

Confessions of an Internet Junkie

(or Why I NEED the Technology)

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I am physically located in central Canada. I work from an office, I have a home and family, I have a large property with many gardens, I have two dogs. But I don't live here. I live in the great wide world. As I have done for nearly a decade now. I am one of those people who has had a private connection to the rest of the world before it was cool,



common, or a requirement of daily living. Two events have anchored this near-decade of exploration. The first was my first modem, of course, and the second happened last week.

It All Started When...

In 1992 my husband gave me a most wonderful gift for Christmas. It was an Internet account through our local university. Nobody else I knew was using this, at least not outside the university realm. At approximately the same time, I also hooked up with a local chapter of a group called Blue Sky Network. By this time, we had purchased an outrageously expensive (by today's standards) external modem, and attached it to our outrageously expensive (by today's standards) 486. I remember the day when that little beige 9600-baud modem first made a connection. That strident chorus of

electronic sounds was one of the most wonderful things I had ever heard – it was my connection to the rest of the world.

This was long before the first browsers made their appearance, so I was using a program called Lynx, which was Unix-based, and featured lovely dark-yellow text on a black screen. To read any statements required a specific type of thinking, as the text was broken down the screen and interspersed liberally with Unix commands. Horrifying to anyone using modern-day browsers, but it was magical to me.

I was actually communicating by computer with someplace else. Granted, the 'someplace else' factor was highly limited, but it was the concept that mattered. As did the cost. Did you know that limiting Internet time is painful, nay, almost impossible, for an obsessive personality? And that at \$2.00 per hour, unlimited Internet time was an inconceivable idea. Unless I was considering divorce, which I wasn't.

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Over the Years

So in the intervening years, I developed my relationship with the Internet, then the World Wide Web, various ISP companies, browser versions, etc. Each time a new browser version was to be released, I waited. Breathlessly, in the case of version 3, which heralded the beginning of layers, DHTML, and scripting. Of course, during this time, I had developed a need to learn how this magic worked, and how to work magic with this technology. I developed fairly decent HTML and JavaScript writing skills, learned about pages, and went back to school to learn how to REALLY do graphic design (creating a page is one thing, designing it is quite another – but that's the subject of another commentary).

Then there were the underworld connotations that beckoned so seductively. I learned to appreciate what the basement dwellers¹ were creating. Why use an 's' when a 'z' is so much more powerful? Why not make every page black with multi-colored neon fonts? Why not indeed. It was correct at the time. There were famous hackers and crackers and all manner of other nefarious characters whose antics could be followed, if you knew where to look. I found many little locations inhabited by these folks. In my own defense, and to stay any possible legal consequences, I never used what I found, but that was never my intention. It wasn't necessary to BE them; it was only necessary to understand them and their culture.

I have never been much of a social/group activity type of person, although I do enjoy working on teams. This technology has been wonderful in that respect. I have had the opportunity to collaborate with folks all over the globe in so many interesting areas.

Not being able to dedicate my entire life to my new world continued to be a source of frustration. In fact, I have been known to book vacation time specifically to undertake some research project or another on the Internet. But I can easily justify that – what's the difference between that and a week in, say, Maui? On some levels, not much. On the other hand, of course, there is an appreciable difference in January!

But before everyone falls asleep, allow me to fast-forward through time. Interesting how just a few years has made such an enormous difference in our world. Yours, as well as mine. Can you imagine a topic that doesn't have information accessible on the Internet someplace? I can't, and I have done some pretty obscure searching over the years. There are so many once unintelligible words that are now a part of our everyday vocabulary. Have you seen any advertising lately that doesn't contain a URL? And when was the last time you had to explain to somebody what the Internet was?

Recently, I gave up my last commercial ISP when the contract expired. I was then using both dialup and Citrix server connections through my employer while I decided what was to come next. Which finally leads to the subject of today's column.

¹ By my definition, basement dwellers are those amazing kids that sit in their own little spaces and build bits of technology, functionality, etc., which is accessible by specific types of searching. That is, one must search using terms that include multiple capital letters, and a heavy sprinkling of z's. And, sadly in recent years, requires sophisticated maneuvering abilities to find the content amongst the porn banners and voting windows.

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High-Speed Internet Connections

It's so terribly seductive isn't it? On both sides of the border, media, advertising, at the water cooler, in the coffee shop you hear the term. You feel disadvantaged if you don't have the technology. At least I certainly did. What complicates the issue even further is to work in a high-speed connection environment. Many folks are content to use their high-speed work connection at work and make do with a regular dial-up connection at home. More cost effective. Couldn't stand the discrepancy personally. So I considered the options.

We live in a rural community about 15 miles from a major city. That limited our options somewhat, to the extent that we were unable to access the xDSL system offered through the area's telephone systems. At this point, this connection type is available only in selected areas due to the nature of the telephone cabling. I suspect this is also the case in many rural areas as the initial telephone cable installations were not designed for this eventuality. In our area, xDSL service is poor due to extended copper lengths or poor copper in general. What about a cable modem? As in most other areas of North America, we are serviced by a cable TV provider, which gave us the option of using a cable modem system. However, since we don't use cable TV anymore, but are the proud owners of a satellite TV system (hubby's obsession, not mine!) that idea seemed out of the question. Which left satellite systems.

About Satellites

A satellite system was always my preference. However, until recently there was still the need for a dialup connection for uploading data as well, which made the satellite component seem almost superfluous. With recent advancements, the need for any kind of wires or cables is bypassed altogether, and the cost is comparable to conventional high-speed connections. Besides which, what on earth could be sexier to a technophile than a satellite internet connection? Nothing. Let me tell you about this system and its workings.

After testing to determine line of sight and signal strength, a tower was erected on the roof of our house. A real tower. It rises some thirty feet above the second storey of our home. The pole supporting the dish rests in a tripod, secured with 9 guy-wires, which I shall have to decorate for the Christmas season this winter. If I dare.

The transceiver has an 10BaseT Ethernet port which runs into our house and connects to my computer. At that point, the cable was connected and tested to verify the signal strength and data throughput. We had the configuration completed with registration of email addresses. And that was it.

The Technology

Herein lies the coolness. We have a 3-foot wire mesh antenna with a central transceiver cone. Data is downloaded via microwave signal from the sighting tower to our antenna. The system uses 10 base-T Ethernet cabling and a LAN card installed in my machine.

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The data transceiver is connected to our PC or network of PC's. Once the antenna has been installed and a connection has been established, pure Internet data is sent to and from our antenna so that we have seamless, full time access to the Internet at high speeds.

In the near future, it will connect through our network's firewall and proxy server. We are currently in a system reconfiguring mode, with the outcome being 2 or 3 machines on a small LAN. Presently, we have a Windows 2000 system with administrator and clients, although my machine is separated from the rest. Uploading data is fast. Again, it is transmitted as microwave signals from our transceiver to the sighting tower (some 20 miles away) which then uploads the data to a satellite for further transmission.

The Features

- This system is a fixed wireless, dedicated technology. Once the connection is installed, it is always on. No dialup. Once my computer is logged in to our little home network, it is on. And it is reliable. Unless the target satellite falls from the sky or the distribution tower we are sighted to falls off the building, we will be up.
- The connection runs 100's of times faster than a standard modem connection. Theoretical maximum amount of raw data throughput is 60 Mb/s (downloading). That is astounding.
- This system is affordable. As I mentioned earlier, the price in our local market is the same for this system as for telephone or cable high-speed access.

My Opinion

So what do I think of this service so far? Well, having had one week's experience, I must say that I am quite pleased. The ugly specter of internet latency has reared its ugly head on a few occasions, however. Latency refers to a slowdown in throughput caused by settings and/or capabilities of the Internet site I am requesting data from. Let me give you some examples.

I run the SETI screensaver (doesn't everyone???). When uploading units of completed data and downloading new data units it is like sucking up water into a syringe and squirting it out again at full speed. That is the only analogy that came to mind. It transferred data at a blistering rate.

On the other hand, I was trying to update the Windows Media Player to version 7 yesterday. I made an interesting observation. When I initially logged into the Microsoft download file, it was transferring data at about 26 k/s, which then quickly slowed to a painful 2.2-2.5 k/s. Makes you wish you could just reach right in there and allocate yourself some more bandwidth!



I also found that I could download files at a rate ranging from 60 to 300 k/s, depending on time of day. One thing I have found interesting is streaming video. It can actually stream! Clarity is very good, pixelation is very occasional, and there don't seem to be any of the net congestion/buffering hiccoughs I experienced in the past with slower connections.

Would I recommend this to everybody? Sure would. As I said earlier, the service is reliable, and faster than anything else currently on the market. For those of us in rural areas, it is the perfect solution when other high-speed services are not available. And besides which, when I come home every night and see that tower on the roof of my house, I am reminded of just how COOL it is.

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