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TECHNOLOGY & YOU

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Like Having a VCR in Your Pocket

If you're traveling, two new services enable you to stream recorded TV shows from your home PC to your laptop, handheld, or phone

Your favorite basketball team plays in the NCAA tournament Friday evening, but you're going to be on a business trip across the country, where the match is unlikely to be broadcast. If you have a home PC that can record TV and a subscription to a new service called Orb, you could watch that game wherever you are via a laptop, Pocket PC, or even certain phones.

Streaming TV shows, as well as music and photos, to yourself from your home PC is still a very new idea. And the video experience you get will fall well short of even a mediocre TV set. The image will be small -- maybe a 6-in. diagonal on a typical laptop, even tinier on a handheld. And network glitches may cause an occasional hiccup in the image.

CHECK COMPATIBILITY. Still, this development is a clear indication of what today's consumer-electronics technology and wireless networks can provide. The first generation of recorders made it possible to shift the time when we watch. Now we can shift the place as well.

Orb Network's service, which costs \$10 a month or \$80 a year after a 30-day free trial, needs a PC equipped with a TV tuner and running Windows XP Media Center Edition. They're testing it on regular XP as well. The Orb software is fussy about just what TV tuners it works with -- you'll need to check the compatibility list at www.orb.com.

You have a lot more flexibility in the devices you use to watch programming. Any PC with either Windows Media Player or RealPlayer will work. So will any networked Pocket PC (Palm support is planned) or any wireless phone with Windows Media Player or RealPlayer.

OCCASIONAL JERKINESS. To use Orb from a PC or handheld, you log in to a Web site that sets up a link to your PC back home. You can choose to view photos, your own videos, or hear music stored on your PC. But the real appeal is television -- this setup lets you view recorded shows, select live shows from a channel guide, or schedule shows for recording. Click "play" and the show is delivered from your home PC to a handheld or computer.

The quality of the video you will see depends on a combination of display size and network speed; bigger images require more data and need a faster link. Cingular's relatively slow network provided smooth video on the tiny screen of an Audiovox ([UTSI](#)) SMT5600 Smartphone. The video was worse on the bigger display of a Pocket PC on the same network and was all but unwatchable on a laptop. But both the laptop and a Dell ([DELL](#)) Axim Pocket PC did fine on a broadband connection via Wi-Fi.

The system is designed so that the quality of the audio is maintained even as the quality of the video degrades when network congestion reduces the available bandwidth. Still, I found that the player would occasionally pause both sound and picture while it refilled its buffer with data.

BETTER NETWORKS NEEDED. Orb can expect some competition later this spring from Sling Media, which is taking a different business and technical approach to the same problem. Rather than

offering a PC-based service, Sling plans to sell a \$249 product called the Slingbox Personal Broadcaster that eliminates the need for a computer as part of your entertainment system.

As with Orb, you connect to the Slingbox through a Web site. It sits in your entertainment rack, and can control a cable or satellite set-top box or a TiVo ([TIVO](#)) by acting like a remote control. You can then stream video to any Windows XP PC. (To record TV, you will need either a stand-alone digital video recorder or one built into a set-top box.)

For products such as Orb and Sling to reach their full potential, we need better networks. For example, a full-screen TV image requires moving at least 1.5 megabits per second, but most home DSL or cable connections limit upload speeds to well under 500 kilobits per second. Still, even today's limited speeds are enough to provide an intriguing glimpse of a future wherein you can watch the programming you subscribe to whenever you want, wherever you happen to be.

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