Like some universal solvent, digital technology seems to dissolve practically everything it touches.

The music recording moguls learned it the hard way, as consumers swapped favorite tunes on Napster and burned pirate CD recordings. Now it’s the TV industry’s turn, as the digitizers apply their corrosive talents to copying videos.

You can smell the aroma of panic wafting from the federal courtroom in Los Angeles where some major TV producers filed suit against Sonicblue Inc. The California company makes Replay TV, a digital video recorder with features that may delight consumers but terrify broadcasters. For instance, the latest version of Replay TV can let the viewer skip over TV commercials without a glance. Moreover, the device allows users to send copies of favorite shows over the Internet.

Scary stuff for any company looking to protect its intellectual property. But even if you think the broadcasters have a point, it’s hard to see how their lawsuit will put a stop to this sort of thing. Especially when you consider that millions of personal computers are capable of similar feats.

In essence, Replay TV is a modified personal computer that uses a custom-designed processor to digitize and compress video data and sling it onto a hard drive. Several years ago, when the first such machines were being designed, standard PC processors lacked the muscle to do this work reasonably well. Besides, who’d want to clutter up a PC hard drive with a bunch of old TV shows?
But that was before Pentium 4s and Athlon XPs, monster chips with clock speeds above one gigahertz. The hard drives got bigger as well; you can buy 100 gigabytes for around $300. Then there are the CD burners that are now standard equipment on home PCs. A high-speed burner can copy 800 megabytes of data in just a few minutes.

In short, any late-model PC can double as a Replay TV. All that’s needed is a way to pump the TV signal into the computer and the software to digitize and compress it. You can now add both these accessories to a computer for less than $100.

TV tuner cards for computers have been available for at least a decade and generally sell for about $50. The cards connect to a home TV cable or broadcast antenna, and let the user watch TV in an on-screen window, while running other computer tasks in the background.

The last piece of the mosaic fell into place last year, when Houston-based SnapStream Media unveiled its Personal Video Station software for recording TV shows on the PC. SnapStream PVS lets the user punch in time and channel information, then order the computer to copy the show. It’s even simpler if the computer is connected to the Internet. The user goes to a Web site that displays local TV listings. Click on the videotape icon next to each show, and the PVS software is set to record the program in Microsoft Corp.’s Windows Media format.

Like the traditional VCR, SnapStream PVS can be confusing to set up and use. But it works. Video quality varies by how much you compress the signal. A half hour of VHS-quality video takes up about 270 megabytes. If your hard drive can stand it, you can make higher-quality copies.

The SnapStream software costs a mere $50 and can be downloaded from the company’s Web site, www.snapstream.com. Since most PCs don’t have TV tuner cards, SnapStream also peddles a hardware and software bundle in retail stores for $90.

Adding TiVo-like capabilities to a PC allows for a variety of paradigm-busting applications. Say you’ve got multiple computers in your home, all networked together. The SnapStream software contains a built-in network server, so you can watch a recorded program on any PC in the house. Suppose you own a palm-top computer that runs Microsoft’s Pocket PC operating system. You can download a SnapStream video and watch it during the morning commute.

There’s just one thing missing - a way to connect the computer to your living room. SnapStream plans to offer just such a device, equipped with WiFi-based wireless networking. In effect, the PC will broadcast
programs to the TV.

There’s nothing to stop you sharing SnapStream videos over the Internet. Nothing but bandwidth, that is. Most high-speed home Internet services allow rapid downloads, but relatively slow uploads. It’d take all day to send an episode of ’’Babylon 5’’ at today’s speeds. So there’s little chance that TV shows will be Napsterized - for now.

But you can certainly burn favorite shows onto CDs and swap them around. Besides, the broadband lines serving universities and businesses are high speed in both directions, and video swappers seem to be using them. Already you can find a great deal of pirated video material online.

If SnapStream gets installed on millions of PCs, there’ll be plenty more. And the TV moguls will find themselves knee deep in the digital acid bath.

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