

*JWR 4.20*

## **How I Told Cable to Go Screw**

# **NERD ALERT**

Apparently now everyone thinks I'm weird because of the books I read and the numbers thing. I'm just trying to share. I'm normal too. I like TV...

I recall adjusting rabbit ears when I was very young. Other than that, I've always had cable. I remember switching between A and B; I remember when HBO was new and "Fraggle Rock" started; I remember watching scrambled soft core porn (I think that was a nipple – no, it was a toe). Where I live Time Warner Cable is king.

When I moved into my house, I obviously noticed the giant TV antenna out back. Another thing I noticed were all the coaxial cables running above the drop ceiling of the basement. I didn't want to tackle it because that's not my idea of fun, so I had every intention of leaving it. Problems arose when the cable company moved from transmitting their information on insulated A and B cable lines to just A lines. Instead of having two coaxial cables running into your house, now there just needed to be one. B had the most viewed channels including local stations; A was more for your pay movie channels. Problems arose because some places in my house only had a B line going to it. Still more problems arose because some cable lines weren't hooked up at all, and the confusion made making sense of it all nearly impossible.

I ended up redoing most of the coaxial cable runs. I forgot until I traced two B lines to the same spot that the guy who lived in my house before me told me he used to

watch football with the sound down while his wife watched whatever she wanted with the sound up, both in the living room, one TV sitting on top of the other. In the finished basement I found A/B switches mounted to the walls far away from where the cables ended. I found cables that looped back on themselves. I found coaxial splitters with a cable attached to the input, but nothing hooked up to the outputs. I found one cable line fed into a seam of the ductwork that came out from the corner of a return vent in the living room (I left that one alone, just tucked it back in).

I removed literally hundreds of feet of cable: redundant lines, abandoned runs, and multiple cables going to the same room. I removed any double A/B cables and replaced them with single coaxial cables. All the A/B switches were removed as well as multiple two- and three-way splitters. Eventually I had one cable going to the living room, one to the master bedroom, one to the second bedroom, one by the pool table in the basement and one to the lounge area in the basement.

I played with the idea of having my TV antenna removed. The only thing it was good for was gaining easy access to my roof by climbing up it. In hindsight, I'm glad that's something I never got around to doing or having done.

For a long time I had cable and a land line and dial-up, each through different companies. Then about three years ago I felt it was way past time to upgrade from dial-up to broadband or DSL. I've never heard good things about DSL from people who used it. I never heard complaints about broadband at all, which is pretty impressive. I signed up for Time Warner's cable/home phone/internet bundle and had a locked in price for two years.

People were right about RoadRunner; I haven't had a problem with it. But after my two year contract was nearly up, I decided to get rid of the land line and get a cell phone. I got the cell first to make sure I could live with it and a couple months later, I cancelled my home phone service. But because the special pricing period was over, my price for just internet and cable was higher than it had been for all three.

I was pissed.

I had read a couple articles in *Popular Mechanics* about how to ditch cable a few months before all this and now I began to do my own research. (Incidentally, I just read this: “Long ago and in a galaxy far, far away, people had to type their work, or even write it out longhand. Unless you had your own printing press, you couldn't do italics. Therefore, when something needed to be italicized, that fact was represented by underlining.” This is information that would have been useful to me a few weeks ago. I feel fucking old.)

I dragged my heels a little, but had the idea in my head of what I wanted to do.

First I hooked up my laptop to my TV in my living room, a 32” Samsung LCD. I know it's not huge, but it's a nice TV. That worked out okay and I watched an MP4 of “Iron Man” playing from my laptop on my TV. I knew it was possible, but quickly realized I wasn't going to want to hook up my laptop every time I wanted to watch something from the internet, so I did some research and ended up buying a Dell Studio Hybrid PC off eBay for around \$300. The Hybrids are very small but they have decent processors (Intel Dual Core or Core 2 Duo), they come with plenty of RAM (3GB in my case), and nice-sized hard drives (320GB in my case) all in a chassis under nine inches tall and three inches wide. All I planned on doing with it was watching stuff on the internet. Another nice thing about the Hybrids is that they have an HDMI jack (one cable carries HD video and sound), so I picked up a 50' Ethernet cable and a 6' HDMI cable from monoprice.com (a great site).

When I got the Hybrid I spent a long time setting up the video driver, the resolution, and the Internet Explorer settings to look the best on my TV. It's not a computer monitor, it's a TV. Since I won't be sitting directly in front of it, text can be difficult to see from across the room, but that's a trade off. The Hybrid came with a wireless keyboard and mouse, but I didn't like them. I ended up buying an IOGEAR

wireless keyboard with laser trackball and scroll wheel built in (GKM561R) for about \$50 from Amazon. It's small (not having a 10-key helps), sleek, and it works just fine.

The big question was the outdoor TV antenna. How would that work? Eventually I did some reconnaissance in the attic and discovered two old school ribbon cables coming into the house from where the antenna sat on the outside. I needed a balun to convert from the 300 ohms of the ribbon cable to the 75 ohms of modern day coaxial cable. I also needed a long, quality coaxial cable to go from the balun in the attic to the basement. Finally I needed a coaxial coupler to hook the incoming Time Warner cable line with another coaxial line that goes to their modem; I would use an existing coaxial splitter for over the air television signals from the antenna. I ended up buying a fifty foot coaxial cable, two baluns and two couplers from some internet store I can't remember (the baluns and couplers were so cheap, even though I only needed one of each, I still feel like just two of each was conservative).

I had my buddy Jon come over because he has a fish tape and he passed the fish tape down to the basement from the attic next to the chimney so he could pull the coaxial cable up. In the attic we took the ribbon cable that was loose and attached it and the coaxial line up to the balun. In the basement I attached the other end of the new coaxial line to the coaxial cable that runs to the TV in my bedroom with a coupler (just temporarily).

I went upstairs and let the TV run through its auto-program for over the air channels. When it was all done I was very disappointed. I think I only got about two channels. I took a break for a few days and then after talking with my brother Dan decided to take a closer look at those ribbon cables. I went outside and could clearly see one of the cables went up thirty feet or whatever to the antenna, but the other came out of the soffit and was hooked up to nothing, it was just tied around itself. It turns out this was the one I had hooked up to the balun. I went back to the attic and cut the other

ribbon cable (it went down into a wall and I couldn't pull it out). I stripped its wires and hooked it up to the balun and ran through the auto program again.

Channel 4-1, 4-2, 4-3, 6-1, 6-2, 10-1, 12-1, 18-1, 24-1, 30-1, 36-1, 36-2, 36-3, 36-4, 36-5, 36-6, 36-7, 36-8, 55-1, 55-2, 55-3, 58-1, 58-2, 58-3, and 58-4 came in. Basically I get ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, two PBS's a couple independent stations and a bunch of sister channels like a weather channel for our NBC affiliate, a music video channel, a retro channel, etc.

By this time it had been a couple months since I cancelled my phone service with Time Warner. I already mentioned that my bill went up quite a bit when I cancelled the phone. Then my bill went up again when I was in the middle of my implementation strategy. The cable price went up about ten bucks.

My resentment became vast.

Now I know why people bitch and moan about their cable bill always rising. It's not just the cable company's fault; it's the cable stations demanding more and more money. But that wouldn't be my problem for long.

I did a little more testing like making sure my internet access wouldn't suffer any when the coaxial cables were hooked up with a coupler instead of a splitter (I know, it would have been better if anything), and making sure the antenna signal was still strong enough when on a splitter instead of a coupler. When I confirmed they were, I dropped off my cable box at the Time Warner office one day and cancelled my cable service the next.

I actually felt like a weight had been lifted. I felt relief. Saving \$80 a month was part of it, but just making something like that work after specifying the equipment, troubleshooting issues, and running cables – it was nice to finish a project like that. No one got hurt, either. Jon did break his fish tape.

There are downsides, obviously. You can't record stuff off TV anymore. Well, you can but not with a VCR hooked up directly to a coaxial cable carrying over the air signals. I guess a VCR would work if the signal first came through a digital converter

box, then to the VCR. I have two TVs hooked up to over the air at the moment; both have internal digital tuners, negating the need for a converter box. Since the DVR went back to the cable company, I haven't recorded a thing.

That's where the Hybrid PC comes into play. The DVR spoiled me, but almost every broadcast station and many cable stations including ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, FX, USA, SyFy, TNT, Bravo, and the CW put full episodes of their programming online. I never liked sitting in front of a computer watching a long video clip. But sitting on my couch? Nice. Some stations like The History Channel, TLC, and The Discovery Channel don't stream full episodes of most of their programming and although I miss "Dirty Jobs" and "Mythbusters," I don't miss them enough to make me change back.

I'm aware there are ways to record TV on your computer, but, seriously, I don't need that. You can find the most recent five or six episodes of a show online. And for "South Park" you can watch every episode ever. Someday the internet will no longer be a bastion for free entertainment from the television stations. I don't know what I'm going to do then.

Another downside to the TV antenna is that I lose signals sometimes. I went outside and watched my antenna for a few minutes one day. I believe it's pointed improperly (off by just a few degrees) and it's a bit loose. In the wind it slightly shifts around. Being off by as little 10 degrees is supposedly enough to lose the signal. I might have someone come out in a cherry picker and lock it down at 350 degrees or so, but I'm in no rush.

Besides, a lot of shows are up on the internet the day after they air. There are a couple odd ducks like "Burn Notice" and "House" that aren't available for over a week. The only other thing that isn't the greatest about watching internet-streamed shows on a large TV is the quality. When you go full screen the quality sometimes suffers; often the image is a little jumpy or choppy when the camera moves quickly. I actually got a

headache the first time I watched a couple hours of internet TV, but just once. It hasn't happened since.

You are forced to watch commercials when you watch something online. But, it's only one commercial (occasionally two) every commercial break (15-30 seconds usually). Sometimes it's the same commercial at each break, which can get annoying, but it's usually over before you can spit. Mute helps.

Despite the flaws and drawbacks to my setup, I'm very happy with it.

But there's more. My DVD player isn't just a DVD player. And not only is it BluRay, but I hooked it up to my router with an Ethernet cable, as well, because it also streams Netflix content. And it has Pandora Internet Radio, which is far cooler than I thought it would be.

There's also a Nintendo Wii, which is wirelessly connected to the internet. I like wireless, but unless I have to, or unless it makes more sense to go wireless (as with a laptop) I prefer a good old Ethernet cable.

Anyways, that's my story. This probably all works best for me because I live alone, and now that it's all set up, it's quite easy to use. If it wasn't, I'd pay for cable as long as I deemed it worth the money. I guess I really didn't tell the cable company to "go screw" because I still buy their internet service. 7Mbps. Good enough to watch "Community." By my gorilla math I figure (between the PC, wireless keyboard/mouse, and all the cables) I sunk about \$500 into my setup, but I'll get my money back in six months (...not if I keep buying Star Trek Micro Machines, though).

John

PS: Look on the next page: I included an illustration to detail my setup since my descriptions of how I did what I did tend to induce looks of confusion... and boredom.

# Living Room Set Up

