

# The

# Computer Link

January 2009

The Newsletter of the Northern Neck Computer Users' Group

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**for NEXT ISSUE,**  
**One week after meeting**

## C.D. Hathaway Talks on VoIP and Local Services

C.D. Hathaway of Southern Electronics returned to the Northern Neck Computer Users Group in December to bring the membership up to date on local improvements in electronics and to tell us about some great news for making phone calls on your computer (VoIP).

Being on the tail end of the information highway, I looked up what VoIP really stands for on Google and found "Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP, IPA: /vɔɪp/) is a general term for a family of transmission technologies for de-

livery of voice communications over the.." I got the idea. The big news is it is dirt cheap and has amazing capabilities, according to Hathaway. He mentioned several services that cost from \$8 to \$25 per month.

Broadband internet is mandatory which makes it much easier in cities to go VoIP but there are some two dozen providers in the Northern Neck area with cable,

towers and phone DSL services where VoIP will work. After a simple hookup, one can make calls to Europe, transmit photos and talk to loved ones in the service without paying extra charges. Transmissions are mostly insecure and are sometimes subject to dropping out, especially with DSL.

C.D. was bombarded with questions about VoIP and local service problems with ordinary internet. He had many experiences with house calls and has been able to find a solution most of the time. He

cited cases where tower service could not find its way through pine trees where houses are only a few hundred yards away. Pines are especially problematic for signals to pass through. Even cable providers have problems occasionally improving pictures for one home at the expense of a neighbor's reception, but things are getting better all the time.

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**C.D. Hathaway**  
Photo by Chris Christenson

## Review - magicJack

by Constance Brown,  
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Do any of you recall the poem by Rosemary and Stephen Vincent Benet stating that **no place on earth is more than 60 hours away?** The authors were awed by the idea that distance was no longer measured in months but in hours. What would they think now that people have circled the world in spaceships and repaired orbiting space stations? On the other hand, my friends who boarded the plane last month found that it can take 60 hours and more to arrive at a destination in our own hemisphere -- if it happens to be Bolivia!

What does travel have to do with computers? Most trips begin with a call to a travel agent or visiting a travel web site to check prices and availability of flights. Then a flight is booked and paid online either by the purchaser or an agent. An e-ticket is sent to the traveler who then checks in via a computer terminal at the airport. Computerized controls are used to guide the plane.

Computers, computers everywhere. Great when they work. Annoying when they don't! They are here to stay and will be performing more and more of our communications. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could travel internationally and communicate with folk back home without paying those **ridiculous in-**

**ternational** calling fees! How about staying in touch with friends who do not live in the USA? Guess what! You CAN!!

Several of us in CAMUG have phone service using VOIP (voice over Internet Protocol). Last week I ordered something immediately after hearing about it. I have been eagerly awaiting the opportunity to test it and now I can hardly wait to share it. Perhaps some of you have seen the ads for the magicJack. What is it? Well, let me quote from PC Magazine online: **"So simple it's almost perfect,** the magicJack is the best home voice-over-IP gadget I've seen to date. Excellent call quality, a workable set of calling features, and an amazing price make this little box the VoIP wonder to beat."

Yes, in two minutes a little USB device about 2 inches by 1 inch by 5/8 inches that I plugged into the powered hub that I run through my USB port was giving me the capability of placing my calls via the Internet. I called Canada and Colorado, spending about 1/12 hours on the phone.

It worked well except when I looked up information on the internet at the same time.

I talked to customer service and they said I can **connect to the powered hub that runs directly to my router.** I will have to restart the modem, most likely. That means that I don't have to have the computer turned on to make calls, just like my current VoIP service. This is great.

What do I like about the magicJack? The price. The **gadget is \$40, and that includes one year of service!** The renewal service price is \$20! Not \$200. Just \$20. In fact, we paid \$60 for five years!

The price. Calls are free to US & Canada and reasonable to other parts of the world. Bolivia ranges from 12-14 cents. Guatemala was a little less. I didn't check farther.

The price. Register your magicJack with a US phone number and travel anywhere in the world. Place calls back to the US or Canada and the call is free! Purchase a magicJack and register it with a number in the USA, send it to your friends elsewhere in the world, and they can call to any place in the US or Canada for free -- almost. Remember, you receive one year of service with the device.

Convenience. You can use the magicJack with **any computer,** not just the one you registered.

Convenience. The magicJack is so **small** that it will travel extremely easily.

**Convenience.** You can use the magicJack to place calls over Wi-Fi, cable, or DSL. Even light high speed is fine as it requires only 80 kbps of bandwidth.

**Services.** You get all of them: voicemail delivered to you via email and also available by calling your number and entering your pass code, conference calling, 3-way calling, caller ID, do not disturb -- have I forgotten anything?

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## Surviving the Switch to Digital TV

*By Andy Marken,*  
Marken Communications  
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At the stroke of midnight on Feb. 17, 2009, the analog transmissions that have beamed free television over the air in the United States for over half a century will disappear for good. They will be replaced by digital signals, many of which are already broadcasting, in what will be the most significant change to television since the introduction of color.

The "**digital switchover**" brings with it higher image quality, better sound and a level of versatility and flexibility previously unattainable through free television. It also brings with it a number of significant headaches, as confusion over exactly who will be affected is inspiring panic in viewers fearful of being left behind in a haze of snow and static as the rest of the country moves into the future. Many of those who will be affected know that the **deadline is fast approaching**, but are unsure of how to prepare for it. Thankfully, a solution is simple, easily attainable and won't cost you a dime.

There are two major reasons for the switch from analog TV broadcasts to digital TV. First, **digital signals offer superior image quality** and allow for the transmission of high-definition signals over the air. This means that a properly equipped HDTV can receive local high-definition broadcasts that will look about as good as what you'd get from cable or satellite television.

Second, switching from analog to digital **frees up real estate on the broadcast spectrum** for other uses, as digital signals are more efficient and take up less bandwidth. Telecommunications companies like Verizon and AT&T have spent nearly \$20 billion to secure the rights to the frequencies that were previously occupied by channels 52 through 69, in the hopes of using that airspace to improve their wireless communication networks.

What the digital switchover is actually doing is changing the language that TV broadcasters use

to communicate with your television. Since 1941, televisions in the U.S. have utilized a set of broadcast standards laid out by the National Television System Committee. Big broadcast towers sent out information over the air using these NTSC standards and were picked up by the television antenna in your living room. Inside your TV, an NTSC tuner interpreted the information and properly displayed it on screen.

The digital switchover is introducing a new language, a new set of broadcast standards, this one designed by the Advanced Television Systems Committee. **On Feb. 17**, those broadcast towers are going to stop speaking NTSC permanently and start speaking ATSC. But unfortunately, your old television set doesn't know how to translate ATSC into moving pictures and sound. Just about all televisions manufactured and sold after Mar. 1, 2007 feature ATSC tuners, but if you purchased a television any earlier than that, chances are your TV won't be able to pick up over-the-air broadcasts once the switchover occurs.

**The solution: A digital converter box**, essentially an external ATSC tuner that sits on top of your existing television and is linked between your antenna and your TV. The ATSC signals are grabbed by the same antenna you've always used, then passed to the digital converter box that translates the ATSC signals into something your NTSC television can understand. They are easy to hook up and **available at a wide variety of stores**, including big box stores like Best Buy, Wal-Mart and Target, as well as online retailers.

Digital converter boxes cost between \$40 and \$70 on average, but since the digital switchover is being forced upon consumers, Congress has stepped up and created the "**TV Converter Box Coupon Program**." Under this initiative, each American household is entitled to two \$40 gift cards that can only be used to purchase a digital converter box. Individuals can apply at the official Web site for the DTV switch. You can apply for coupons **until Mar. 31, 2009**; they expire 90 days after they are issued. You might want to

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**MagicJack** *Continued from Page 2*

Quality. The quality compares with other VoIP services. The calls pass over a private network.

Customer Service. Customer service was good, **but busy**. The online chat took a little time as the service person moved between customers. But it was good. He didn't have time to tell me about the Outlook add-on, so I am still waiting to discover what that is. Customer service apparently is improving, based on evaluations I read.

The US News and World Report had an interesting article online dated September 27 about the magicJack. Here is a part of it.

*"The colorful and wealthy **Borislow**, who also raises, races, and wagers on racehorses, has launched magicJack fast out of the gate. The startup has sold more than 400,000 devices just six months after its official unveiling. It's **selling about 7,000 a day**, the company says, adding twice as many net new accounts over the period as Vonage, an Internet phoning pioneer. MagicJack's appeal is not only the price, which falls to just \$20 for a second year of calls, but sound quality that's consistently good. And it's flat simple to install and use."*

Who is the inventor behind the magicJack? Dan

Borislow. Here is information about him taken directly from the magicJack web site.

*Dan Borislow is the founder of YMAX Communications Corporation, a modern phone company with the largest competitive local exchange carrier (CLEC) network in the U.S, and inventor of the magicJack™.*

*Borislow has been in the telecommunications industry for over twenty years and is recognized in the industry for pioneering the development of breakthrough technologies. He previously held the position of CEO and founder of publicly-held*

*Tel-Save, Inc. At Tel-Save, Borislow **revolutionized low-cost long-distance** for more than four million America Online (AOL) customers. While with*

*Tel-Save, he saved customers over 40% on their phone bills and also received the prestigious J.D. Power and Associates Award for Customer Satisfaction. After a brief attempt at retirement, Borislow returned to the telecom industry and invented the magicJack. By eliminating the expense of local and long distance phone charges - and saving the average customer around \$1000 a year - magicJack is positioned to be the **fastest growing telecom company** in the world; Borislow likes to call it .Telecom Revolution Part II.*

*Borislow received his Bachelor of Arts degree and honorary doctorate degrees from Widener University. He is an avid soccer player, dedicated deep sea fisherman, enjoys watching sports and has a Thoroughbred Horse Breeding Business.*

**Note: Radio Shack handles magicJack. The nearest hookup, however, is Mechanicsville but local service is expected soon. Ed.**

**HDTV** *Continued from pg 3*

apply for them sooner rather than later because the government has allocated a **finite amount of funding**.

TV viewers who pay for cable or satellite service need not worry. The digital switchover **only applies to over-the-air broadcasts**, so consumers who get their television directly from Comcast or DirecTV will not be affected at all, and service will continue uninterrupted and unchanged as the DTV deadline comes and goes.

There is, however, a subtler, unrelated analog-to-digital switchover taking place among cable companies, one that could affect subscribers. It has usually

been possible to view a small number of basic cable channels by plugging the coaxial cable directly into a television set, by-passing a cable box entirely.

This was a quick and easy way to bring cable TV to many rooms in a home without renting multiple cable boxes. Unfortunately, this may not be possible in the near future. Cable companies like Comcast and Time Warner are slowly phasing out their analog cable services in favor of digital. By switching over, they free up more space on their cable networks that can be allocated to new high-definition channels and interactive services like "On Demand."

The **downside** is that when all cable channels are converted to digital, **renting a cable box will be required to see any chan-**

**nels at all.**

Another point of confusion that retailers and manufacturers have been reluctant to clear up: **consumers need not purchase an HDTV to weather the digital TV switchover.**

In addition to the converter boxes, new **standard-definition CRT televisions are still available**, and they are required by law to include the necessary ATSC tuners. While an HDTV will allow viewers to take advantage of digital TV's high-definition potential, it's important to know that there is a **lower-cost option** available as well.

With the emergence of free, digital, over-the-air television

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**VoIP** *Continued from Page 1*

He also reminded the membership that full HDTV is coming very soon and those with roof-top only antenna service (rare in this area) are soon going to need a converter box or go dark on their TV. Even then high definition signals may not make it to the roof on conversion day. Those currently getting signals from Richmond or Norfolk are finding that they are not in station's service area when seeking help. Companies like his are there to see you through the transition.

Once again, it was great having C.D. Hathaway at our meeting to tell it like it is and what the possibilities are in this fast changing information age. **Ed.**

**APCUG USER GROUP  
CONTESTS FOR 2009**

Digital Photos, Websites and newsletters must enter by January 31st. See Board members for details. **Ed.**

**Membership Report - December 2008**

**NEW MEMBER**— Peter J. Kane

**RENEW January 2009** – John Bowles, Anne Moss, Sue Broadway, Egbert Dees, William Gibson, Carol Hallett, Bill Pregnall

**RENEW December 2008** – Nick Borst, Jean Ward

Membership dues are \$20 annually. Please send to:

Jim Thompson, Treasurer, NNCUG, P.O. Box 774, Burgess, VA.

*For insertion into our local newspaper advertising, please send to [benjim@netscape.com](mailto:benjim@netscape.com) no later than 15th of the month.*

**NNCUG December  
Meeting Minutes**

The meeting was called to order on December 20, 2008, at 9:30 am by president B.J. McMillan. 34 members and guests were present.

Treasurer Jim Thompson submitted a Year-End Report of Income and Expenses for 2008, We now have 115 members. Jim Sapione reported on the activities of the Photo SIG and BJ McMillan reported on the status of the Beginners SIG. BJ also stated that more programs may have to be developed by our members in the future. Members were asked to fill out a survey on how they use their PCs and how they

would like to use them. BJ said she is also looking for someone to take over the Beginners SIG. Bill McCrosky volunteered to do a presentation on "Google tools OTHER THAN its search engine".

After a Question and Answer period, C.D. Hathaway, from Southern Electronics gave a presentation on "Voice Over IP (VoIP) and the HDTV Changeover. Raffle winners were: **Betty Lehman, Roger Fortain and Pete Sturm.** The general meeting adjourned at 11:30 pm. Following the general meeting, the Beginners SIG met for a presentation on "Tips on Emailing".

*Don Beard, Secretary*

**December Photo Winner**


**By Richard Davis.** The topic was "Texture." "Driftwood" was taken down by my dock and I had to put waders on to get out to it. It was shot late afternoon for a lower sun angle which also helped add some color.

**HDTV** *Continued from pg 4*

that includes HD transmissions, it will be interesting to see if Americans, the majority of whom now pay for their television service via cable or satellite, might see the **benefit of switching back to the old rabbit ears.** While the selection of over-the-air broadcasts will never be as comprehensive as pay services, that same glut of content is often cited as an annoyance--lots of channels that subscribers will never watch.

Of course, all this will depend on how smoothly the digital switchover goes, and whether or not people are actually able to see the improvements on their screen. With just a **few short months to go,** having the right knowledge to make it through is absolutely crucial.

**See Also:**

In Pictures: 10 Tips For Switching To Digital TV == <http://tinyurl.com/5tj8wq>

Ask This Before You Buy An HDTV -- <http://tinyurl.com/57jfbu>

# The Computer Link

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## **NNCUG Meeting Dates**

### ***NNCUG GENERAL MEETING***

***Third Saturday 9:30 a.m.***

***Rappahannock Westminster-Canterbury Meeting Room***

### ***BEGINNERS SIG***

***Third Saturday 11:00 a.m. (after General Meeting)***

### ***GENEALOGY SIG***

***Third Saturday 11:00 am***

***Rappahannock Westminster-Canterbury***

***[Members interested in leading and forming new SIG group, contact B.J. McMillan 580-8666]***

### ***PHOTOSHOP SIG***

***First Tuesday every month, 9 a.m.***

***Lancaster Community Library, Kilmarnock***

***For more information,***

***Call Jim Sapione, 804-462-5831 or message***

***Bird@kaballero.com***

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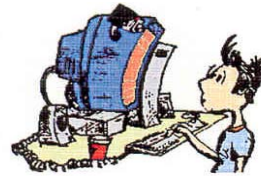
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**Coming Attractions**

Membership—January 17th, 9:30 am RW-C—Google features  
Photo SIG—January 6th, 9 am—Library