

Frequently Asked Questions About Local Access TV

By Paul Berg NEWTV

What is local access television?

Federal law provides that states 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 Telecommunications Act of 1997 calls “public, educational, or government (PEG) access” channels on the local channel lineup, for unrestricted use by citizens, school districts and municipalities. In Massachusetts, many such existing agreements also require that certain equipment and funding be given to the towns. 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 Massachusetts?

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 on who to contact about the local cable access center, studio or station.

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 a cable company

Also, under any one of these operating structures, the access center may be only a “public access” facility where individual citizens or groups have equal access and produce their own TV programs. It may be only an “education TV facility,” usually affiliated or located in a school primarily used for educational purposes. 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. Or, finally, an access center may be a multi-purposed facility. Many access centers in the Commonwealth are responsible for all types of access, “F” “E” and “G.” Again, local government officials are the best first call for such information. The Massachusetts Cable TV Division can also help at (617) 305-358Q or <http://www.state.ma.us/dpu/catv>

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 unlike broadcast stations, they are not 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 how to use TV production equipment, how to make TV shows, and then are provided the free use of equipment and cable channel time to produce and air their shows.

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

Many access centers, regardless of how they are operated, have certain requirements under the agreements with the local community to produce certain programs, like Annual Town Meeting, or

even coverage of a local parade. But these requirements are specific to the community, and they do not change the fact that citizens may make their own programs. They also do not mean that the access center is like an independent TV production company, available to carry out every request for programming. Many access centers are an interesting mix of all these things, but all access centers have a common goal of facilitating the production of TV programs - of, by and for the local community.

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 1 to 3 people, although some urban centers have several more. And it is these employees' job to manage the public resources, train people in TV production skills, and facilitate the telecast of programs on the local channels. 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?

Community volunteers who either want to hone their skills in TV Production, or have an interest in the program topic or content do much of the programming produced at access centers. So, parents of athletes often produce high school football games. The League of Women Voters may cover a town meeting. A town department 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 communications or public intonation staffers, and supporters. These and other community-based resources are the primary means of getting programs or events videotaped in local access centers. The local access center staff can provide any elected official or municipal employee with the information and contacts necessary to begin production of a local show.

Isn't 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.