

7 Public, Educational, and Governmental (PEG) Access Channels

IN DECEMBER 1968, DALE CITY, VIRGINIA, launched what would be America's first community access cable channel, DCTV.¹ Broadcasting for one hour every Tuesday night, the station aired such programs as *Ex Cons Tell It Like It Is*, in which inmates of the nearby prison were interviewed; *The Fire*, an interview with the local fire chief after a devastating fire; a Fourth of July parade and carnival; and local sporting events such as Little League baseball, Little League football, and a soapbox derby.²

Around the same time, George Stoney, considered the “father” of public access television, was in Canada, working on a program called *Challenge for Change*. He filmed low-income citizens talking about their lives and then showed the films to local communities and government officials to raise awareness.³ Impressed by the quality and impact of this first effort, Stoney returned to New York, where he helped found the Alternate Media Center at New York University.⁴ Funded by local cable companies and the National Endowment for the Arts, the center trained “public access interns” from around the country and then sent them back to establish local community media access centers in their own neighborhoods.⁵

As more cable companies began to seek local franchises to create infrastructure in a community, many local franchising authorities (LFAs)—most often local governments—began to require cable operators to set aside public, educational, and governmental (PEG) access channels.⁶ Today, about 75 percent of franchises charge cable operators franchise fees, some of which may be allocated to support one or more of the three types of PEG operations at the LFA's discretion. A 1998 survey reported that only 18 percent of cable systems have public access channels; 15 percent have educational access channels; and 13 percent have governmental access channels.⁷ There are thought to be as many as 5,000 PEG channels nationwide.⁸ The Alliance for Community Media, which represents over 3,000 PEG access centers (some operating several channels) across the nation, estimates that at least 375,000 organizations use PEG services every year, and that local PEG programmers produce on average over 20 hours per week of local original programming, amounting to over 2.5 million hours a year.⁹

PEG services are unevenly distributed across the country. States in the Northeast, the Midwest, and on the West Coast tend to have more PEG activity than states in the South or the Rocky Mountain region.¹⁰ MappingAccess.org, which compiles a list of PEG channels, lists none in Alabama or Mississippi.¹¹ Massachusetts has more PEG channels per capita than any other state.¹²

The scale of PEG access center operations varies widely, with some having multimillion-dollar budgets, but most having a paid staff of just one or two people.¹³ With about a third of public access centers operating on budgets of less than \$100,000 per year, many are staffed almost entirely by volunteers.¹⁴

Public access channels (the “P” in PEG) are usually controlled by nonprofit groups, which must first petition LFAs for a contract to manage one or more channels. They must meet certain competency and eligibility requirements. In many cases, the group not only runs the distribution channel itself, but also a community media or access center that trains local citizens in media production.¹⁵

If public broadcasting has historically focused on the delivery of information, nonprofit cable access channels have focused on providing a platform for public expression. In 1984, Congress spelled out its hope for the PEG system:

“Public access channels are often the video equivalent of the speaker’s soap box or the electronic parallel to the printed leaflet. They provide groups and individuals who generally have not had access to the electronic media with the opportunity to become sources of information in the electronic marketplace of ideas. PEG channels also contribute to an informed citizenry by bringing local schools into the home, and by showing the public local government at work.”¹⁶

Today, the question is whether PEGs can evolve to retain, or increase, their relevance in a digital world, in which many other “soap boxes” now exist online.

What PEG Channels Do

Although there has never been a comprehensive study of PEG channel performance, anecdotal evidence suggests that quality varies widely. At their best, PEG channels provide essential local programming not provided by other media.¹⁷ “For many rural locales and suburban and exurban areas that are in the ‘shadow’ of larger metro areas where commercial and public broadcasters have little time and incentive to cover local events,” says the Alliance for Community Media, “PEG access entities are the only electronic media.”¹⁸ For instance, CCTV in Salem, Oregon, is one of the only local broadcast television stations serving the state’s capital city; other television stations, though licensed in Salem, tend to serve the larger media markets in Portland and Eugene.¹⁹ CCTV has televised more than 2,200 local government meetings, 2,000 programs with local public schools and colleges, and 1,000 other programs with community groups. The station serves 150 groups in six languages through its 9,400-square-foot nonprofit information center.²⁰ In Pikeville, Kentucky, the local commercial TV stations are based more than 50 miles away in Hazard or across the border in West Virginia, so the public access channel, PikeTV, is the one that regularly covers high school sports and other community events.²¹

PEG channels reflect the special interests and character of each local community. For instance, a typical day’s programming on the PEG channel in Franklin, Tennessee, includes *Army Newswatch*, *Today’s AirForce*, *Sharing Miracles*, and Board of Mayor and Alderman meetings. In Palm Beach County, Florida, the lineup includes: *Nature-scope*, *Everything Animal*, *Green Cay Wetlands*, *Positive Parenting Today*, and *Film Festival Review*. Other examples of PEG channels include:

- Mount Prospect Television in Mount Prospect, Illinois, provided disaster coverage and assistance when an 80-to-90-mile-per-hour wind tore through town in 2007.²²
- Chicago Access Network television, on five PEG channels, offers coverage of town hall meetings and other community events, and has worked with health care organizations to disseminate basic education about AIDS prevention through live call-in programs.²³
- In Minnesota, the Saint Paul Neighborhood Network (SPNN) offers eight programs for the growing Somali population in the area.²⁴
- Cambridge Community Television (CCTV) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has provided more than 22,000 hours of programming on three community cable channels, including *BeLive*—a weekly call-in program, featuring artists, poets, comedians, and neighborhood activists.²⁵
- In Cincinnati, more than 80 churches use the Media Bridges community access center to reach out to those unable to leave their homes.²⁶
- Across the country, multilingual channels provide programming in Greek, Czech, Hungarian, Albanian, German, French, Portuguese, Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, Hmong, Farsi, Arabic, Hebrew, and Swahili.²⁷

PEG advocates note that their media access centers do not just broadcast programs, but also serve as community centers, providing training and production services. For instance, the Grand Rapids Community Media Center (GRCMC) houses a full-power FM radio station, two PEG channels, an online citizen journalism platform, a vintage theater, and full-service information technology (IT) services—including web design, networking, database creation, and web hosting—to some one hundred nonprofit entities across the state and nation.²⁸ GRCMC’s IT department built websites for the Reentry Resource Center to help those released from incarceration integrate back into the local

community.²⁹ Through its Mobile Online Learning Lab for Information Education, GRCMC offers skilled trainers and digital video production equipment to schools and community organizations for special projects.³⁰ Other examples of PEG community centers include:

- In Cincinnati, Media Bridges³¹ operates three public and one educational access channels, a low-power FM radio station (WVQC), and a community media facility. It offers space for classes (in graphic design, IT, web design, video and audio production) and meetings by such groups as the Genesis Men's Program, Women Writing for (a) Change, the Literacy Network, and the World Piano Competition.³²
- The Boston Neighborhood Network's Beard Media Center offers "state-of-the-art connectivity and interactivity," two television studios, digital field production and editing equipment, a multimedia lab, a mobile production truck, and media training classes.³³
- In Saint Paul, SPNN partnered with AmeriCorps to launch the Community Technology Empowerment Project, which teaches digital literacy skills, providing over 250,000 hours of community service to libraries, workforce centers, and media centers.³⁴
- The Public Media Network in Kalamazoo, Michigan, offers "vocational courses in radio broadcasting and digital video production to high school students."³⁵
- Lewisboro Community Television in New York State trains volunteers from local community organizations and, as almost all PEG centers do, allows them to borrow equipment.³⁶

In general, a medium-sized PEG access center can train anywhere from 100 to 200 community video producers each year.³⁷

Unfortunately, because there has been no comprehensive study of the quality or audience size of PEG channels, it is hard to tell whether these inspiring examples are the exception or the rule. The small budgets and first-come-first-serve ethos for programming have inevitably led to some dubious programming choices—fictionalized in the movie *Wayne's World*, depicting two slackers with a cable access show filmed from their basement.³⁸ An extreme real-life case occurred in 1989, when Kansas City attempted to shut down its public access station in order to bar the Ku Klux Klan from airing its program, *Race and Reason*.³⁹ Proponents assert that this kind of controversial programming largely ended in the 1990s, and even then comprised only one percent or less of all public access programming.⁴⁰

Where PEG channels have weak reputations, it is sometimes because they spend many hours airing electronic bulletin boards with community information,⁴¹ often in conjunction with a local radio station or a radio reading service for the visually impaired.⁴² For instance, the public access station in Bellhaven, North Carolina, runs its bulletin board most hours of most days, going live only for special events on Halloween, Christmas, and the Fourth of July.⁴³ PEG supporters argue that such electronic bulletin boards provide an essential community service, informing residents of school closings, health screenings, job postings, and government meeting schedules, but there are no solid audience numbers.⁴⁴

Factors Affecting Quality

At their best, PEG channels and community media centers help a community develop its ability to communicate. PEG channels can approximate a kind of hyperlocal blogging with higher production values, cable distribution, and community connections. The community access centers can provide media production and literacy training, increasing the ability of community members to communicate effectively. In a recent poll conducted for PEG proponents, 74 percent of respondents said local community programming is important and nearly 60 percent think that one dollar or more of their "monthly cable bill[s]" should be "set aside and used" to create this programming.⁴⁵

At their worst, however, PEG channels provide an unnecessary platform for self-expression, as it is now available in abundance on the Internet, and thus take up cable capacity and funding that could be used for more valuable or worthwhile programming.

What distinguishes the high-quality PEGs from the rest? PEG advocates often say the key is "money." And they have a point. Cable operators pay fees to local franchising authorities for the use of public right-of-way facilities.

These franchise fees can generate huge sums for municipalities—for instance, as much as \$142 million for Dallas in 2007 and \$140 million for New York in fiscal year 2010.⁴⁶ While in the past, a substantial portion of these fees were used to support PEG channels and other public communications needs, the law does not require that any of the money go to PEG channels⁴⁷—and today, very little does.⁴⁸

In California, new laws that allow cable operators to drop certain public access obligations altogether have eliminated \$590,000 in PEG support.⁴⁹ In San Francisco, only about 8 percent of the roughly \$10 million to \$12 million cable operators pay in franchise fees goes to public access each year.⁵⁰ After the city of Dallas took over PEG funding from the cable provider in 2000, it reduced PEG allocations from \$700,000 in 2001 to \$246,000 in 2008, and in 2009 it eliminated all funding.⁵¹

The financial situation is getting worse. A variety of FCC rulings and state and local law changes—described in greater detail in Chapter 27, Cable Television—have left many PEG stations in dire straits.⁵² Many states have adopted “state franchising,” in which the state determines franchise fees and other cable obligations and dictates how franchise fees are spent (often after allowing local authorities to weigh in). In a survey of 165 PEG centers, half said that their funding dropped between 2005 and 2010, and among those reporting a decline, the average loss was 40 percent. The survey stated that 100 community media centers had to shut down during that period.⁵³ The American Community Television Association estimates that by 2012, over 400 PEG channels could be lost across six states—including Wisconsin, Florida, Missouri, Iowa, Georgia, and Ohio.⁵⁴ In 2006, California adopted a law allowing cable operators to drop long-standing obligations to provide free studios, equipment, and training to the public, which led to the closure of at least 12 public access studios in Los Angeles alone.⁵⁵ At least 45 PEG access centers have shut down around California because of cable company responses to the change in the state law.⁵⁶ Kansas, South Carolina, Missouri, and Nevada do not require new cable operators to provide any PEG support.⁵⁷

PEG leaders also say that cable operators are treating PEG channels progressively worse as the environment becomes more competitive. AT&T has placed all PEG outlets on a single channel—channel 99.⁵⁸ A drop-down menu allows viewers to select their community, and then a second drop-down menu allows them to select channels within that community. AT&T argues that “U-verse TV is based on an all-IP architecture totally unlike that of traditional cable operators” and that the “[m]ethod of delivering PEG should not be frozen in time.”⁵⁹ American Community Television, Inc. observes that Charter Cable has moved PEG channels to the 900 range, “off the basic tier of service and into the digital stratosphere.”⁶⁰ Some cable operators are moving their PEG channels from analog to digital tiers, but not all cable subscribers have the equipment necessary to view the digital channels.⁶¹

Reduced funding and terms of cable carriage are not PEG channels’ only problem. Media funders and others in local journalism report that PEG operations are difficult to support and to partner with, in part because they often lack stable leadership and staffing. They are largely volunteer-run, in keeping with the spirit of public access and also out of financial necessity. Yet, as volunteers come and go, it is hard for PEG centers to sustain programs, engage in long-term planning, and bring good ideas to fruition.⁶²

Some suggest that PEG channels are too bound to their studios and don’t source programming from a large enough pool of contributor throughout the community. PEG operators have bristled at new laws that require them to air a minimum number of hours of non-repeat programming per week.⁶³ However, they might have an easier time complying with these requirements if they expanded the types of content they used, offering sporting events, flip-cam videos, and commentary or other shows produced in the field.

In addition, PEG operators could improve quality, and impress state lawmakers, by collaborating with other nonprofit entities. As a report from the Benton Foundation noted, “Perhaps the most promising trend on the horizon for community media is the emergence of new highly integrated organization structures and collaborative processes.”⁶⁴ Enlightened PEG leaders realize that their industry has to innovate to remain relevant, especially given the competition for cable channels and the ability the Internet provides for anyone to speak their mind. As Media Bridges in Cincinnati noted in its comments to the FCC, “PEG channels have evolved over time to retain their effectiveness and must continue to evolve to ensure effectiveness in the digital future.”⁶⁵

In Cincinnati, more than 80 churches use the Media Bridges community access center to reach out to those unable to leave their homes.

Tom Glaisyer of the New America Foundation and Jessica Clark of American University's School of Communication summarized the areas where PEG channels can have the most positive impact:

"Digital and civic literacy training: Community media organizations can help to foster civic engagement and broadband adoption among underserved populations, and to serve as hubs for access to not only broadcast, but broadband and wireless.

"Vocational training: PEG access TV stations and community media centers have traditionally provided youth and adults with access to vital job training skills and other educational opportunities that may not be available to them anywhere else in the community. In this way, they are often closely aligned to the services provided by public libraries and other trusted community anchors.

"Government transparency: Community media organizations can foster oversight, broadcasting gavel-to-gavel coverage or hold politicians to account via interviews.

"Making local and national connections: The organizations in which community media is created have to operate with a collaborative, boundary spanning approach. Community media are important in the development of digital literacy training, citizen journalism, hyperlocal civic agency, and collaboration with local communities and nonprofits. There is currently some collaboration happening between public and community media; more should be encouraged.

"Providing open access to communications infrastructure: Historically this has been achieved through PEG channels, though equally important opportunities exist around radio and other community anchor institutions."⁶⁶

Based on interviews with PEG organizations and small-market PEG operators across the country,⁶⁷ and a survey of existing research,⁶⁸ it appears that, in addition to sufficient funding, the common features of high-performing PEG operations include:

- > a board that reflects the community and internalizes the purpose, importance, and openness of PEG
- > sound management practices that ensure adequate bookkeeping and accountability, reasonable openness to the public, and the ceding of editorial control to producers
- > the embrace of new technologies that allow PEG production capabilities to be distributed throughout the community, using wireless connectivity, handheld cameras, digital networks, and mobile studios
- > access to community fiber networks and high-speed connections to other public institutions
- > community support through membership and other means
- > partnerships with other nonprofits and public media that can produce high-quality content

PEG, Local News, Information, and Journalism

Intriguingly, some recent PEG endeavors aim to help fill gaps in local journalism. The Grand Rapids Community Media Center started an online newspaper, *The Rapidian*, a citizen journalism project "intended to increase the flow of local news and information in the Grand Rapids community and its neighborhoods."⁶⁹ It has 180 community-based reporters and 60 to 70 nonprofit contributors.⁷⁰ Stories from *The Rapidian* have been heard on Michigan radio and picked up by the *Grand Rapids Press*.

One of the most promising templates for the future of public access centers seems to be emerging in the San Francisco Bay Area. In September 2009, the Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC)—a long-standing community media center—took control of San Francisco's public access television station,⁷¹ and is now working with municipal and noncommercial entities to produce a neighborhood news network, called "n3," which will link PEG channels to 15 community sites throughout the city using an existing fiber network. Like *The Rapidian*, n3 is designed to be a bottom-up network, providing residents with the skills and equipment necessary to share "relevant, timely, and hyperlocal news and information with each other." Each n3 program will be broadcast on BAVC's cable channels, reaching up to 200,000 San Francisco households, and also made available online as a "channel" on BAVC's local video website.⁷² These sites can then be used to broadcast live and pre-recorded community events and programs from cultural centers and schools around San Francisco.

Other local entities are enlisting PEG channels to help with local journalism. The Saint Paul Neighborhood Network in Minnesota has partnered with independent newspapers to produce public affairs content. It has also joined forces with an independent African-American newspaper, *Insight News*, to produce 20 hours of public affairs programming on important issues in the Minnesota African-American community.⁷³ The Boston Neighborhood Network produces a nightly *Neighborhood Network News* program with a three-person staff and assistance from Boston University students.⁷⁴ And the Manhattan Neighborhood Network, the oldest PEG operation, is planning to launch a “mini-C-SPAN” to cover city elections and public affairs.⁷⁵

While the Internet has somewhat reduced the importance of PEG channels as a platform for expression, it is important to remember that as long as there is not universal broadband, digital distribution will not match the reach of PEG. At the same time, the digital revolution may increase the importance of the educational function PEG can serve.

Doing journalism was never really a primary goal of the PEG system, but in the new media climate it is not inconceivable to imagine that these groups could play a role, in cooperation with other entities and with improved management. After all, public access channels have been doing “citizen journalism” since before the Internet was born.⁷⁶

Government Channels

The “G” in PEG refers to government channels, which broadcast government or public meetings.⁷⁷ According to one report, government access television is available in approximately 2,800 communities in at least 19 states.⁷⁸

Government access channels have been broadening their content in recent years. Many now offer field coverage of public policy forums, third-party-sponsored policy events, and a range of public affairs programming, including call-in programs, issue discussions, interviews, neighborhood news, and news-in-review programs.⁷⁹ For example, the Seattle government’s Seattle Channel, founded in 2002, offers cultural programs that explore the local art scene, showcase films from the Seattle Municipal Archive, and display the charms of Seattle’s “sister cities” around the world.⁸⁰

Government operators often act as content editors and gatekeepers, creating their own programming and selecting externally produced programming to air.⁸¹ These channels tend to play it safe. According to one commentator, they broadcast little more than “safety tips from government departments such as police, fire, and transportation,” to avoid charges of political bias.⁸² Even so, government channels are susceptible to charges of propaganda.⁸³ A reporter in St. Petersburg, Florida, has accused the local government access channel of “trying to influence public opinion” with respect to the state budget.⁸⁴

In Pikesville, Kentucky, it is the public access station that regularly covers high school sports and other community events.

Other government access channels are administered by independent, nonpartisan organizations, usually led by political appointees. The use of an intermediary administrative body helps to shield the channel from political influence, and channels that are administered in this way tend to be more likely to provide diverse and inquisitive coverage, according to writer J.H. Snider.⁸⁵

Whatever their management structure, most government access channels are supported by public funds.⁸⁶ This leads to two contradictory criticisms: 1) governmental bodies that control PEG funding have an economic incentive to underfund government access channels in order to decrease political accountability;⁸⁷ and 2) government may overfund government access channels at the expense of public access channels.⁸⁸ Critics have called for the creation of an equitable funding mechanism that would guarantee a proportion of funding to public access and ensure that “government speakers won’t displace the public.”⁸⁹

The City of San Francisco came up with a potentially promising solution when it awarded a public access channel contract to an operator that is working to preserve public access services in the city. Under this contract, the operator, the Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC), receives only 20 percent of what the previous operator received in annual operations funding, but can obtain up to three times more capital funding for equipment and facilities that are distributed throughout the city.⁹⁰