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No absolutes with high-speed Net services



DIGITAL SURVIVOR

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The ability to get on the Internet while at home, whether to check your office e-mail or to do some research related to your job, is becoming increasingly important.

If you are like many Canadians, you're doing so through a 28K or 56K modem, and may be wondering whether to upgrade to one of the new "high-speed Internet" offerings from a telephone or cable company.

More than likely, you're confused about which one to choose.

Ignore the advertisements, as much of what is being said doesn't quite ring true.

Indeed, the advertising battle between telephone companies and cable firms is intensifying all over the world, and often stretches reality to a huge degree. Case in point — the delightfully funny series of TV commercials from Pacific Bell. (People are sharing them via e-mail; if you haven't seen them, you can download them from the **www.adcritic.com** Web site. Simply do a search for Pacific Bell.)

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The four commercials build a story around the terrible things that happen to people in a nice, quiet suburban neighbourhood when they start sharing access to the Internet using cable modems. Indeed, there can be no better cinematic moment than the scene in which a five-year-old is screaming at a middle-aged man, calling him a "Web Hog."

Pacific Bell is applying the same marketing message used by telephone companies worldwide: Cable modems — shared — bad. Asymmetrical digital subscriber lines (ADSL) — not shared — good.

Is that true? Well, not in my case. I've got both systems. And the fact is that I regularly get connections of 350 to 400 kilobits per second through my cable modem, but only 30 to 70 kbps through my ADSL connection. (Compare that with the 3 kbps or so that I get through a dialup modem connection.)

Does that mean cable modems are faster everywhere? Probably not — I often talk to people elsewhere who get fast ADSL performance, and whose neighbours get slower cable modem performance.

The reality with either method of high-speed access is this — what you get depends on where you live. Both technologies are good, both have an upside and both have problems. To assess what is best in your neighbourhood, you need to understand some factors that affect the quality of each service.

First, there is the quality of the cable/telephone system infrastructure in your neighbourhood — these companies are spending millions to upgrade their systems, and so one may simply be better than the other depending on where you live.

Second, in the case of ADSL, your speed performance may be influenced by how far you live from "central office" — the farther you are, the slower it may be. Third, in the case of cable modems, your service may be affected if you do have a whole bunch of cyberdweebs in your neighbourhood who spend their entire life on-line. But that could change if cable companies reconfigure their networks to minimize such problems.

Notice how I've used the word "may" a lot. There are no absolutes when it comes to comparing the attributes of each service. And finally, keep this in mind — you could find that the performance of either alternative changes dramatically tomorrow, as lots of money is being spent on upgrading both networks.

The most important point is this — if you are still chugging along using a dial-up modem, don't leave yourself in the dark ages of connectivity — choose at least one or the other. The improved speed will provide you with a whole new Internet.

Ask around your neighbourhood to find out who is using cable modems and who is using ADSL. Ask about the performance that each is getting, and use that to help determine which technology to choose. After all, the cable-versus-telephone fight may be global, but the battles are occurring on a neighbourhood basis.

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