

ACCESS MANAGEMENT MODELS

PEG Access (Public, Educational and Government Access Television) is managed in a variety of ways. In some cases two or more of the P, E & G functions are combined under one access management entity and/or channel. In other cases each function is managed separately and each has its own channel or channels. There are differences between how the channels and the programming for each of the P, E & G functions can be overseen.

Public Access: Programming is generally produced by access producers in the community. The public access channel(s) is considered to be a First Amendment conduit and as such the Public Access Entity exercises no editorial control over the content of the programming and practices no censorship. In order to be aired the program producer and/or community sponsor is generally required to sign a cablecasting agreement where they take full responsibility for the content of the program(s) and state that the program(s) are non-commercial in nature, that they contain no copyrighted material, no lottery information, no libel or sedition and that they contain no obscenity as defined by community standards.

Educational Access: Programming decisions are made by the Educational Access Entity. Programming generally comes from a variety of sources. The educational access channel(s) is not considered a First Amendment conduit so the Educational Access Entity has full control over the programming and content on the channel.

Government Access: Programming decisions are made by the Government Access Entity. Programming generally is created within the local municipality but can also come from a variety of sources. The government access channel(s) is also not considered a First Amendment conduit so the Government Access Entity has full control over the programming and content on the channel.

Public Access Management Structures

Below is a discussion of the several forms of Public Access management structures that can be found around the country.

1) Managed by Cable Company

The cable company hires the personnel and is responsible for running and maintaining Public Access. The cable company's main expertise is in the construction and maintenance of video delivery system and providing commercial video programming on that system. They are a profit making venture.

Public access is more like a social service/arts/community media organization than a for profit business. Its mission is to outreach to all segments of the community, to use public resources for the benefit of the community and to train and encourage the creation of non-commercial programs to be viewed by the community. The outreach necessary and the hands-on care that is required to retain volunteer producers takes a dedication to a nonprofit model of energy expenditure that is not part of the usual scope of a cable company.

Typically, cable company run access has comparatively few community producers, inadequate staffing and rules and regulations which are not created to encourage fuller and fuller participation. Outreach and education are not always high priorities.

2) Institutional Run Access

This is Public Access Television run, for example, by a school, arts organization, or library. Very occasionally the managing entity may be a for-profit group as a video production house. If the organization managing access is a nonprofit, there is some compatibility with the mission of public access.

While there are some successful access centers run in this way it is not a best-case arrangement. A library or school or arts organization's top priority is to do what it was founded for, i.e. teach a school curriculum to a specific age group in the community or to maintain and increase its book collection and lending procedures or to work with arts groups. Public Access television has need of specific focus. Dedication and expertise is

needed in accordance with its mission. Public access television is dealing in a very technical format with special ways of operating and training in order to encourage people of all groups and ages to make diverse programs for the community. It would be questionable to ask a functioning Public Access station to add a public library to its responsibilities even if the funding was available. In practice libraries that have been running access often get uncomfortable with legal questions of censorship and shared use of facilities and exist in an uncomfortable position until the management structure is changed. Schools have a tendency to overuse the resources for their own classes to the loss of the larger community, to have limited hours available to the public and during budget cuts access resources may be curtailed or preempted.

When run by an organization that has its own commercial agenda such as a video production house the problems can be compounded. There can be a perceived or real conflict of interest over dealing with producers as community volunteers or for-profit clients.

3) Municipally run public access:

While most municipalities designate access providers for Public, Educational and even Government Access there are a few access stations run directly by municipalities. Since a city government is there to serve all the people there is a compatibility of interest.

However, Access Television is a public forum and as such it is a conduit for free speech. Cities take a risk in running a station that may have issues of controversial programming. Governments may set up regulations or controls that could put them in opposition to First Amendment rights of the citizenry. Also, the channel may be perceived as a propaganda arm of the city which discourages the perception of free speech and defeats the purpose of community development that is a major reason for the being of Public Access.

Cities do not face these liabilities when managing Government Access television since that is not by law a first amendment conduit and can be programmed at the cities discretion.

4) Nonprofit Management

The Alliance for Community Media in its Advocacy Platform states, that the Alliance supports any vital use of the local potential of

telecommunications and encourages the development of such resources in diverse ways. It further states that the nonprofit community access organization creates a context best suited for the accomplishing of the communications environment embodied in our principles. (The Alliance is a nonprofit organization founded in 1976 whose purpose is to foster citizen participation in community television.)

Nonprofit organizations abound as the structure of choice across the country. In comparative studies we performed it was found that many of the access entities which were cable company run had, or were in the process of, transferring management to a nonprofit structure.

The nonprofit organization exists solely to promote successful public access. Community based nonprofit access, governed by a community board, allows a sense of ownership of access by the community. Pitfalls are encountered if the community board is not structured to appeal to the entire community. It is therefore imperative that the board is established with great thought to composition and with bylaws that insure democratic elections and term limits. It is also important that the city cable office establishes checks for accountability and that access producers, concerned individuals, and community leaders actively participate in the governance of their public access center.