

How to Prevent Viewing of Scrambled Cable TV Programs (“Signal Bleed”)

Cable television companies typically encrypt or scramble the signal of channels that the subscriber has not purchased so only people who paid for the service will receive and view it. However, some scrambling techniques cable operators use may not always fully block the audio and video of each channel. The result may be “signal bleed.”

What Is “Signal Bleed?”

Signal bleed is the ability of a cable subscriber to access the audio and/or the video of a channel that is part of a cable package that the subscriber has not purchased. For example, if you did not purchase a certain cable station or package to which that station belongs but are able to see or hear the programming on that station for brief periods, there is signal bleed. Signal bleed may result in your viewing programming that contains objectionable content or material. To address this specific concern, Congress enacted Section 504 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 (<http://transition.fcc.gov/Reports/tcom1996.pdf>, page 98-99).

How Does Section 504 Address a Signal Bleed Problem?

Section 504 requires that, upon the request of the subscriber, a cable company must fully scramble or block the audio and the video of a programming service that a consumer does not subscribe to at no charge to the subscriber. This law applies to any type of programming you do not wish to view and to which you do not subscribe. The programming must be on a channel that is *not included* in the programming package that you purchased from your cable company.

Section 504 does not require the cable operator to fully block the channel unless the subscriber requests blocking. To take advantage of Section 504, contact your cable company and request that the channel you do not wish to view be blocked.

Other Mechanisms Available to Block Programming or Channels

Generally, cable television operators have the right to determine the channels that are available on their cable systems. To maximize the number of subscribers, the cable operator selects channels that are likely to appeal to a broad spectrum of viewers. Because of this, you may receive programs as part of a programming package that you do not want to view. While Section 504 does not require a cable operator to block services provided as part of a package you have subscribed to, there are a number of tools available to you that can be used to prevent the viewing of programs or channels. For example, your cable set-top box may permit you to block certain channels and/or programs. In addition, you may employ a lockbox and/or the V-chip.

- **Lockbox** - A lockbox is a device that a subscriber may lease or purchase from the cable company or from a retail store. By using a lockbox, you can literally lock specific channels so that the programming cannot be viewed.
- **V-chip** - Federal law now requires that most programming available on television be rated to alert viewers if the program contains violence, inappropriate language, or other material that you

may find offensive. A V-chip is the circuitry in a television that is capable of identifying these ratings and blocking the programming that you find inappropriate. As of January 1, 2000, all 13-inch or larger screen televisions that are manufactured or imported for use in the United States are required by law to be equipped with the V-chip. If you have an older model television, you can purchase a V-chip and attach it to the television set. The V-chip can be used to block individual programs or to block one or more channels entirely.

Filing a complaint

You have multiple options for filing a complaint with the FCC:

- File a complaint online at <https://consumercomplaints.fcc.gov>
- By phone: 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322); TTY: 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322); ASL: 1-844-432-2275
- By mail (please include your name, address, contact information and as much detail about your complaint as possible):

Federal Communications Commission
Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
445 12th Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

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