

Educating The Public... A How To Guide Utilizing Public Access Television



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Introduction

There is a group known as the Conservative Caucus which describes themselves as a major Constitutional government citizens' lobbying group. For over a decade they have produced a half hour weekly television program in the style of Meet the Press expressing their political views. **This One Voice is not endorsing their political agenda or philosophy - we are only using them as an example of what citizens can accomplish... for free...utilizing public access television.**

Each week viewers tune in to their slant of important public policy issues which affect our lives and our country. Of course, from their slant on things, "Liberal threats" to freedoms are exposed, and conservative values and solutions are highlighted - even though many independent thinking individuals would judge their solutions to be greater threats to freedom than the original issue.

Such is the case with public television and the media in general. The point is that this group is successfully influencing public opinion, our law makers and other public policy makers by distributing the program FREE via public access television stations across the country.

News reports after the 1994 elections indicated that conservative shows like Rush Limbaugh, Pat Buchanan, G. Gordon Liddy, and many others strongly affected millions of voters and every election since than. Following is an article on how you too can start utilizing the FREE public access media to start getting your information and views out to millions of people in all parts of the country... and beyond.

This guide is written to help acquaint you with the benefits of using public access television and as a very basic level primer in how to produce a television show.

May you have a wonderful time as you go about making your One Voice be heard throughout the land!

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What is Public Access Television?

Think of Public Access TV as "do-it-yourself" television. It's a channel on cable TV reserved for residents of the community which the cable company serves to create or air a television program - usually at no cost. You do not need to be a subscriber. Think of it as like a televised letters-to-the-editor page where anyone can get their ideas on TV. You can too, and this article will give you the basic facts you need to get started. Be aware - Not every cable TV company has a public access channel.

Why Use Public Access?

Public access is free - or almost free, depending upon the company - television coverage! You can reach thousands of people within your community, and millions more throughout the country because you control your message 100%. Your message will not be diluted, distorted, or misunderstood because you are the one that is giving your message - and it is given directly. Via your free Public Access TV show, you have an excellent means to educate the public and rally them to action - and a Public Access show will help you recruit new supporters. Depending upon your Public Access TV company's policies, you may even be able to sell tapes of your show to help raise money for your cause.

Of course, with the help of a web site, you will soon be meeting other people in all different parts of the country (and the world) and you will be able to share a copy of your already produced TV show with them - so that they may get the show aired on Public Access TV in their area. There are many organizations, causes, and individuals that do this on a regular basis!

It Only Takes A Few Phone Calls To Get Started!

Your first step is to call your local cable TV company and see if they provide a Public Access TV channel for your area. If they do, you will find them very pleasant and helpful in providing you all the information you will need. Generally speaking, you will probably be overwhelmed by their response and helpfulness - as there usually aren't enough shows to fill all the hours in the day that the channel is on the air, and they dislike repeating the same shows over and over again. Public Access is generally short on material and will help in any way they can to get a new show started.. If your area is one of the few where this is not the case, you may end up with an off-the-prime viewing time for the airing of your show, but if you stick with it, and ask for a better airing time, you will generally end up there before too long.

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To insure that your show have that polished professional look - which does help, as the public at large does tend to judge a book by it's cover - you can learn quite a bit about television production by taking a class at your local public access station, community college, or even on-line. It is not hard to learn how to actually produce a successful, professional looking TV show. Who knows? Maybe this could even turn into a career!

You can add variety to your show by having guests and videotaping local lectures, speeches, and events that support or add creditability to your cause. Or you can just videotape them and run them independently on Public Access. You can do this with a VHS type camera and it will look like a C-SPAN program. But - and this is very important - be sure to get permission from the speakers..

You can get others involved in making your TV show easily. People in general are fascinated by TV and the thought of being involved with TV is very appealing to most people. And as mentioned above, you will soon be able to get your tapes aired on Public Access stations in other cities to expand your audience. You and your friends will be on your way to making a name for yourselves in the television Industry.

Of course, once you really get the process down and are turning out a consistently professional product and you have stirred up public interest, you can always choose to get a commercial sponsors and move the show to a regular television station. Low-power, independent stations will be the best places to start if you decide to go this route.

Producing a TV program is easier than you may think. The truth is you don't need expensive equipment to make a professional looking TV program nor do you need a highly trained crew with years of experience. With some training, practice and creativity you can produce a quality program using basic equipment and a volunteer crew at a public access station. Here are details of the most important steps in beginning a television program.

Finding The Crew (If your Public Access station does not provide one)

Of course, the first place to look for help with your TV show will be among the people and / or organizations that feel the same way as you about your cause. You can ask them to learn about television production from the same sources that you did (the public access class, community college, or on-line) or you can even work together on learning - learning about something new is often more fun when you're doing it with a friend. Because you share a

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common interest in the cause, they will automatically have a interest in the program, they should be very dependable. Public access stations and colleges may also have lists of trained volunteers who want to help other people produce shows, and this is a good source for recruiting experienced crew members. You may even know someone with some video experience, either professionally or as a hobby.

Many public access stations offer at least basic classes in television production, and in only a few lessons you can learn how to make a quality show. Start by learning the "jargon"--the specialized words of the industry to understand the subject better. Get as much hands-on experience as you can, whether just for practice or while assisting on some other Public Access show.

Who Is Your Audience?

Whether you want to make just one show, or to start a regular weekly or monthly series; the content of your program will depend on who you want your message to reach. Do you want to focus on one or several particular issues? People with existing beliefs? People you want to educate to your cause? Overburdened taxpayers? Do you want to reach pregnant mothers? Hawks? Doves? Undecideds?

You may come to see that each group you focus on will require a slightly different presentation of your message. (This could become a very important point, depending on your cause). For example, if you want your show to educate average voters about issues, then make sure that the show does not talk about political issues from the level of a policy expert. It's hard to teach multiplication before addition and subtraction. Remember, many viewers will have already formed their political opinions from various sources - so it will be important that spend time clearly explaining the basics. For example: Yes, Senator Smith does say that he is 100% behind this issue - BUT his voting record for the past 50 years shows that each time this, or similar issues have come up, he has consistently voted against it. So, are we to judge where Senator Smith really stands on this issue by his words or by his actions? etc...

Select The Right Format

Once you have decided what segment of the population you want to receive your message, then you're ready to select the way you present that message. For a political program, there are several distinct categories of shows. Here are a few familiar varieties:

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An interview type program like Meet the Press where two or more people discuss an issue or one person interviews the other.

A C-SPAN type show featuring public speeches or meetings. This format is very easy to produce by just aiming a camera at the speaker.

A debate type show like CNN's Crossfire or the McLaughlin Group. People arguing each side of an issue can be entertaining and informative. (If you go this route, be sure that you are deeply familiar with ALL the facts, and be prepared to present the dates, times, speeches, and votes of Senator Smith when his side starts boasting about he is already 100% behind the issue.

A live call-in show. The hard parts here is building a large enough audience to guarantee you will receive enough phone calls - and you can't re-tape over a mistake.

A mixture of information and entertainment.

An "evening news" type of show offering short segments of various events with perhaps some commentary - put the honest spin on the news! Bring back balance to the news. A News Magazine format show is similar, and 60 Minutes is an example. These formats usually need lots of field camera work and editing.

Videotape & watch successful network shows with your chosen format and take good notes so you can get ideas for your show. Try turning the volume all the way down to help you concentrate on the camera moves - the music is designed to make individual shots seem to blend together.

The Studio Set

Now you are focusing on what your show looks like. For a politically oriented show, a studio set could be as simple as a couple of people sitting facing each other, or sitting at a table or desk. But don't stop there, because one big difference between public access shows that look amateurish and ones which look professional is how the studio looks. So be sure to make the studio look as attractive as possible, and try to make the set look a lot like the network shows of a similar format so viewers can quickly recognize what kind of show it is. Good lighting is very important in making your set look professional too.

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You may save some money here by asking local businesses to donate items or services for your program.

For example, a furniture company may wish to donate a desk and chairs. In exchange, you can offer businesses a credit at the end of the show such as "Furniture donated by Big DaddyFurniture, 1234 5th Street." Check with your access station, for some do not allow giving such credits.

On Location

Make sure there is enough lighting to get the best possible picture. Low lighting results in a very grainy picture with dull colors. Portable TV lighting kits can be rented for about \$50.00 per day and are well worth it, particularly if you will be distributing your tape to many people. Better yet, go to a hardware store and buy two or three floor-stand halogen work lights. They work almost as well as the professional lights for a fraction of the price!

Your local public access TV station may offer a class on lighting, and libraries should have some good books on basic lighting. Search the web too. Ask other public access show crew for their lighting tips.

The podium or person you are taping should not be in front of a window. In the day, the sunlight will be brighter than the person speaking, silhouetting the speaker badly; and at night, the camera may catch distracting reflections of lights and people in the window. So, pull the curtains or better yet, rearrange the room so the windows are not behind the speakers.

Always have a microphone at the podium - DO NOT use the built-in camera mike. Most VHS and all professional cameras have an external mike input. If there is a panel type discussion, then have one microphone per person, and perhaps one for audience questions too. You can often plug in to a hotel's public address system to use their mikes--visit the hotel in advance, then get the necessary cables and adapters from Radio Shack.

If you use the built-in mike on your camera, the speaker's voice will be tough to understand at best, and you will also pick up all the noises from the audience much louder than the speaker--such as coughs, chairs moving, clinking of dishes at a dinner, air conditioner fans, etc.

When taping outside, place mikes close to the speakers, and have the sun behind the camera for best results.

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Video Equipment

Many public access stations have studios, portable cameras, and editing equipment available for use at either at little or no cost. If not, check out public libraries, schools, colleges or even renting from video stores. Perhaps your church has some cameras you can use, or ask friends to loan you their home camcorders. For an interview type show, a studio with two or more cameras will usually look the most professional.

Actual Costs

Not a lot! This can vary from one station to another because some offer free use of their facilities and others charge small fees for each use. As a range, figure from no charge up to perhaps \$50.00 to reserve a studio, portable cameras, and editing time to create a complete television program. You may also have to buy videotapes for \$10.00 to \$20.00 each. This is a tiny fraction of commercial studio costs.

Training courses at public access stations are usually quite inexpensive too. If you also plan to send copies of your show to other public access stations, figure about \$4.00 in postage each way for a month's worth of video tapes per station, plus the costs to buy tapes for each station you mail tapes to.

Expanding To Additional Areas

Once you have invested the time in making your program, then work to get it on the public access channels in other cities too. Usually you will need a resident in that city to be the "local sponsor" who requests that their public access channel run your program. There should be little or no charge for this. Here are the steps to do this:

Have the local resident call their local cable TV company and speak to the public access channel.

The resident simply asks the public access channel to send them the forms and rules which are needed to air a program which is produced at a different access station. Fill out and return the forms for approval.

When they approve the show for airing, begin sending the video tapes either directly to the access channel, or to your local sponsor to hand-deliver, whichever works best.

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Advertisements:

Most public access stations have rules forbidding commercial ads or selling things on your show, so don't expect to sell ads or make money from your program. The station may even forbid you from selling copies of your show. They will, however let you promote your organization or candidate as long as you avoid specific words like "Buy this book", "Membership is \$15.00".

Some stations may also prohibit directly supporting or opposing candidates in elections, such as stating: "Vote for Smith", which sounds un-American, but you may be stuck with their rules. You are welcome to say "Call or write us for more information" and when people do call, you're free to sign them up as members or sell them publications!

Promotion

Be sure to promote your Web Site often on every show! Enough said on that. Without good promotion few people will know your show exists. Only about 5% of the public watches public access regularly, but you can build our own audience! Print up fliers describing the show, with the channel and airing times; and distribute them at every friendly meeting and church in the cable service area. Hand out the fliers at big public events, at the polls on election day, and even to people at the post office on April 15th! Spread the word on the Internet by creating a web page for the show and post notices for the show on newsgroups and discussion forums. Send out news releases when the show airs for the first time, as well as after each show detailing the most important items discussed. Be sure to get the program listed in any local cause friendly publications.

Learning TV Jargon & Who Does What

Here are the most important jobs involved in creating a show. These positions can be learned in a few weeks at a public access station or a community college. Often two or more of these jobs can be done by one person. The saying "practice makes perfect" is very true. The more experience you can get by rehearsing and by volunteering on other public access shows, the better you can make your show look and the fewer mistakes you will make.

Producer

This is the person in charge of making the show happen. The producer finds (or delegates someone to find) crew members and gets them trained, selects the format of the show, organizes and oversees all aspects of production, and often occupies various crew positions

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as needed. Additionally, the producer should get trained in all the other crew jobs such as cameras, lighting, audio, editing, etc. Only by knowing each part of producing a show can you be totally in control and therefore able to get exactly the results you want.

Scriptwriter

You won't need a script if you are simply taping a political speech, but when you are producing an interview type show or an even more involved show, you will want to have at least a simple script to act as a timetable for when each event should happen. For example, if the credits at the end will take 20 seconds to roll up the screen, then you need to know when to give the host of the show signals to wrap up so you can start the credits on time. Scripts can get much more complicated, but for a political interview type of show, you can get by with only a basic outline of the show. The producer often is the person who writes the script.

Host

An interview type show may have a regular host who will introduce viewers to the subject being discussed and perhaps promote a sponsoring organization or candidate. The host interviews one or more guests on each show. No experience or training is necessary, and an easy way to practice is to just do a few rehearsal shows on camera and review the tape to see how you did.

Guests

Guests are simply anyone who can discuss a particular topic as an expert, and ideally at a level which the viewing public can understand with a minimum of jargon or specialized language.

Director

The Director supervises the production crew during the studio or field taping. He directs the cameramen to move the cameras for each shot, decides which camera to select and when to add computer graphics (such as the name of the guest); and tells the Floor Director to give time signals to the host so the program ends on time. This job requires some training and fast reflexes. The producer can (if trained) also be the director.

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Technical Director

The Technical Director operates the camera switcher at the Director's instructions. This job requires some training and fast reflexes, and can be done by the Director.

Audio Technician

This person sets up all necessary microphones, tests them, and keeps the microphone and music volumes at the proper level during the program taping. This job is fairly easy to learn, and a background in audio, music, or audio/visual is helpful.

Computer Graphics/Character Generator Operator

This person operates the graphics computer to type in names, titles, phone numbers and all other text and graphics that will be displayed on the screen during a studio taping or editing session. During the studio taping this person selects the correct graphics pages for the Director to insert into the program, such as the name of a guest. In a pinch the Technical Director can do this, but in a fast-paced show you really need a separate person. This person also works with the Editor (and often is the editor) to create logos, special effects and promotional ads. This position requires some training to learn the basics. Experience in computer graphics, desktop publishing, web or graphic design is very helpful. Many graphics programs run on Windows and can be easily used by anyone competent in Windows.

Lighting Technician

The lighting tech sets up the lighting before the studio taping (or a field taping at another location) so that the people and the props within are properly lit and without objectionable shadows. This position requires some training and is very important to making a professional looking show. This person can also operate a camera during the taping. A background in photography or video camera work is helpful.

Camera Operator

The Camera Operator moves and adjusts the TV camera to the instructions from the Director via headphones. Typically three cameras are used in a studio taping, and one or

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more in a field taping. Home camcorder or photographic experience is helpful. The basics of this position can be learned in about 15 minutes and is an ideal starting point for anyone interested in learning video production.

Floor Director

The Floor Director directs the host's and guest's attention to the camera which is active, and gives the host hand signals to indicate when to start or stop talking. Little training is needed. This job can be done by one of the Camera Operators, although it is more effective if it is not. This person is also connected via headphones to the Director.

Editor

The editor works with the videotape after a studio or field taping to add music, titles or other finishing touches to ready the program for airing. The editor also selects and assembles segments from separate video tapes into a complete production. The editor can create promotional advertisements for the show or your organization too. The editor works with the Character Graphics Operator and these two jobs can and often are held by the same person. Some training is necessary.

Studio Assistants

All of the above people also act as studio assistants. They help set up and dismantle the studio set for each show, change pages on the graphics computer during taping, or operate the video recorder as directed. No experience is necessary.

Makeup

Shiny faces, bald heads, etc. can be made less glaring, and unwanted facial faults can be hidden with very basic makeup; and this can help make your show look more polished.

Promotion

This person is responsible for making the program well known in the communities where it is on cable by using the media, distributing fliers, advertising in local publications, promoting it on web sites, news groups, chat rooms, etc. and any other ways to get favorable publicity.

ABOVE ALL, HAVE FUN!

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