OTT Build-vs-Buy — Decision Worksheet

Place your streaming project on the spectrum, score the four trade-offs, check who owns delivery, then work the questions. Engineering guidance — confirm vendor pricing live, it changes.

1 · PLACE YOUR PROJECT ON THE SPECTRUM (tick the one that fits)

- ☐ **Buy — OTT SaaS.** You rent a finished platform and configure it. Fastest and cheapest upfront; lowest control; the vendor runs encode, store, deliver, protect, and player, with their markup folded into your fees. Good when an off-the-shelf product already does your job.
- ☐ **Assemble — cloud primitives.** You build your product on a managed encoder, storage, a CDN, and a multi-DRM service at list prices you control. Medium cost; high control; you own the architecture and can optimise delivery. The default for serious custom platforms.
- ☐ **Build — fully custom.** You also run your own encoding farm, origin, and key servers. Highest cost and longest timeline; lowest run cost at very large scale; full control down to the metal. Worth it only at huge scale or for an unusual requirement.

2 · SCORE THE FOUR TRADE-OFFS (Low / Med / High for your chosen option)

- ☐ **Money (3-yr total, not upfront).** Buy ≈ small setup + a subscription that never ends; assemble ≈ a one-time build + cloud list-price run; build ≈ large build + own-infra run. Compare the same multi-year window. Rate: ____
- ☐ **Time to launch.** Buy = days to weeks; assemble = 4–15 months; build = many months+. A market window can settle this on its own. Rate: ____
- ☐ **Control of the product.** Can the option do the one thing your product exists for — your content type, monetization mix, discovery, or integration? Rate: ____
- ☐ **Control of margin (delivery).** Delivery is the dominant cost. Can you optimise it — your own CDN deal, cache-hit ratio, codec — or is it opaque and marked up? Rate: ____

3 · WHO OWNS DELIVERY & PROTECTION (the cost-critical boxes)

- ☐ **Buy:** vendor owns the whole pipeline; delivery cost is opaque and carries their markup. You cannot touch the margin line.
- ☐ **Assemble:** you own delivery and protection on open standards — CMAF packaged once, **cbcs** Common Encryption (ISO/IEC 23001-7), served as HLS and DASH, licensing Widevine/PlayReady/FairPlay. Portable across vendors.
- ☐ **Build:** you run the media yourself — full control, highest operating burden.
- ☐ **Lock-in test:** the bytes are standard, but a bought platform ties your integrations, pipeline, and ops knowledge to the vendor. Assembling on standards keeps you free to move.

4 · WORK THE QUESTIONS, IN ORDER (an early yes ends it)

- ☐ Can a finished platform do your product's core job? YES → buy SaaS.
- ☐ Is a differentiated product or your own margin/portability the point? → assemble.
- ☐ Does very large scale or an unusual requirement force owning the infrastructure? YES → build fully custom.
- ☐ Unsure? Buy first to validate the market, then rebuild once proven — a valid path, not a failure.

THE ONE TEST BEFORE YOU COMMIT A BUDGET

Write your chosen option, the four ratings, and who owns delivery on one line, then say the project out loud: "A [buy / assemble / build] streaming platform, where [the vendor / we] control the delivery bill." Decide control first: if the bought platform cannot do your product's core job, the money you "saved" is spent twice on workarounds — move one step toward assemble before you build, not after month nine. Compare total cost over three years, not a build quote against one monthly invoice, and put both delivery bills on the table. Let cost break ties only between options that can actually do the job.



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This worksheet places your project on the buy, assemble or build spectrum and shows who owns the delivery bill. We wrote seven volumes covering the whole video stack: encoding, delivery, audio and AI. Start with Volume 3 for CDN, DRM and delivery economics, then Volume 2 for packaging and Volume 1 for encoding.

WHAT YOU WILL FIND INSIDE

- Economics of delivery and CDN egress
- Packaging once for HLS and DASH
- Multi-DRM and CMAF with cbcs
- Encoding ladders you control yourself

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Torn between an OTT SaaS and assembling your own platform?

We will score your options on three-year cost, launch time and margin control, and sketch the assemble path on open standards. 250+ video products shipped since 2005.

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