

Some still having problems with digital TV conversion

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It seemed so simple. Buy a government-subsidized converter box, plug it in, and sit back and enjoy the brave new world of digital television.

At least that's what we were led to believe. But for some residents, the June 12 conversion from analog to digital has been one colossal headache, a frustrating exercise filled with contradictions, speculation and fuzzy or non-existent reception.

"The American public was promised improved service, more stations and clearer reception," Elisabeth Salfelder of Fair Lawn, N.J., wrote. "Instead, we have fewer channels and are extremely frustrated and disappointed with what is available to us. We should have known better than to believe all the hype."

For many like Salfelder, who rely on rabbit ears or rooftop antennas for reception, the digital revolution has meant technical glitches and incompatible equipment leading to [TV reception](#) that is fair to non-existent, depending on the channel, time of day and the will of Zeus.

"I have four sets and at any given time I can get reception in one room, but not another," said Rosanne Hurley of Paramus. "For example, I was watching Channel 5 in the back room and when I went to cook and watch the TV in the kitchen, it said no signal.

"Since many shows are in repeats now, I am good to watch shows I have taped or rely on Channels 7, 11, 13 and 25 for news and entertainment,"

she said. "But come August and September, this just will not do."

Hurley is one of about two dozen readers who responded to our request to share their experiences. What was unusual about their comments was the lack of a pattern in stations affected and solutions suggested by electronics stores and online sites.

Nationally, the conversion seems to have gone well for most of the estimated 13 million homes -- 11.5 percent of U.S. households -- that rely exclusively on antennas and millions more who use antennas for second or third sets.

The [Federal Communications Commission](#) fielded more than 900,000 calls in the week surrounding the June 12 changeover, but "the calls have dropped dramatically since then," FCC spokesman Rick Kaplan said.

Most of the problems can be traced to having the wrong antenna and scanning the boxes improperly.

"Most peoples' problems with reception come down to the antenna," said Graham Jones, director of communications engineering at the National Association of Broadcasters, the Washington-D.C.-based trade association.

Consumers usually think of television channels as VHF (channels 2 to 13) and UHF (14 and up), and each requires its own antenna or a single antenna that includes both frequencies.

The problem is that stations have two numbers with digital TV, one that is announced -- the brand, as it were -- and one that represents the actual broadcast frequency, Jones said by phone.

As a result, when New Jersey viewers watch New York's WNBC, they

click on Channel 4, a VHF designation, but they're actually getting radio frequency Channel 28, which is UHF. The same situation exists with all the stations in the metropolitan area except WABC, which is Channel 7 in brand and frequency.

Since many rabbit-ear antennas are for VHF stations, they don't work for the UHF cousins, Jones said. "You need to have an antenna that does both."

It seems clear that the government and television stations, which did a great job preparing the public for the conversion to digital, did a lousy job telling us what it would take to get reception.

"The first couple of days, the people didn't know what to do," a salesman at the P.C. Richard & Son store in Wayne said. "They thought you just plug it in."

But it's not just a matter of having the right hardware, as Camille Metzler of Hasbrouck Heights, N.J., discovered.

She spent \$20 for the converter box -- a third of the selling price, thanks to the \$40 government coupon -- but got no reception.

"Now, they tell us you may need a new antenna, which I purchase, for another \$20," she said. "Bring that home, hook it up, weak signal. They suggest you turn the TV in the direction of the 'big antenna in the sky' and it still doesn't work."

Even with the right antenna, reception may be spotty if the converter box is not scanned properly.

For starters, scanning done before the conversion omits stations that changed their frequency on June 12, Kaplan said. "You need to do a

double rescan, to clear out the memory, because some stations moved. That helps in about 85 percent to 90 percent of the cases."

He suggested unplugging the antenna, running a scan, unplugging the box, waiting a minute or two, and running the scan again.

But if the antenna is not positioned correctly to pick up a station's signal, it won't be recognized by scanning. That could be a problem with New Jersey Network's Channel 50 in Montclair because its signal comes from a different direction than most of the New York stations, Jones said.

That means you need to reposition the antenna to get reception from those stations and then rescan the box, Jones said.

Complicating matters is the fact that, unlike analog, where picture quality changes immediately when you move the [antenna](#), there is a lag time of a few seconds when you do so with a digital signal.

Also, with analog, a weak signal or weather interference can result in fuzzy pictures or snow, but at least you're getting a picture. With digital, it's often an all-or-nothing situation, with either a great picture or nothing at all.

"It takes a little bit of trial and error," Jones said.

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