

Freesat vs Freesat?

Bill Wright worries that many viewers across the nation will now be even more perplexed about their digital TV options

No, you aren't confused. But you are far better informed than the average punter because you read this magazine. You've kept up with the proliferation of digital TV choices: you know about Sky, Freeview, Freesat, Virgin, and BT Vision. The addition of one more little complication isn't going to throw you.

We've had Freesat for a few years. It needs a Sky box with a card, but not a Sky card, a sort-of-free one, and you need a Sky dish (even if you don't want Sky). Now there's another thing, also called Freesat, but this one doesn't need a Sky box, and it works from a Sky dish or from a different dish.

But the man on the Clapham Bendybus doesn't know the difference between Freeview and Freesat, never mind that the latter now comes in two incompatible flavours. The phrase I hear most often when trying to help customers with options is: 'It's doing my head in!'

Mr & Mrs Average Viewer

In areas of poor terrestrial reception there are lots of people (many of whom can't afford to waste cash) who pay Sky each month because they think there's no other way to get good reception of the Big Five channels. The Freesat from Sky publicity has been muted, to say the least, and the message has not reached many people who could benefit. Given good publicity, the new 'BBC' Freesat should improve matters, but customer confusion has always been rife, and I fear that with two different 'Freesats' on the go, it can only get worse.

Anne is about 70 and a lovely person although, disconcertingly, she is the Customer Who Is Also A Friend. We had a cuppa in M&S, and when her Jim came back from the toilet he had a large bun too. Anne did most of the talking; Jim just nodded.

'We got a new telly last week, Bill, and that's where the trouble started. Don't get me wrong, it's a lovely telly, a gem it is, a real gem! It's a widescreen one as well, and it's this big!'

She held her hands apart like a boastful angler.

'It's the clearest picture I've ever seen – well, it's a Polaroid and they make cameras, don't they, so it will be, won't it? It's got a jelly screen, you can't touch it, it's jelly – well, it's a bit squashy when you touch it. I don't know what I'll do if there's a really funny bit on and Jim spits bits of dinner at it.'

She looked at Jim and his cream bun and whispered 'Pig!', then continued: 'You're not allowed to clean it, only flick it with a duster. I'll have to make him sit further back when he's having his



Over the years, delivery platforms have come and gone. At the bottom is a dish for the ill-fated British Satellite Broadcasting, on the right a Sky analogue dish and, top left, a Sky digital minidish

dinner. Anyway, it's only about this big' – she held her finger and thumb about 3in apart to indicate the depth of the new TV set – 'not like the other one, that had a great big bulge.'

She made a 'very pregnant' motion with her arm. 'Why did they used to make them with that big bulge at the back when they don't need it? He couldn't carry it about when I wanted him to, not with that bulge. 'Course, he's got a bulge as well!' she cackled, and Jim stopped nodding and pulled in his stomach slightly. The bun had gone.

This is where I got confused. Anne pressed on.

'It's a digital one, but we can't get all the digital channels like we could before with the old one, and even the analgesic ones stop and start.'

'It reminds me of when we went to Belgium,' Jim interjected. 'It looks like those great big ships at the docks, piled up with containers, all those squares, all different colours. And the picture stops, and the sound goes off. I think it's disgusting! It says "DVD" on it, so that's digital, but you have to pay for all the channels, and we didn't on the old one. I suppose we'll have to pay for Sky now. It's a real con. I'm not going to vote for this lot next time, I can tell you!'

DVB logo

I'll spare you the rest. It turned out that the new TV was indeed 'digital', and bore the DVB logo. But, first, the no-gooder at the TV shop had failed to connect the Scart lead to Anne and Jim's Freesat from Sky receiver. I'd installed that for them some time ago – where they live there's no chance of getting reliable terrestrial digital TV until 2011.

Second, they have a Group A aerial (channels 21 to 37) aligned on the Belmont transmitter. This

means that four snowy analogue channels and only two digital multiplexes are available. The main BBC multiplex on channel 30 (within Group A) was being received at just adequate strength, and somehow the ITV multiplex, on channel 48 and thus out of group, was creeping into the aerial. The other muxes, further up the band, weren't making the trip. The TV set had auto-tuned the channels on the two multiplexes it could receive and stopped there. The channels on the ITV multiplex were of very poor quality, hence the 'container ship' look of the picture. Jim's repeated presses of the 'Sky' button on his Freesat from Sky box had no visible effect, due to the lack of a Scart connection.

Leaving aside why the installer of the TV set had made such a mess of it, why were Jim and Anne half-convinced that the non-availability of some channels on their new digital TV meant that they had to be paid for? It was as if they saw pay-TV as an inevitable consequence of the digital revolution. Anne and Jim aren't idiots. They are just Mr & Mrs Average Retired, struggling to find the most cost-effective way to keep watching telly.

Many ordinary people – not idiots, just people who have no more interest in TV technology than how to turn the thing on – are terribly confused about how they are going to receive TV. Many still think that the terms 'satellite', 'digital', 'Sky', and 'pay' are synonymous. We're told that analogue switch-off went smoothly in Whitehaven. But there was a huge publicity drive and it won't be sustainable when analogue screens go dark in large conurbations. Let's hope the BBC Freesat message gets through so older citizens aren't fooled into taking up unnecessary Sky/cable subscriptions ■