

Changing the way you watch television

Under or behind most TV sets is usually a cabling rat's nest.

I try to keep mine somewhat orderly and attempt to re-route and organize it every time I add or remove an item from the entertainment center.

I've got the basic stuff like a wide screen TV, satellite receiver from DirecTV and a DVD player which was just recently upgraded to Blu-Ray now that the battle with HD-DVD is over. On top of that I have a wireless access router which is utilized not only for it's wireless coverage of our family room but also for the four installed RJ45 Ethernet ports to attach other neat gizmos.

The first port connects to the primary 8-port Ethernet switch acting as the home network base which is in turn linked to my office via a 24-port managed Ethernet master switch. This SNMP (Simple Network Management Protocol) enabled Bay Networks switch I bought from e-Bay for \$100 use to sell new for \$1,000 10 years ago. It still works like a champ providing throughput and performance statistics from all my network nodes.

Back in the home under the TV, the first toy connect to the remaining three ports on the wireless router is a SlingBox (see that column at DeansConsulting.



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com written on 1/26/2006) which was also recently replaced with the High Definition SlingBox Solo. This little jewel enables me to view my TV service from any computer in the house and any Internet-connected PC on the road.

The second open port connects one of many Dlink wireless video cameras which monitor the outside of our home for security reasons. Though our property has never been breached, I believe in proactive security. Our alert dog and accurate firepower are other preventive measures acting as good deterrents to thieves and other bad guys that may wander up the road.

Just recently I filled the final open port of the wireless router with a new connection to my HD DirecTV satellite receiver. I did this from seeing an advertisement while channel surfing after getting depressed watching Fox News Channel talking about higher gas prices and the falling dollar.

Tuning to channel 1000 I learned about DirecTV's new Video On Demand (VOD) service that lets you download TV shows, movies and videos down to the DVR (Digital Video Recorder) that now comes built-in to many DirecTV set top boxes like ours. These down-

loads are done over the subscriber's high speed broadband connection to the Internet.

Following the instructions I connected that open port in the wireless router to the Ethernet port in the DirecTV DVR with a CAT5 patch cable. It automatically set itself up with an IP (Internet Protocol) address and started communicating with DirecTV's Web site downloading all the available programming information.

Within a couple of minutes I was able to see the hundreds of downloadable TV programs and movies that had been previously played but still available for viewing by downloading them to the DirecTV DVR hard drive over the web.

Browsing the VOD (Video On Demand) channel list I quickly realized that it was not every program on every channel available to download since that would have been really cool.

Nope, it's just over half the channels and a small percentage of the programs on each channel that have been made available for VOD downloads. Of course CNN was on the list but Fox News Channel (FNC) was not, typical big media bias.

Still, I was pleased to see many familiar channels we watch like the History, Discovery, Animal Planet and A&E. There is also a good movie channel at 1100 that offered over 200 movies for download-

ing. Almost all of them are pay-for movies ranging from \$1.99 to \$3.99.

After selecting your show or movie it goes to the download queue and depending on your Internet Service Provider (ISP) you should have it downloaded within an hour or two. A one-hour show of UFO Hunters took just under 40 minutes to download via Texas Broadband at a rate of 1.6Mb/s.

Slower DSL and cable links may take longer but you can queue them up a couple of hours before you want to view them and have them ready after dinner and the kids are in bed.

You are not charged for the pay movies at download time but rather when you choose to view them. Only then will you be prompted to accept the charge which will appear on your next month's DirecTV bill. Since we already pay \$20 a month for the Blockbuster Online service, I try to limit any additional DirecTV VOD purchases since they can add up quickly.

With two DirecTV receivers with HD service and HBO subscriptions our bill is high enough without numerous three and four dollar movies on top of the Blockbuster monthly charges.

Eventually, as DirecTV's storage capacity grows they will be able to offer downloads of any program played at any time from any channel — now that would be way cool. Even though we

record numerous kid shows, news programs and movies on our DVR, having the ability to go back in time and retrieve any show that DirecTV has played would be the ultimate.

It all comes down to hard drive space and network bandwidth. Since disk space keeps getting cheaper and bandwidth capabilities continue to grow I figure a wide open and rich choice of VOD programs and options will be the wave of the future.

This would mean the end of Blockbuster stores (which I haven't been to in years thank the Lord) and even the die out of mailing DVDs back and forth to NetFlix and BlockBuster.com.

Eventually we will purchase, download and view all our movies and TV shows whenever we want. Whether this is done over the Internet, the satellite/cable link or a combination of both, we will have the final say of what we watch and when we want to watch it. Isn't technology great?

Bottom line: DirecTV's new VOD service is a good start to putting the consumer in direct charge of their TV viewing.

Next week's column: FemToCells.

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