

INSTANT INTERNET ACCESS FROM RESTON

By William Nicoson

“When,” asked my wife, “will the promised day arrive? When will all that new TV cable get me to the internet without wasting dial-up time?” As usual, I agreed to research her question. The answer surprised us. The promised day arrived two weeks ago.

Installation by Jones Communications of Reston’s new cable infrastructure was completed as the Year 2000 rolled in: a Y2K bonus. At about the same time, Jones Communications took the name of its controlling stockholder in 1999, Comcast Corporation, the third largest U.S. cable company. And at about the same time, Comcast began renting and selling cable modems to Restonians, permitting instant computer access to the World Wide Web.

But this was a revolution by stealth. No ads for the service were placed. No breathless flyers were distributed with bills to cable subscribers. A visit to Comcast’s website (www.comcastonline.com) promised information on this service (supplied by Comcast@Home), but, to a query about zip code 20190, the answer was: “We’re sorry! Comcast@Home will not be providing the 20190 ZIP code area with high velocity cable modem access during 1999.” True, but notice that such access is currently available might be more helpful.

I’m sure Comcast is not asleep at the switch. It takes time to prepare for potentially enormous demand for cable modem installation. And, as with all new technology, glitches may occur at the outset of the supply process. It’s better to catch the bugs before mass marketing begins.

To get the real facts on internet access by cable, I had to resort to the old pre-internet research technique of questioning knowledgeable human beings. I talked to Tom Bartelt who’s been managing the technical side of Reston cable through five successive companies. He explained that a cable modem is hundreds of times faster than the standard 28.8 telephone modem. Comcast rents the new modem to cable subscribers for \$39.95 monthly (and to non-subscribers for \$49.95) with a fee for standard single-visit installation of \$149 plus \$49 for each additional computer.

Switching to a cable modem may free up a dedicated telephone line for other uses or a cost-savings disconnect. If you’re now linked to the net through AOL and want to retain features like digital city and your email address, AOL will reduce your monthly fee if you substitute cable for telephone access. (But you’ll then be unable to access your account from a remote location.) Comcast@Home provides no information on collaboration with any other access provider.

To observe the cable modem in operation, I visited computer expert Bill Boyle of Comcast and Opus Development. I saw the advantages of 24-hour internet access without sign-on. He programmed the system to sweep to his screen every two hours notice of emails received. He demonstrated the instant contact of a requested website (though the common delay in receiving

components of the site may result from lower speed of the sending modem). He reported that download time was reduced to a tiny fraction of time required by telephone modems.

Francis Bacon said “time is the greatest innovator.” Everyone says “time is money.” If all this is true, innovations like the cable modem which save time must therefore promote both further innovation and further commerce. Reston is first with this time-saving innovation in Fairfax County. Thanks, Comcast.

William Nicoson is a former publisher of Connection Newspapers.