



U-DAY AND YOU

This week may mark the beginning of a TV revolution—or of a multimillion-dollar boondoggle

BY DAVID LACHENBRUCH

Friday, May 1, 1964, will be long remembered as a landmark in the history of television. Informally known as "U-Day," it is the date on which a Federal law dictates a major change in the design of American television receivers. It is an attempt to encourage the development of more **continued**



TV stations, and you may feel its impact when you buy your next set.

The "U" in U-Day stands for UHF, and the new law is the so-called "all-channel law." It is a unique law in that it will make TV set buyers pay extra for a gadget which most of them won't be able to use immediately.

The all-channel law is like a dose of bitter medicine—it may be unpleasant at first, but in the long run it could have desirable results. Little noted by the public when it was passed by Congress in 1962, it gives the Federal Communications Commission the power to require that all new television sets be built to tune to 82 TV channels.

The FCC selected May 1 as the day for the changeover, and its ruling means that all sets built on or after that date must be equipped to tune to the ultra-high-frequency (UHF) channels 14 through 83 as well as the more common very-high-frequency (VHF) channels 2 through 13.

To meet the provisions of the new law, television set manufacturers must now build two separate tuners into each new set—one for VHF and the other for UHF channels. The UHF tuner previously had been offered as an "optional extra" in areas where there were stations operating on channels 14 through 83.

Television set makers, many of whom opposed the law, say that at today's all-time low TV prices (and profit margins) they can't possibly absorb the additional cost of the new tuner, and that they must pass it along to the public in terms of a price increase, which may average \$20 or \$25 a set at first. (There's another expense involved in receiving UHF programs. An outdoor antenna is often necessary for good reception, even where rabbit ears will do for VHF. Where an outdoor antenna is used for VHF, usually a separate UHF an-

tenna must be added.)

Many viewers would be happy to pay a little extra for a greater choice of programs. But, unfortunately, most set buyers won't realize any immediate benefit from the changeover to all-channel set production. About 80 percent of current television set sales are made in areas where there are no UHF stations on the air, according to the Electronic Industries Association, which estimates that the new law will require people who live in non-UHF areas to spend \$160,000,-000 extra next year for UHF tuners which will be completely useless at the start.

Congress took a gamble

Will these tuners ever bring in entertainment, information and education? In passing the all-channel law, Congress took a gamble that they will. The law is part of an all-out Government program to break the deadlock in the growth of new TV stations.

Channels 2 through 13 (VHF) can accommodate about 650 television stations throughout the United States. More than 530 are now in operation, and most of the remaining vacant VHF channel assignments are for locations where there are more jack rabbits than potential viewers. If there is to be any significant expansion of commercial and educational television, it must be in another band of frequencies.

The FCC foresaw this problem in 1952, when it carved 70 new channels out of the unused ultra-high-frequency radio spectrum and opened up this new frontier to television station settlement. These channels could provide from 1600 to 3000 new TV outlets if fully occupied. By the end of 1953, 121 UHF stations already had gone on the air, and television manufacturers were turning out all-channel sets and UHF converters (for existing sets) to receive them.

But the UHF boom quickly turned

into a bust. VHF had too big a head start. In areas where VHF stations were already on the air, there already were millions who couldn't tune their sets to the new UHF stations and couldn't care less. With little audience, these UHF stations could get few advertisers; with few advertisers, few good programs; few good programs, few viewers.

In those grim days, one UHF station in Connecticut—under the gun of New York City's seven VHF outlets—attempted to measure its audience by making this on-the-air offer: Send us your name and address and we'll mail you a crisp one-dollar bill. When it had no takers, it upped the ante to \$10 a head. Nobody wrote in.

Out of a total of almost 230 UHF stations which were on the air at one time or another, nearly half of them ran into financial difficulties through lack of audience, and, like the Connecticut station operator, were forced to turn off the kilowatts and call it quits.

A few, however, did extremely well. These were commercial stations in areas which had no near-by VHF channels, where the public willingly purchased all-channel sets to get any television at all. Approximately 120 UHF stations are now on the air; more than one-quarter of these are noncommercial educational outlets.

Twelve years after the opening of the UHF frontier, fewer than 12,000,000 of the Nation's 66,500,000 television sets are equipped to tune to channels between 14 and 83. The all-channel law's purpose is to eliminate this built-in handicap to UHF development.

The normal life span of a television set is considered to be about 10 or 11 years. Therefore, it could be a decade before substantially all sets in use can tune to all channels.

May 1 was selected as U-Day because it coincides with the set-making industry's new-model changeover, when the 1965 sets start to roll off the

production lines. For some time—certainly well into the fall, and probably through the rest of this year—there will be plenty of 1964 VHF-only, 12-channel sets for sale. As many as 1,500,000 1964 sets are believed to be in the distribution pipelines—that is, somewhere between factory and ultimate consumer. These 12-channel sets are perfectly adequate for areas where there are no UHF stations now, and can be converted to all-channel later.

It's too early to tell whether the all-channel gamble is going to pay off. Since the law's passage, there has been an increase in applications for UHF stations, but there are still fewer than 100 applicants. Obviously, any big UHF expansion is going to await an increase in the potential audience.

It will take more than sets to put UHF across. You can lead a viewer to UHF, but you can't make him watch. The FCC realizes this, and is now struggling with proposals to help assure availability of quality programs to UHF stations. The FCC plan to make network programs available to stations not now affiliated with networks is one of these projects.

Turning point in TV history?

Set manufacturers, too, are trying to minimize the impact of the all-channel law on the public. They are hoping that mass production economics will quickly reduce the added costs of UHF. And they've appealed to Congress to reduce the Federal excise tax on TV sets by an amount equal to the cost of the UHF tuner, to wipe out the price increase. At present, however, this proposal is given little chance of success.

May 1 could be a turning point in the history of American television. The all-channel law may be a major boon to the television viewer. Or it could turn out to be a monumental, multi-million-dollar boondoggle. Even the experts don't know for sure.