

I Want My DTV

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Growing up in the 1970s, I remember watching my favorite cartoon, Scooby-Doo, on our 21-inch Zenith TV. The TV had a remote control with just three buttons: on/off and channel up and channel down. The buttons were about the same size as the ones on our dishwasher and just as hard to press.

I remember clicking the remote to switch between ABC, CBS, NBC and public television. Then we got cable. Now we had 20 channels, including the awesome Channel 18 out of Milwaukee that seemed to run 'The Brady Bunch' on a loop.

My dad is kind of a techie, and was on a first-name basis with the guys at Sound World. Accordingly, we always had cool TVs. In the early 1980s, we had one set that you could hook up to a phone line and make calls. We had the first VCR on the block – a top-loading Quasar as big as a microwave oven. Then came laser discs, DVDs and DVRs.

His latest endeavor is digital satellite TV that comes with the Big Ten Network, so now he doesn't have to miss any Badger games. Basically, I know my dad will be ready on February 17, 2009, when the new federal law goes into effect requiring all full-power television broadcast stations to stop broadcasting in analog format and broadcast only in digital format.

Known as the Digital Television (DTV) Transition, the new law requiring the conversion to all-digital television broadcasting will free up frequencies for public safety communications (such as police, fire, and emergency rescue). Additionally, digital transmission has vastly improved picture and sound quality, so you can actually count Larry King's ear hair. Also, some of the freed up frequencies will be used for advanced commercial wireless services for consumers.

If my folks still had their old analog Zenith, they would have to buy a digital-to-analog set-top converter box to be able to see over-the-air digital programming. Some newer televisions have either a built-in digital tuner (integrated DTV) or a digital-ready monitor with a separate digital tuner set-top box. For these sets, consumers will have to have a TV antenna, either on the roof or a set of rabbit ears on top of the set.

Starting on March 1, 2007, all new TVs in the U.S. must contain a digital tuner. On May 25, 2007, the Federal Communications Commission requires retailers to disclose if their televisions contain only an analog tuner and require a digital-to-analog converter box. Accordingly, after May 25, 2007, all TVs should either contain a digital tuner or be identified as analog and need a converter.

To determine if the TV set in your living room is a DTV, look on the TV or check the manual for the words "Integrated Digital Tuner" or "Digital Tuner Built-In", "DTV," "ATSC," or "HDTV." However, HDTV is only necessary to view digital programming in "high definition." If the set is promoted as "Digital Ready" or "HDTV Ready," you may still need a separate set-top box that contains a tuner digital to watch TV programs. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) is offering all U.S. households two \$40 coupons to purchase digital-to-analog converter boxes.

As my mom said so many times, soon I'll be able to rot my brain with a choice of about 200 channels with a crystal clear picture.