

CTAM

Community Television Association
Of Maine

Frequently Asked Questions About Local Access TV

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What is local access television?

Federal law provides that state or local communities may require a license or negotiate a non-exclusive cable franchise with cable TV operators wishing to market their services locally. As part of the provisions of such a license or franchise agreement, cities and towns may require the cable operator to provide what the Federal Telecommunications Act of 1997 calls "public, educational, or government (PEG) access" channels on the local channel lineup, for the unrestricted use by citizens, school districts and municipalities. In most states, existing agreements also require that certain equipment and funding be given to the towns. The funding, called a "Capital Grant", may only be used for television equipment purchases or leasehold improvements to a building that is used for PEG Access. The laws provide and court cases have upheld that such channels provide equal access to all potential users, and that they are public electronic forums for free expression.

Is there only one kind of access station in Maine?

No. There are almost as many different types of access centers as there are cities and towns, since they are set up to meet individual community needs. Potential users are best advised to contact their city or town hall and ask for information or who to contact about the local cable access center, studio, or station. Another resource is **(CTAM- The Community Television Association of Maine, (www.ctamaine.org)** which is a non-profit organization that serves the interests of PEG Access operations statewide. As an affiliate of The Maine Municipal Association, CTAM also provides municipal officials and the public with information about setting up PEG Accesses Centers in their community. Their e-mail address is: ctam@usa.net

What is leased access?

Leased access is when an individual organization or commercial entity "leases" a channel from the cable operator for a fee. Programming on leased access channels is funded by the sale of commercial advertising on the channel. If a program is not commercially viable however, it may not be shown.

How do access centers operate?

There are three basic operating structures possible for access centers:

- operated by an independent non-profit corporation
- operated by a municipality or by a school
- operated by the cable company

Under these operating structures, the access center may be exclusively a "public access" facility where individual citizens or groups have equal access and produce their own TV programs.

Or, it may be only an "educational TV facility," usually affiliated or located in a school and primarily used for educational purposes.

Or, it may be only a "municipal" or "government" access facility, usually housed in a town building and operated for municipal communications purposes by the city or town.

Finally an access center may be a multi-purposed facility. Many access centers in the State of Maine are responsible for all types of access, "P" "E" and "G." Again, local government officials are the best, "first call" for such information about the access centers in your community and remember, it all begins with the terms of the Franchise that the cable operator has signed with the municipality.

Often times, multipurpose centers and the channels assigned to them may be referred to as "Community Television".

So, what do access centers do? Do they produce TV shows for all these users?

No. This is perhaps the most misunderstood role of PEG access operations. Access centers are TV studios, but are unlike broadcast stations, which are usually staffed with TV producers, camera operators, and technicians. An access center is more like a combination school and "equipment library" where individuals and organizations are trained by knowledgeable staff to use TV production equipment and cable channel time to produce and air their shows for the enjoyment of citizens in their community.

But my town access center is run by the cable company, and they produce the shows! How come?

Many "Local Origination" channels as they are called, have requirements under the Franchise Agreement with the municipality to produce certain programs, like Annual Town Meetings, sporting events, or even coverage of a local parade. These requirements are specific to the community, and they do not change the fact that citizens may make their own programs. However, as with leased access channels, the program may not be shown if an advertiser or sponsor cannot be found. Many access centers are an interesting mix of all these things, but all access centers have a common goal of facilitating the production of local TV programs.

Can an access center serve more than one town?

Yes. Many smaller towns have found it difficult to provide funding to properly equip and staff an access center to serve their residents. They have entered into agreements with other neighboring towns to use the regional access center concept. The regional center is a non-profit organization which is funded through the annual budget process of the member towns, and by combining resources, it can offer a larger, better equipped facility with full time staffing.

So why don't all access centers just produce all the programs?

Most independent or municipal access centers are funded by a small "cable license fee" (usually from 1% to 5% of the local cable company's revenues) which pays for facility upkeep, utilities, and a small part-time or full-time staff-usually from 1 to 3 people, although some urban centers have several more. It is these employee's job to manage the public resources, train people in TV production skills, facilitate the telecast of programs on the local channels and update the bulletin board daily. It is neither possible nor appropriate for them to be in the "TV production business." For access TV is "Do it yourself " TV.

If access centers don't produce shows, how can elected officials and government employees get important programs on the air?

Most of the programming produced at access centers is done by community volunteers and residents of the towns or cities who either want to hone their skills in TV production, or have an interest in the program or topic or content. So, high school football games are often produced by parents of the athletes. A town meeting may be covered by the Local League of Women Voters. A town department head may find an interested worker in the department to prepare information for a department program or service that needs publicizing. Many access centers recruit college and high school interns to help produce programs. Several state and local elected officials already produce shows in their districts using such volunteers, as well as getting help from their community-based resources.

The local access center staff can provide any elected official or municipal employer with the information and contacts necessary to begin production of a local show.

Is it very hard to produce a TV show?

TV production is not as complicated as you might think, and the skills necessary to produce simple but effective TV shows are well within the grasp of most people in the community. Access centers across the state have people ages 9 to 90, from every educational or career background doing hands-on TV production.

Why should I care about what programs are on TV?

The first amendment guarantees every citizen the right to free speech. This is the basis of our democracy. Today, there are many ways people can communicate their thoughts and ideas to others, including, radio, television, newspapers and more recently, the internet.

Although the number of television stations has grown in the last 50 years from 96 to over 1200, most of the television (and radio) stations and cable companies are owned by just a few large corporations. For example, just 8 years ago there were 21 cable companies in Maine, now there are 7. Fifty years ago there were 2,200 daily newspapers in the U.S., now there are less than 1500.

Because of this consolidation of ownership and the commercial benefits of transmitting consolidated program “packages” to multiple markets (cities), the coverage of *local* news events and public affairs programming (which do not generate as much revenue,) often are replaced by nationally syndicated programs. The results, as we have witnessed, is a proliferation of “tabloid television” and other sensationalistic programming which originates far from our local communities. As this consolidation and commercialization of the media continues, the possibility for individuals to have input to the media becomes less and less.

In April 1998, the Media Access Project and the Benton Foundation published a report, "What's Local about Local Broadcasting?" * This project surveyed television stations in selected cities regarding the amount of local public affairs programming aired weekly. The survey covered a two week period and found that in the five markets examined, Chicago, IL; Phoenix, AZ; Nashville, TN; Spokane, WA; and Bangor, ME, 40 commercial broadcasters provided 13,250 hours of programming. However just 0.35% or 46.5 hours of the 13,250 total hours were devoted to local public affairs. The survey also found that 35% of the stations provided no local news, and 25% offered neither local public affairs programming nor local news.

Too often, when local news stories or community events are picked up by the commercial media, the finished product becomes a two minute slot on the six o'clock news and is judged on it's merits relative to whether or not it will increase the stations ratings rather than it's ability to tell the whole story.

In the early part of this century, the FCC began licensing broadcast stations "in the public interest", using the airwaves which "belong to the public". In recent years the trend toward less and less regulation of telecommunications companies has promoted the licensing of commercial broadcast stations to benefit large corporations which now own not only the means to gather the information, but also the conduit through which it passes to reach our homes. In the early days of newspapers, this was called a monopoly.

So we must be first of all, critical viewers, and realize that the reason for 99% of what we see on television is there because it is commercially attractive to the networks. That it may have a secondary educational or informational purpose to enlighten or inform has become the exception rather than the rule.

Newton Minnow, Chairman of the FCC in the 1950's when asked to describe television programming, referred to it as a "vast wasteland". His observation has proven to be correct on more than one occasion since that time. Our purpose as critical viewers and participatory citizens then, is not to sit in our recliner and accept without question the programming that is piped into our homes. We need to celebrate and preserve our local culture, traditions and heritage, and to share this information and knowledge with others in our community. In television, we have a wonderful tool to accomplish these goals and more.

What are requirements for using the equipment and facilities?

Most access centers only require that you be a legal resident of the city or town, that you are responsible for the equipment you signed out and that you are producing a program that can be shown on the access channel. It's as easy as that! So, don't just watch TV, get out there and make it !

FMI contact the Community Television Association of Maine, P.O Box 2124, South Portland, Maine 04084

E-mail ctam@usa.net, or visit us on the web at www.ctamaine.org

*www.benton.org/Television/whatslocal.html