



# The digital video library

## DVRs, DVD recorders make TV worth watching ... no computer required

"When television is good, nothing — not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers — nothing is better. But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there without a book, magazine, newspaper, profit-and-loss sheet or rating book to distract you — and keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland."

So said Newton Minow in describing the state of television in 1961, coining the infamous metaphor for television and (in light of the 500 channels we now have, compared to 1961's three) not knowing when he had it so good. If television past was a vast wasteland, today's broadcasting might be described as a nuclear waste landfill not unlike Yucca Mountain.

That said, there are a fair number of pearls before the swine, and since our lives have become immeasurably more busy since that bygone age, seeing and preserving those few needles from the digital-cable haystack has gotten more important.

There are basically three ways to get the absolute best of what TV has to offer delivered to you on demand, and preserved for all time (or at least the next major format change, which is of course just around the corner): buy the stuff pre-packaged on DVD, record the shows on VCR or what's now called a DVR (digital video recorder), or record the shows direct to DVD using a standalone DVD-Recorder. We'll explain each method and how they can work together to help you build a library of much-loved shows — or just utilize your limited TV-watching time more efficiently — and cut out most of the commercials while we're at it.

### DVD-TV

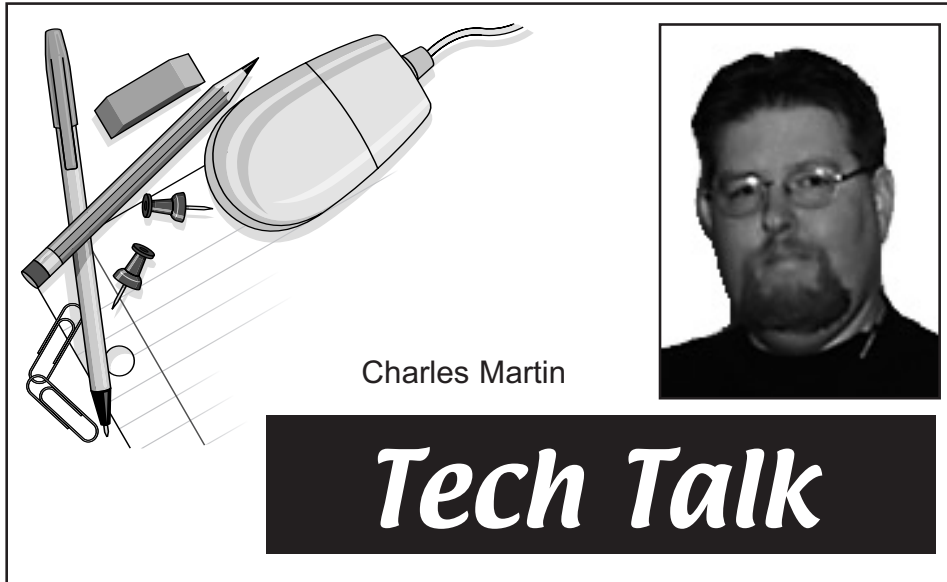
For capturing an entire run or season of a particular series, there's really nothing that beats just buying the program in DVD box sets. In addition to the actual shows themselves, you almost always get loads of "extras" such as commentary from the stars and creators, interviews and featurettes that detail the making of the show, photo galleries and other such "bonus" material — not to mention the lack of annoying advertising.

Though this can get expensive if you are enraptured by a particularly long-running series, it's cost effective for most fans (pity the poor *Dark Shadows* fans, however — they will end up with around 125 DVDs if they want everything from the original series, and that's not counting the two theatrical movies, the reunion specials, the documentaries made over the years and the revival series of 12 episodes made in the early '90s!).

Surprisingly, DVDs based on TV shows have started to outsell movie DVDs of late, and so almost every fondly remembered series of yesteryear is either out or on its way out in DVD format. From old westerns to British comedies, from *Doctor Who* to *SCTV* to the complete *Wonder Woman* series, if you remember it, there's a good chance it's available.

For shows you recall slightly less fondly but would still like to see, there's also the option of renting the DVD set for an evening's viewing. Using a service like Netflix ([www.netflix.com](http://www.netflix.com)) is a particularly good idea, if it's going to take you a few evenings to get through every episode of *Dragnet* or all five years' worth of *Babylon 5* — they let you keep the DVDs for as long as you need with no "late fees" (instead, you're charged a monthly subscription until you return them).

Then there's the so-called "cheap"



Charles Martin

## Tech Talk

option for people who don't care about the extras — wait until they appear on TV, then "tape" them (I use quotes around the word "tape" because fewer and fewer people actually use VHS tape to record shows anymore, but the verb is still more popular than the more accurate "capture" or "record" in today's digital world).



DVRs, along with DVD recorders, make archiving TV a snap.

Ironically, the cheapest way to do this is still by buying a cheap VHS machine and recording to tape. But with HDTV right around the corner and giant-screen digital cable everywhere you look, VHS' inferior picture quality is really starting to show, and TV aficionados reject the option out of hand.

### TiVo My World

As DVDs finally found their audience in the late '90s (crushing the last of the laserdisc diehards along the way) and "home theaters" involving surround sound and large TVs began to become moderately affordable, the arsenal of difficult-to-operate remote controls and electronic doohickeys attached to the set made even the simple act of turning the "idiot box" on something well beyond the capabilities of the average idiot. Several competing methods of simplifying the "flashing 12 o'clock" syndrome were tried, but even the easiest was still confusing to consumers.

Finally, in 1997, TiVo emerged with a product that tied the ease of use of the Internet with digital recording technology. Instead of videotape, TiVo used a computer hard drive to record shows directly in digital format — and because it got its information from internet listings, you could simply instruct it to "tape all new episodes of *Law & Order* on channel X" and it would do so, ignoring nights when the show was in repeat or pre-empted. What's more, the hard drive would store the program indefinitely (until it filled up), allowing you to watch it whenever your schedule permitted.

This freedom had a tremendous effect on consumers, so much so that despite the high price tag (around \$500 at first, but now available for around \$150-\$200) and

monthly subscription fee, the company currently boasts around 2.3 million customers. Ironically, TiVo has recently seen its fortunes reversed by a slew of cheaper competitors and may soon have to merge, be bought or go bankrupt to stay alive — but their place in history at least is assured.

The TiVo-like machines are now

can import TV signals, allowing users to edit out the commercials and save the files or burn them to CDs or DVDs. While this approach gives the user more control, it also ties up your home computer.

Recently, the emergence of what are called "standalone DVD recorders" (which sometimes integrate VHS machines into them) has bridged the gap and freed up the home computer to do more important tasks. These standalone units allow you to either directly record live television straight to DVD or work with your existing DVR or VHS to copy stuff you've recorded on tape or hard drives onto DVD (recent units have a DVR integrated right into them, but of course these units cost more).

DVD recorders can be used in a variety of ways, but one of the biggest attractions is that you can use them to copy your existing VHS (or Beta, or laserdisc) recordings digitally so that you don't "lose" any quality in the copy. In the case of precious tapes of home movies and other important recordings, this can be a lifesaver. Copy-protected tapes and discs (pre-recorded movies, basically) can usually not be copied, and it's illegal to copy pre-recorded DVDs and other copyrighted material anyway. But for your own home-taped stuff that you recorded for your personal use, copying them to DVD is a great way to preserve them.

Having both a DVR and a DVD-recorder is a great way to save the great stuff, watch the good stuff and ignore the mediocre and bad stuff. Some DVRs, like TiVo, offer the ability to edit out commercials automatically, and to preserve the show on DVD all you have to do is play it again and press "record" on the DVD-recorder.

Most DVD-recorders offer the ability to create "chapters" (allowing you to quickly skip through a program) and a few even allow you to create other kinds of video discs (which can be useful when sending programs to friends who are overseas or can only use computers to play DVDs).

The small amount of time invested in learning to master a DVR or DVD-recorder — both of which are much easier to use than your old VCR — pays off handsomely in allowing you more flexibility and freedom to control what you watch and when you watch. Never again will you have to cut short a dinner date or social occasion because a favorite TV show is about to come on, or waste time scheduling a show only to find out it's a repeat you've already seen.

It should be noted that all the technology I've referred to thus far is aimed at and captures "conventional" television such as cable or over-the-air. If you've already taken the plunge to high-definition TVs and HDTV programming, you'll want to make sure that you get a DVR that is capable of recording HDTV signals, and you might also want to wait and invest in "bluray" or other next-generation hi-def DVD recorders that will be appearing in the marketplace next year.

However, if the majority of the shows you wish to watch and preserve are current or older programs, the current crop of DVRs and DVD-recorders should have all the features you need, and are priced low enough to make them worth it even if you do end up replacing them in a few years.

Free yourself from the tyranny of TV, get more selective about what you do watch, and preserve those video moments that are special to you and build a library of "must-see" TV with digital technology. As the ratio of bad programming and the torrent of ads continues to escalate, you may even get so desperate that you'll crack open ... a book!

### I Want My DTV

For years now, computer enthusiasts have spent countless man-years and hundreds of dollars buying video cards that