

*"Working for quality  
and diversity in  
British broadcasting"*



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Founded by Jocelyn Hay in 1983

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Ms Bronwen Roscoe  
BBC Trust  
35 Marylebone High Street  
London W1

BBC Trust Consultation re Project Canvas

Dear Ms Roscoe

Thank you for the briefing you gave my colleague Lewis Rudd and me on the BBC Executive's proposals for establishing Project Canvas, and for granting an extension to the deadline for responses.

I found the proposals put forward most interesting and potentially of great benefit to viewers, licence fee payers and in developing a Digital Britain. I am, however, concerned that there is an ambiguity and lack of transparency in the proposals with far too many 'ambitions', 'aspirations' and uncertainties in the wording for an unreserved endorsement to be given at this time. Despite your briefing and the presentation by Erik Huggers at the recent Digital Television Summit, questions remain, and my comments are set out below.

- 1. Technical standards.** I was pleased to note that, unlike Project Kangaroo, the intention is allow any content provider the opportunity to join the Project. My concern is that the technical standards may not be common or fully open. From the content provider's and from the viewer or consumer's point of view, I believe it is absolutely essential that open standards are employed and that they are standardised with Europe, if not globally. The extraordinary success of Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) can be attributed largely to its open standards and the ability of manufacturers to enter a free and open horizontal market in the provision of set top boxes. The result has been great innovation and viewers being offered a choice of receiving equipment from the cheapest, simplest boxes to the most sophisticated integrated TV sets. If Project Canvas is to bring maximum benefit to viewers and licence fee payers it must also involve open standards, coordinated internationally but especially with Europe, in order to enable manufacturers, content providers and viewers to benefit from a competitive market and economies of scale.
- 2. Minimum Mbyte capacity.** The idea of 'bringing the iPlayer into the living room' is an attractive one which could bring benefits to viewers. Virgin Media is already proving its popularity. However, the aspirations outlined in Digital Britain are for a broad band capacity of only 2 Mbytes to each home. With a minimum of 1.6 Mbytes required for standard definition, I am concerned that this will not be sufficient to deliver high quality HD Television and may cause problems with streaming live events, especially popular ones, even in SD.
- 3. Partnerships.** The scheme is described as a partnership but the only partners actually named in the document are ITV and BT plc. It states that the BBC 'hopes the number

of partners will increase'. As the intention is to bring the widest benefit to viewers and also to assist in the development of Digital Britain, I hope that many more partners will be involved and that there will be more transparency, not only in disclosing them but also in clarifying the contributions and advantages each partner will make and receive. The BBC has not been noted for extracting maximum gain from business partnerships in the past.

4. One of the document's main 'aspirations' is to take advantage of converging technologies to bring together digital television, broad band and the internet in one piece of equipment. This is highly desirable but also brings risks and costs for the consumer.
  - a) **Costs and support** . The costs to the individual consumer for adding broad band could be considerable and must be transparent. Customer support may also be necessary - once there is involvement with the internet, people run into difficulties. Where do they go for help? Is consideration being given to the provision of technical support for those who require technical assistance or those who require any form of redress? Will BT or any other ISPs charge for these services?
  - b) **Editorial control**. Access to the internet brings the risk of receiving or unintentionally accessing undesirable content or spam. Are any steps being taken to assist viewers who may be new to the Web in avoiding such dangers? From our conversation I understood that it was not the intention to provide a 'walled-garden' but that some restrictions on access to the Web might be introduced. What form would these take and what would the costs be of introducing some editorial process – to the BBC and to individual users? Could such use of licence payers' money be justified? If any of the ISPs involved are willing to introduce such a service, who will regulate its use?
  - c) **Electronic Programme Guides**. If various services are now to be brought together in a single piece of receiving equipment, a new EPG will be required. As one of the aims of Project Canvas is to encourage people who have so far been reluctant to try the new technology and are therefore unused to computers and the internet, the new EPG will require careful design, most probably incorporating a keyboard. What steps are being taken to ensure that the new EPGs are designed for maximum simplicity and ease of use, with sufficient safeguards to reassure and protect vulnerable users?
5. **Conclusion**. I think Project Canvas has great potential and a scheme of this sort will be required before Digital Britain can be established. Project Canvas goes a long way towards that end but the Trust will need to reassure itself that more thought is put into designing the scheme; that more information and answers have been provided to the questions above; and that it will provide good value for licence payers before it gives the go ahead for the Project to be launched.

Yours sincerely

Jocelyn Hay CBE  
Honorary President

I have no objection to this response being published.