Public Access: Fortifying the Electronic Soapbox

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Jason Roberts*

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"America is a melting pot, and public access is the receptacle for the indigestible parts."

**INTRODUCTION**

Most people would not think of public access as the cornerstone of cable television. The popular film *Wayne's World* helped solidify the widely held impression of what access has to offer—two teenagers in their poorly lit basement discussing babes, rock and roll, and the meaning of the word "schwing." Community-based channels, however, have been a part of the cable industry ever since entering the broadcast medium. Public access has symbolized the goal of cable television—achieving diversity by providing a voice to anyone in the community who wants to share his or her message with others.

Over 2000 public access channels exist nationwide allowing for more than 10,000 hours of original programming each week. City council meetings, church services, and aspiring television stars make up most of these access schedules. Recently, though, alternative and minority viewpoints of a far more controversial nature have begun to appear. Viewers are watching or may soon be watching these programs in their communities:

- A white supremacist show hosted by Dr. Herbert Poinsett in Tampa, Florida, who speaks out against the Jewish-controlled media and the "black bucks" destroying American cities. One program concluded that most serial killers are white because "blacks don’t have the brains to be serial killers."

- A show called *It's Time to Wake Up* in which Ta-Har, a self-proclaimed high priest of the Black Israelites, brandishes a baseball bat and prophesies the day when blacks will beat "the hell out of" white people and bash their children against the stones for years of enslavement.

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- *Back Alley Bitches*, a program which follows the lives of prostitutes and includes allegations of unfair police harassment and features photographs covering the best sexual situations of the week.\(^7\)

With this new wave of controversial material, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC or Commission), access users, and local cable operators have found themselves in a First Amendment battle over what material should be allowed on public access channels, when such material can be shown, and who should be liable when access regulations are violated.

Congress in 1984 passed the Cable Communications Policy Act in an attempt to create uniform content regulation of public access.\(^8\) Under this Act, cable operators were allowed to set aside channels in their franchise agreements for public, educational, or governmental (PEG) use in exchange for franchise exclusivity.\(^9\) The Act gave the operator no editorial control over these channels, except for the right to forbid obscenity, and granted the operator power only over what time the program aired.\(^10\) With these limits, the cable operator was immune from liability for any show aired on public access.\(^11\) These rules, at least in theory, helped public access symbolize “the widest possible diversity of information sources and services to the public.”\(^12\)

With the rising use of access for hate shows and indecent material, Congress returned to public access programming with the Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act of 1992.\(^13\) This Act modified the previous rules by removing a cable operator’s immunity for programs that feature obscene material.\(^14\) At the same time, the provision which barred cable operators from exercising any editorial control over content remain unchanged.\(^15\) Congress also allowed the FCC to create rules that would prevent children from viewing indecent material on public access.\(^16\)

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9. 47 U.S.C. § 531(b) (1988). These channels could be separate or combined, usually labeled as the PEG channel.
The United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit stayed the FCC rules on November 23, 1993. In *Alliance for Community Media v. FCC*, the court held that it was unconstitutional to give an operator control of public access content because the operator becomes an agent of the government. On February 16, 1994, the D.C. Court of Appeals vacated its judgment in *Alliance* and granted a rehearing en banc. As all sides wait for the ultimate outcome in this case, public access producers attempt to maintain their hold in the expanding cable channel spectrum.

This Note will argue that even though some viewers find programs such as those previously cited tasteless and indecent, this should not justify recent actions by the FCC and Congress which threaten to severely limit the diversity of public access. The trend towards governmental prohibition of program content takes the power of public access away from the people. As the number of cable channels continues to increase, the need for a channel that allows the public an outlet for expression becomes increasingly important. Part I of this Note will examine the history and underlying policies of public access, FCC attempts to regulate access, and the role access should fulfill in cable. Part II will examine the difficulties the FCC has had in prohibiting certain public access programming. The Note will show how regulatory difficulties stem in part from the problems the courts have had in defining the scope of indecent material on cable television. Finally, in Part III, this Note will explore ways of assuring that the needs of the FCC, operators, and access users are met.

This Note concludes that viewers should ultimately choose which public access programs should air, through effective counter-programming and the use of blocking devices. Because of the difficulties the courts have had in creating an indecency standard for cable, operators should be limited to controlling program schedules. This structure will adequately protect minors, while public access users can continue presenting programs with the greatest possible diversity.

I. THE EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC ACCESS

While broadcast television reached most American cities by 1948, rural and remote areas found themselves unable to receive transmission

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signals. In 1949, a local television salesman in Lansford, Pennsylvania, solved this problem by creating the first subscriber-cable television service, where signals were passed over wires. Since broadcasting signals are transmitted through the air, they weaken with distance and can be blocked by geographic obstacles. With cable service, however, cable operators use antennas to receive these broadcast signals, transfer them to wire, and then retransmit them to homes through the cable, thereby reaching areas that simple broadcasts could not. This method of signal transmission by cable gradually spread to all parts of the country, improving reception and expanding the channel capacity beyond the frequency limits of the broadcast spectrum. Technological advances have made it possible to transmit over 120 channels by cable wire, and channel capacity continues to expand.

A. Public Access and its Inception on Cable Television

Operators soon realized that cable could be used not only to transmit pre-existing broadcast signals, but also as a medium to present shows produced by independent parties and other production companies. The idea of a public access channel for local communication found inspiration with the first centralized public television system created in Washington, D.C., in 1967. Congress, however, asserted control over public television content during the Nixon administration, virtually eliminating any political or controversial programming.

One Canadian television producer said public access "all began in Newfoundland." In 1967, a Canadian group created the "Challenge for Change" program, producing documentaries that chronicled the effects of poverty in Canada. The Canadian public initially responded with hostility to these stark displays of children looking for food in the Canadian ghettos. The producers responded by putting the choice of what to film in the hands of the group they were studying. The people living and

20. Id.
23. Id.
24. Id. at 10 (quoting Patrick Watson).
25. Id.; see also GILBERT GILLESPIE, PUBLIC ACCESS TELEVISION IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA 21 (1975).
26. Engelman, supra note 22, at 10; see also GILLESPIE, supra note 25, at 21.
struggling in these areas were permitted to participate in all editing and production decisions to take an active role in showing what life was like from their point of view. The experiments gave the people oppressed by poverty the freedom and ability to have a voice. Many in Canada were deeply affected by the unfiltered view of this forgotten part of society. Allowing public control highlighted the success of cable as a communicative medium, and helped influence the Canadian government to create programs for welfare and economic reform. The documentaries also indirectly became the catalyst for public access in America.

Dale City, Virginia, became the first American city to incorporate public access through a channel made available to the Junior Chamber of Commerce. The program lasted only from 1969 to 1970 because of a lack of funding. Larger cities like New York implemented public access with greater success in 1971. These early access programs embodied a "guerilla television" in which television became an instrument available to the subversive culture. Access proponents felt the potential for a shift in television control would help restore a "media ecological balance." Instead of a medium that produced programming for a general audience, access users focused their programs at the individual. Communications professor Lee Thayer noted, "Communicational realities and the human institutions which are built out of them are ultimately the products of intercommunication between people, not of the mass production and mass distribution of messages."

Cable operators have kept this "balance" between the cable system and the individual tipped in their favor because they still control the allocation of money for cable access. Limited funds have made it difficult for those involved in access to create programs that successfully meet the idea of participatory television. In order to save money, a majority of operators fill their access schedule with repeats of church sermons, community politics, and school plays. Families in Elmhurst, Illinois, had

27. Gillespie, supra note 25, at 22.
29. Id. at 31; Gillespie, supra note 25, at 35.
32. Id. at 24.
33. Id. at 26.
34. Gillespie, supra note 25, at 31 (quoting Lee Thayer, On Human Communication and Social Development, 5 Economies et Societies: La Communication II 51 (1971)).
a contest to see which repeat was played more often on their access channel—the Calumet Beauty Pageant or the Elmhurst Pet Parade.\footnote{35}

Some operators actively promote their access channels. For example, cable operators in Dayton and Minneapolis have provided between $500,000 and $1 million for local production facilities, with over twenty portable cameras each for use by access participants.\footnote{36} In contrast, the “programming facilities” of many operations consist only of a bulletin board that lists events.\footnote{37}

Many minority groups who feel their viewpoints are not being expressed in the mainstream cable medium have pushed nationwide for facilitating the training process needed to operate and produce an access program.\footnote{38} These protests have led to the production of numerous community-based programs. Examples include a Chicago newsmagazine produced by and for homosexuals called *The 10% Show*;\footnote{39} a Houston show watched by hundreds of Vietnamese immigrants because it is the only program available in their native language;\footnote{40} and a talk-show hosted by a mother who lost two sons in a drive-by shooting, pleading for an end to gang violence in the “barrios” of Lynwood, California.\footnote{41}

The number of viewers of cable access channels varies in different cities. Surveys range from less than 1 percent viewership in Ventura County, California,\footnote{42} to 50 percent of adult viewers in Bloomington, Indiana.\footnote{43} Nationwide polls show that 25 percent of cable viewers have watched at least one cable access show within the last two weeks.\footnote{44} On average, operators and media analysts note that the number of viewers who tune in to public access is growing because the mainstream media, as exemplified by the film *Wayne’s World*, continues to focus on the quirkiness of public-access programming.\footnote{45} For example, the show *Biker Bill Cooks with Fire* in Arizona—featuring Bill talking about motorcycle

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{35}{Gary D. Christenson, *Smile, You’re On Cable TV!*, CHI. TRIB., July 30, 1989, (Magazine), at 26, 29.}
\item \footnote{36}{Kiernan, *supra* note 4, at 114.}
\item \footnote{37}{*Id.*}
\item \footnote{38}{Judy Semas, *Smile, You’re on Television; Public Access Television Programs*, BUS. J., Mar. 14, 1994, at 23.}
\item \footnote{39}{Christenson, *supra* note 35, at 26.}
\item \footnote{40}{Kiernan, *supra* note 4, at 114.}
\item \footnote{41}{Howard Blume, *Media for the Masses*, L.A. TIMES, Mar. 31, 1994, at J8.}
\item \footnote{42}{Stephanie Simon, *Viewer Challenges TV Station’s Airing of Abortion*, L.A. TIMES, Feb. 24, 1993, at B1.}
\item \footnote{43}{Ronald Taylor, ‘People’s TV’ is Here—On Cable Systems, U.S. NEWS AND WORLD REP., May 10, 1982, at 84, 84.}
\item \footnote{44}{Kiernan, *supra* note 4, at 112.}
\item \footnote{45}{Semas, *supra* note 38, at 23.}
\end{itemize}
safety tips and ways to cook jalapenos—has gained a loyal audience as Arizona newspapers have written articles on the program.\textsuperscript{46} Motorsports Unlimited in Chicago has gained cult-like status with its cable viewers, featuring car aficionado Bill Wildt talking about crankshafts and the engine sizes of various cars—while his "girls," women dressed in bikinis, lie on and in the cars that are being discussed.\textsuperscript{47} These programs demonstrate that the more unique the program, the greater chance it has for attracting viewers.

\section{B. Regulation of Public Access}

\subsubsection{1. Early FCC and Congressional Attempts}

The FCC originally ignored cable television, deciding instead to focus on the "national television service."\textsuperscript{48} The Commission asserted jurisdiction over cable in 1972 after realizing that cable television, being able to both originate and distribute programming, created formidable competition.\textsuperscript{49} One of the surprising promulgations by the FCC required cable operators in the top 100 cable television markets to provide three free access channels—one channel for public use, a second for educational programs, and a third for local government meetings.\textsuperscript{50} The FCC set this mandatory rule as a trade-off: by allowing cable operators to have free use of commercial and public broadcast signals, the Commission could compel cable operators to open new outlets for expression, education, and information.\textsuperscript{51}

Community access users praised the Commission's efforts. Proponents saw the rules as FCC recognition of public access, marking "cable as an institution within which the separate voices of the community may be

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{footnote1} Nilsen, \emph{supra} note 1, at D1.
\bibitem{footnote2} Christenson, \emph{supra} note 35, at 26.
\bibitem{footnote3} See Frontier Brdcst. Co. v. Collier, \emph{Memorandum Opinion and Order}, 24 F.C.C. 251 (1958). In Frontier, the complainant asked the Commission to apply the common carrier provisions of the 1934 Communications Act to operators of cable television, then known as community antenna television (CATV). \textit{Id.} para. 2. The FCC dismissed Frontier's complaint, reasoning that CATV did not conform to the traditionally accepted concept of common carriers. \textit{Id.} para. 7.
\bibitem{footnote4} ORINGEL \& BUSKE, \emph{supra} note 19, at 5.
\bibitem{footnote5} In \textit{re} Amendment of Part 74, Subpart K, of the Commission's Rules and Regs. Relative to Community Antenna TV Sys., \emph{Report and Order}, 36 F.C.C.2d 143, para. 121 (1972) [hereinafter \textit{1972 Cable TV Report}]. The FCC set a compliance date of March 31, 1977, for CATV operators to provide the designated channels. \textit{Id.} para. 147.
\bibitem{footnote6} \textit{Id.} para. 121.
\end{thebibliography}
heard."52 Operators were to offer public access to users on a non-discriminatory, first-come, first-serve basis, and program operators were to have no control over program content.53 Congress realized, however, that completely open access might lead to an abuse of the First Amendment, so it required operators to screen access programs for indecent and obscene material and promulgate rules prohibiting such content.54 Although the FCC noted that the First Amendment did not "safeguard against unpleasantness,"55 Congress wanted the FCC to ensure that the public was protected from obscenity.

However, it soon became clear that public access was not creating the impact the FCC had anticipated, as the number of access viewers and users remained small. In 1976, the FCC ruled that access channels could be combined to offset the limited hours of available programming.56 The Commission also delayed the deadline date for compliance with the channel capacity requirements, but expanded the coverage of the requirement to cable systems with 3500 or more subscribers, regardless of market location.57

2. Midwest Video and the Obstacles to Public Access

The Supreme Court held in Southwestern Cable Co. that because of the competitive threat cable posed to broadcast television, the FCC could assert jurisdiction over cable systems as long as it was "reasonably ancillary" to the Commission's responsibility for regulating broadcast television.58 Relying on this holding, Midwest Video Corporation and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) successfully appealed to the

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52. Engelman, supra note 22, at 39. The Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit later viewed the Commission's requirement as an attempt to "anticipate the course of communications advances" while racing against "our modern technological juggernaut." Midwest Video Corp. v. FCC, 571 F.2d 1025, 1031 (8th Cir. 1978), aff'd on other grounds, 440 U.S. 689 (1979).
53. 1972 Cable TV Report, supra note 50, para. 135. The Commission, in order to create enough channel capacity, also required cable operators in the top 100 markets to create systems with twenty-channel capacities. Id. para. 120.
54. Id. para. 135.
56. In re Amendment of Part 76 of the Commission's Rules and Regs. Concerning the Cable TV Channel Capacity and Access Channel Requirements of Section 76.251, Report and Order, 59 F.C.C.2d 294, para. 10 (1976). This rulemaking led to access channels being labeled as "PEG" channels.
57. Id.
Eighth Circuit, and ultimately to the Supreme Court, to strike down the FCC requirements for public access. 59

The Eighth Circuit held the mandatory access rules “burst through the outer limits” of the FCC’s jurisdiction. 60 Because the concept of open access on separate cable channels had no relation to broadcast television or the “retransmission of broadcast signals on existing channels,” the interaction between cable and broadcast was absent. 61 Therefore, the FCC’s access rule was not reasonably ancillary to the delegated scope of FCC cable regulation. While the court of appeals commended the FCC’s efforts to provide a variety of voices on cable, the court noted that “[r]hetoric in praise of objectives cannot confer jurisdiction.” 62

The FCC was also held to have imposed an unconstitutional burden on the cable operator by requiring the cable operator to create a channel for a public forum with non-discriminatory access, while placing an obligation on the operator to suppress obscene or indecent content. 63 The court held the Commission failed to provide the procedural safeguards required of governmental “prior restraints” which include judicial proceedings and a prompt determination of the content that is being prohibited. 64 The FCC’s rule, in effect, made the cable operator both “judge and jury,” and, coupled with the operator’s personal desire to satisfy the Commission and avoid sanctions, would have hurt access users by enlisting the operator “on the ‘safe’ side—the side of suppression.” 65

3. The 1984 Cable Communications Policy Act

The Eighth Circuit’s and Supreme Court’s scrapping of the mandatory access rules did not end the growth of cable access, as most cable operators still included an agreement for access channels in their franchise proposals. 66 This was a direct result of the cable franchising system, whereby local governments would demand from cable franchises certain concessions—like an access channel—in exchange for the cable system’s use of public land to construct its facilities. 67

59. Midwest Video Corp. v. FCC, 571 F.2d 1025 (8th Cir. 1978), aff’d on other grounds, 440 U.S. 689 (1979).
60. Id. at 1038.
61. Id.
62. Id. at 1042; see also HBO, Inc. v. FCC, 567 F.2d 9 (D.C. Cir. 1977) (holding that the FCC lacked the authority to regulate pay-per-view cable).
63. Midwest Video Corp., 571 F.2d at 1053-54.
64. Id. at 1056-57.
65. Id. at 1057.
66. ORINGEL & BUSKE, supra note 19, at 6.
67. Id. at 6-7.
In 1980, Congress began to push to amend the 1934 Communications Act. As demonstrated by cases such as Midwest Video, the courts and government were unclear about the scope of the FCC’s power to regulate cable television. After four years and numerous requests from cities confused by the boundaries of allowed regulation, Congress passed the Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984, the first federal legislation for cable.\(^6\) Congress wanted to relieve the cable industry from unnecessary regulation—such as limits on cable rates and franchise fees\(^69\)—and declared prohibitions on “redlining,” where cable operators would refuse to wire low-income areas.\(^70\)

Congress also enacted the 1984 Act to ensure that cable systems remained responsive to the needs of the public.\(^71\) Public access again became one of the focal points of regulation. Cable had evolved into the most prevalent form of broadcast transmission, which meant that the breadth of channel capacity could support diversity. The House Report stressed a congressional desire that public access again become meaningful—“the video equivalent of the speaker’s soapbox or the electronic parallel to the printed leaflet”\(^72\) where cable operators act as a “conduit” for programming.\(^73\)

Congress simply codified the common practice at that time—franchising authorities could (and almost always did) include in their proposals a statement that they would reserve channels for public, educational, or government use.\(^74\) Operators were to treat access users on a first-come, first-serve basis. Congress further declared that a cable operator could not exercise any editorial control over the use of the designated access channel.\(^75\) To avoid constitutional problems and operator liability, the 1984 Cable Act granted operators full immunity from any liability for any program carried on an access channel.\(^76\) A cable operator, however, could still set forth limited technical standards, budgetary

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constraints, and regulations on the use of cable facilities. Operators could also provide a scrambling device (usually a lockbox) on a subscriber’s request, which allowed the subscriber to selectively block reception of material.

4. The 1992 Cable Television and Consumer Protection Act

The cable television industry continued to grow after 1984. Over 60 percent (approximately 56 million) of American households subscribed to cable television in 1991. This led to unforeseen problems of ownership, cable rates, and use of retransmitted broadcast television signals. Cable operators had also reacted with growing nervousness toward public access after the 1984 Act provisions. Some access programs began to push the edge of indecency and obscenity. From images of stripteasers and sexual activities on the program Dull-A-Vision in Austin, Texas, to a religious group’s airing of an abortion in Ventura County, California, cable subscribers in various communities wanted to choose what was being shown on public access. Bill Schricker, programming director for Jones Intercable in Tampa, Florida, spoke for many operators when he answered critics of certain access shows by “throwing up his hands and ask[ing], ‘What do you want us to do? We are powerless to prohibit or suspend.’”

Congress attempted to appease both operators and subscribers by enacting the Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act of 1992. Congress created the 1992 Cable Act after conducting three
years of hearings on the structure and operation of the cable television industry.\textsuperscript{87} One of Congress's goals was again to further the "substantial governmental and First Amendment" interests of promoting diverse viewpoints through "multiple technology media."\textsuperscript{88} Congress gave the FCC authority to promulgate rules for operator prohibition of certain controversial programs and made the operator liable for the content.\textsuperscript{89} Congress deemed these changes necessary to protect children from obscene and indecent subject matter.\textsuperscript{90}

In late 1992, the Commission commenced informal rule making to set forth guidelines for cable operators in their prohibition of obscenity, sexual explicitness, or programs soliciting unlawful conduct.\textsuperscript{91} The Commission defined sexually explicit conduct within a generic "indecency" standard.\textsuperscript{92} These proposed rules and definitions set forth broad parameters within which programs could be prohibited.\textsuperscript{93} Further, the FCC created a certification process where users would have to certify their programs did not contain any material that fit into one of the prohibited statutory categories.\textsuperscript{94}

Access users and cable operators quickly objected to these rules. Arguments opposing the proposed rules ranged from the potential for "its chilling effect on the use of public access"\textsuperscript{95} to the exorbitant costs required to pre-screen every program, even the "call-in astrology" shows, for statutory compliance.\textsuperscript{96} In \textit{Alliance for Community Media}, the ACLU

\begin{itemize}
\item[92.] \textit{Id.} paras. 14-15; \textit{see also} Dial Info. Servs. Co. v. Thornburgh, 938 F.2d 1535, 1540 (2d Cir. 1991) (setting forth the definition of "indecency" upon which the FCC relies); \textit{In re Implementation of Section 10 of the Cable Consumer Protection and Competition Act of 1992, First Report and Order}, 8 FCC Rcd. 998, paras. 33-37 (1993) (to be codified at 47 C.F.R. § 76.701(g)) (incorporating indecency as material that "depicts sexual or excretory activities or organs in a patently offensive manner as measured by contemporary community standards for the cable medium").
\item[96.] Duryea, \textit{supra} note 85, at 1B.
\end{itemize}
and community access groups challenged the constitutionality of these access content regulations.97

5. Overturning the 1992 FCC Access Regulations

Access proponents appealed to the Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit in *Alliance for Community Media* that the public access of the 1992 Act and the ensuing FCC promulgations were impermissibly broad and enacted without proper procedural safeguards.98 Even though it was the private operator who was to have the choice of content prohibition, the three-member panel of the court looked at the relationship between the operator and the FCC.99 When a government agency encourages a private actor to prohibit material that it could not do itself, that close influential nexus creates an unconstitutional state action.100 The court used a three-part test to scrutinize the FCC regulations examining: the immediate objective, the context in which the specific authorization to ban indecency was issued, and the ultimate effect of the FCC regulations.101 Because the operator was given such overt encouragement to prohibit material, the operator in essence acted like the FCC’s private agent, which resulted in unconstitutional state action.102 “[T]he government has stripped the cable operator of any editorial control over cable access channels except for programming the government wishes to suppress.”103

The court recognized that the government had a compelling state interest in protecting children from viewing indecent material.104 Relying on its 1991 decision in *Action for Children’s Television*, however, the court held that a complete ban on indecent material, similar to what was attempted on broadcast television, was unconstitutionally overbroad.105

98. *Id.* at 816.
99. *Id.* at 818.
101. *Alliance for Community Media*, 10 F.3d at 819 (citing Reitman v. Mulkey, 387 U.S. 369, 373 (1967)).
102. *Id.* at 820.
103. *Id.*
104. *Id.*
105. *Id.* at 823 (citing *Action for Children’s Television v. FCC*, 932 F.2d 1504 (D.C. Cir. 1991), *cert. denied* 112 S. Ct. 1282 (1992)).
The FCC had failed to show that cable television deserved any different regulation from broadcast, and the court held that providing some safe time harbor or other less restrictive alternative would have to be enacted by the FCC for effective protection.\(^6\)

The court continued the stay of the FCC regulations until a resolution on remand. However, on February 16, 1994, the court vacated its November 23, 1993, ruling and granted a rehearing en banc for review by the full Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit.\(^7\) While the three justices who decided the initial Alliance holding were President Carter appointees, the full court is comprised primarily of appointees of Presidents Reagan and Bush.\(^8\)

As noted in the Midwest Video case, granting the operators authority to ban certain programming, while removing immunity for liability, creates the potential for overzealous prohibition. Striking down the 1992 rules would ensure that the original intent of public access remains, thereby giving a voice to those outside the mainstream to present their message in a way they see fit.

As cable’s popularity and the number of child viewers continues to grow, the problem of protecting children from these controversial access programs remains. As one access system spokesperson put it, the courts, access users, and operators have only created a temporary solution “in search of a problem.”\(^9\)

An example of what some see as the reason for access and others view as the prime example of the need for greater content regulation is Channel V (formerly Channel J) of the Manhattan Cable System in New York. In 1976, New York created its public access channel without a great deal of publicity. One of the few who did attempt to use public access was former radio disc jockey Alex Bennett.\(^10\) According to Bennett, “It wasn’t like a gold rush to get on. Hardly anyone knew about it.”\(^11\) Bennett, along with Al Goldstein, the founder of the adult magazine Screw, launched the access program Midnight Blue, an exploration into the perverse side of New York City life.\(^12\) Al Goldstein wanted to reach a part of society he felt went unnoticed. Goldstein said, “There is a stifling

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\(^6\) Id.
\(^7\) Alliance for Community Media v. FCC, 15 F.3d 186 (D.C. Cir. 1994).
\(^8\) New Hearing for TV Decency Rules, CHI. TRIB., Feb. 19, 1994, at B1. The three were Chief Judge Abner Mikva and Judges Patricia Wald and Harry Edwards. Id.
\(^9\) Flint, supra note 95, at 62.
\(^10\) David Friedman, The Fat Cat of Porn, NEWSDAY, Sept. 4, 1990, at 8.
\(^11\) Id.
\(^12\) Id.
silence out there that doesn’t authenticate my reality, the reality of men obsessed with sex.” Installments of the program included a 400-pound stripper, a double-jointed contortionist named Mr. Infinity, and a dominatrix who whipped a middle-aged Englishman dressed in a maid’s costume. Midnight Blue also launched the career of Robin Byrd, a sex-show performer dressed in a G-string, dubbed the “X-Rated Ed Sullivan” of cable access, who interviews strippers and pornographic film stars.

Al Goldstein, who recently became a member of the National Press Club, faces constant allegations of obscenity and legal pressure to remove his programs from the cable access channel, but Channel V still airs Midnight Blue. Goldstein noted, “The courts have ruled that obscene is illegal but indecent is permitted. That’s why I’m home free. No one knows the difference. One man’s obscenity is another man’s indecency. One man’s perversion is another man’s religion.”

One of the steps needed to reach a compromise lies in the area of disagreement raised by Al Goldstein—the difficulty of defining obscenity and indecency, and the role of the FCC in regulating programs that fall within either category.

II. OBSCENITY AND INDECENCY ON CABLE—REGULATING THE GREAT UNKNOWN

The FCC has had difficulty placing cable television within a regulatory category. Cable incorporates aspects of the broadcast medium, but also contains unique attributes that demand different standards. This hybrid structure has led to confusion between state statutes attempting to define who has control over content regulation and courts trying to assimilate these regulations with existing precedent.

A. Obscenity and Indecency Regulation under the Miller and Pacifica Holdings

The Supreme Court first dealt with delineating material protected under the First Amendment in Roth v. United States. In Roth, the Court upheld a federal statute that punished the mailing of materials that were “obscene, lewd, lascivious, or filthy.” The Court held that ideas even having the slightest “redeeming social importance” are protected under the

113. Id.
114. Id.
116. Friedman, supra note 110, at 8.
118. Id. at 491.
First Amendment, but rejected obscenity that is utterly without social importance.\textsuperscript{119} 

Nine years later, the Supreme Court in \textit{Memoirs v. Massachusetts} altered the definition of obscenity under \textit{Roth}, requiring that to prove obscenity, the prosecution must affirmatively establish that the material is utterly without value.\textsuperscript{120} This forced the prosecution to prove a negative, which became “a burden virtually impossible to discharge under our criminal standards of proof.”\textsuperscript{121}

\textit{Miller v. California} marked an attempt by the Court to further define obscenity, with the Court acknowledging the danger of regulating “any form of expression.”\textsuperscript{122} The case involved the arrest of an adult book salesman who was charged with violating a California statute for knowingly distributing obscene matter.\textsuperscript{123} In a \textit{5-4} decision written by Chief Justice Warren Burger, the Court confined the scope of obscenity to matter which depicted or described sexual conduct, to be defined by the applicable state statute.\textsuperscript{124} The Court created a tripartite test for defining obscenity.\textsuperscript{125}

The test for the trier of fact is:

(a) whether the average person under “community standards” would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to a prurient interest; (b) whether the work depicts or describes in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by state law; and, (c) whether the work, taken as a whole lacks serious literary, artistic, or scientific value.\textsuperscript{126}

Burger noted that while “the sexual revolution” had helped in removing some of the “prudery” in society, the Court saw no need to permit “hard core” material.\textsuperscript{127} The Court warned states to use caution in not going beyond the test when enacting their obscenity statutes.\textsuperscript{128} The material to be judged was to be very fact specific and examined from the standards of an average person, not a “particularly susceptible or sensitive

\begin{itemize}
  \item 119. \textit{Id.} at 484.
  \item 122. \textit{Id.} at 23.
  \item 123. \textit{Id.} at 17. The salesman sent four brochures in the mail: \textit{Man-Woman, Sex Orgies Illustrated, An Illustrated History of Pornography, and Intercourse}, along with a film titled \textit{Marital Intercourse}. \textit{Id.} at 18.
  \item 124. \textit{Id.} at 24.
  \item 125. \textit{Id.}
  \item 126. \textit{Id.}
  \item 127. \textit{Id.} at 36. “[P]eople do not allow unregulated access to heroin just because it is a derivative of medicinal morphine.” \textit{Id.}
  \item 128. \textit{Id.} at 23-24.
\end{itemize}
person.’’\textsuperscript{129} For material that was questionable, the Court noted, ‘‘[W]e must continue to rely on the jury system, accompanied by the safeguards that judges, rules of evidence, presumption of innocence, and other protective features provide.’’\textsuperscript{130}

In his dissent, Justice William Douglas noted the past difficulty the Court had in placing limits on regulating obscenity, an area that was vague and uncertain, with a scope that would vary among communities. He worried about the government becoming involved in an area of extreme emotion, crossing the fragile line of regulating expression into censorship. Regulation of expression should not, in Justice Douglas’ eyes, be applied when the definition of obscenity too often became a rule of ‘‘I know it when I see it.’’\textsuperscript{131}

Building on these allowances and limitations, states began to implement obscenity statutes. Questions began to arise, however, about regulating objectionable material that fell short of the obscenity standard. The Court returned to the area of controversial expression within the specific media of broadcast radio and television in \textit{FCC v. Pacifica Foundation}.
\textsuperscript{132} A New York radio station broadcast in the daytime comedian George Carlin’s ‘‘Filthy Words’’ monologue, a list of the seven words that ‘‘you couldn’t say on the public, ah, airwaves, uhm, the ones you definitely wouldn’t say, ever.’’\textsuperscript{133} A man whose son heard the broadcast filed a complaint against the station, which prompted the FCC to issue an opinion that set a regulatory standard for the growing number of complaints about indecent speech on the airwaves.\textsuperscript{134} The FCC had found that broadcast speech was different from other forms of expression because children had easy, unsupervised access to broadcasts, broadcasts invaded the privacy of a person’s home without warning, and a scarcity of the broadcast spectrum existed as compared to the print medium.\textsuperscript{135} Calling Carlin’s speech ‘‘patently offensive’’ but not obscene, the FCC allowed channeling of the content by time, place, and frequency.\textsuperscript{136}

The FCC’s authority to regulate indecent broadcasting was upheld.\textsuperscript{137} The Court defined indecency within the context of protecting

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{129} Id. at 33.
\item \textsuperscript{130} Id. at 26.
\item \textsuperscript{131} Id. at 39 (Douglas, J., dissenting) (quoting Justice Stewart’s concurring opinion in \textit{Jacobellis v. Ohio}, 378 U.S. 184, 197 (1964)).
\item \textsuperscript{132} \textit{Pacifica}, 438 U.S. 726 (1978).
\item \textsuperscript{133} Id. at 729.
\item \textsuperscript{134} Id. at 730-31.
\item \textsuperscript{135} Id. at 731 n.2.
\item \textsuperscript{136} Id. at 731-32.
\item \textsuperscript{137} Id. at 738.
\end{itemize}
children, as anything patently offensive within community broadcast standards that describes sexual or excretory activities and organs, broadcast at times of the day when there is a reasonable risk children may be in the audience.\textsuperscript{38} The Court agreed with the FCC that because of the uniqueness of the broadcast medium, its pervasiveness in American homes, and its accessibility to children, regulation of indecency was constitutionally permissible.\textsuperscript{39}

As it had done in Miller, the Court in Pacifica stressed the narrowness of its holding by requiring regulation to be very context specific.\textsuperscript{40} In order to avoid infringement on a broadcaster’s First Amendment rights, the FCC was to weigh such factors as time of day, expected composition of audience, and mode of broadcast.\textsuperscript{41} Factual context is important because indecency “may be merely a right thing in the wrong place—like a pig in the parlor instead of the barnyard.”\textsuperscript{42}

B. Regulation of Content on Cable Television

Cable television presented a new problem for the FCC and state governments. While cable television incorporates aspects of broadcast television, cable operators transmit signals over wire and require subscribers to pay a fee in order to receive programming. Similar to persons involved with other visual media, however, operators have expressed concern over how to regulate objectionable cable content. One of the primary battles over control took place with Utah’s attempts to enact a statute prohibiting and regulating obscene and indecent cable programming.

The case HBO, Inc. v. Wilkinson involved the enactment of a statute by the Utah legislature in 1981 that imposed criminal sanctions on cable operators who knowingly distributed obscene and indecent programming on cable.\textsuperscript{43} National and local cable television distributors and franchisees brought a class action suit challenging the constitutionality of the statute. The Utah District Court upheld the section of the statute prohibiting pornographic and obscene material by holding that the Miller test was a proper boundary for cable television.\textsuperscript{44} The court drew the line at the Utah legislature’s attempt to regulate indecency. Under the Utah statute,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{138} Id. at 732.
  \item \textsuperscript{139} Id. at 748-50.
  \item \textsuperscript{140} Id. at 750.
  \item \textsuperscript{141} Id.
  \item \textsuperscript{142} Id. (quoting Justice Sutherland from Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co., 272 U.S. 365, 388 (1926)).
  \item \textsuperscript{143} HBO, 531 F. Supp. 987 (D. Utah 1982).
  \item \textsuperscript{144} Id. at 995.
\end{itemize}
indecency was defined as portrayal of nudity and descriptions or depictions of “illicit sex or sexual immorality.” The court held that this definition was overly broad, as it would prohibit the portrayal of such material in art, literature, and scientific works.

Merely because something offends one person does not mean it precludes another from finding some artistic or scientific value in the work. Judge Jenkins wrote:

I think the appealing to the worst in all of us is indecent. Those who do ought to be ashamed of themselves. But that does not mean that what they do is proscribed. We put up with it. What we do if we have occasion to be offended by something in a program is we get up and turn it off. We do something else. We read a book. We refuse to purchase the sponsor’s product. And if we’re concerned parents and we’re not overjoyed by the violence and stupidity of The Dukes of Hazzard, we turn it off and direct our children to something else.

The Utah District Court in 1983 addressed the applicability of the Pacifica holding to regulating cable content. The court struck down a city ordinance enacted in Roy City that banned cable programming that fell under a municipally defined version of indecency. The court held that Roy City could not rely on Pacifica because of the inherent differences between cable and broadcast television. Differences include the requirement of subscribing to cable, which the court likened to a contractual agreement, the greater choices of channel selection on cable, and the difference between television broadcast waves as public property and the private nature of cable wires. A person could choose not to subscribe to cable, but could not cancel broadcast television. Cable content should only be limited under the tripartite test of Miller, as it provided a degree of flexibility at the community level for all forms of publicly available information. Rather than let the government interfere in an area that is protected by the First Amendment, the choice of regulating indecent or objectionable material rests with the individual, “a moral function for the parent and the family.”

146. HBO, 531 F. Supp. at 996.
147. Id. at 1001.
149. Id.
150. Id. at 1167.
151. Id.
152. Id. at 1170.
153. Id. at 1172 (quoting SYDNEY HARRIS, THE BEST OF SYDNEY T. HARRIS 194 (1976)).
Utah’s last look at indecent cable programming arose in *Community Television of Utah, Inc. v. Wilkinson*, where the district court again asserted that only the *Miller* standard could apply to cable content regulation. In striking down the regulation which would have made the broadcasting of indecent programming a criminal nuisance, the district court again stressed the difference between broadcasting and cable. *Pacifica* cannot apply to cable regulation because at best it “stands for the proposition that a federal regulatory agency can monitor consumer complaints directed at broadcasters who operate in the public domain.” Cable subscribers simply have more choices when dealing with programming they may find offensive: Subscribers may cancel their subscriptions to cable television or cancel certain channels through scrambling or lockboxes. Limiting questionable programming due to fears of possible exposure to child viewers would unfairly restrict the rights of those consenting adults who subscribe to watch those programs.

The Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit supported this distinction in *Cruz v. Ferre*, holding that a Miami cable regulation statute exceeded the *Miller* test. The proposed Miami statute ignored the rights of the majority viewing audience as subscribers. The statute also did not provide the *Miller* protections afforded to material with some social, artistic, and political value, which is necessary so that only the truly offensive material is prohibited. The court suggested that *Pacifica* limitations were too excessive because cable operators would have more control over certain channels to restrict programming to certain times and days, and could warn viewers well ahead of time of potentially offensive programs with monthly programming guides. Applying *Pacifica* to cable would be an onerous burden for cable operators and viewers; *Cruz* relied on greater parental manageability and the choice of subscribing to certain programming instead of allowing further content regulation.

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155. *Id.* at 1115.
156. *Id.* at 1113; *see also* *Cruz v. Ferre*, 755 F.2d 1415, 1419 (11th Cir. 1985) (discussing the options of lockboxes and parental keys that help protect children from programming that adults consider objectionable).
157. *Community TV of Utah*, 611 F. Supp. at 1115; *cf.* Sable Comm. of Cal., Inc. v. FCC, 492 U.S. 115 (1989) (holding that a complete ban on indecent telephone messages was unconstitutional because a denial of access to adults exceeded that which was necessary to limit the access of minors).
158. *Cruz*, 755 F.2d at 1415.
159. *Id.* at 1418-22.
160. *Id.* at 1420.
Circuit set forth the difference between cable and broadcast television, stating "that if an individual voluntarily opens his door and allows a pig into his parlor, he is in less of a position to squeal." 161

Throughout these cases, and including the initial *Alliance* decision, court precedent has established that government cannot enact a statute for control of cable content that exceeds *Miller*. The 1992 Act provisions attempt to disguise government regulation through indirect control of the cable operator. Like government, an operator cannot prohibit sexually explicit conduct, or material soliciting unlawful conduct, without concern for its level of prurient interest or social, artistic, and political value. Under the FCC's proposed rules, an operator could ban an access show that explains the use of condoms for the sake of AIDS awareness. If the program involves a sexually explicit topic, an operator would not need to examine the possible social and artistic value of such a message. A complete ban of indecency is not the least restrictive alternative in balancing the needs of free expression on public access and the protection of children from objectionable material.

While the *Alliance* decision is pending a rehearing en banc, a recent California district court case provides a compelling argument as to how the District of Columbia Circuit Court should ultimately decide. 162 The California court enjoined Viacom Cable in San Francisco from attempting to segregate and utilize its editorial discretion in regulating indecent material. 163 Viacom had terminated episodes of the public access programs *Wax Lips* and *Erotica SF*—shows that dealt with sex education, opinions, and "points of view not often heard on commercial television." 164 Cable operators relied on Section 10(c) of the 1992 Cable Act, which gave operators authority to prohibit indecent programming on public access channels. 165 The court acknowledged the *Alliance* holding and noted that in spite of its vacated judgment, the "underlying rationale for holding Sections 10(a) and (c) unconstitutional remains highly persuasive to the court." 166 While the protection of children was again recognized, the court wanted to avoid excessive prohibition because "the government can be

161. *Id.* at 1420 n.6.
163. *Id.* at 1347.
164. *Id.* at 1339.
assured that cable operators will institute bans on indecent material if only
given the opportunity."\textsuperscript{167}

Shows on public access may be controversial—either because of their
message or content—but those programs are the reason why public access
exists. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the speaker on the electronic
"soapbox," access provides a chance for the voices that go unheard in the
mainstream to communicate their message. In order to address the concerns
of viewers who are deeply offended by access programs and parents who
want to protect children from objectionable material, steps other than
prohibition can be taken that provide a less restrictive alternative.

III. SOLUTIONS TO ACCESS REGULATION

\textit{Miller} provides a fair test for determining obscenity on both a national
and local level. It is a test narrow enough that diverse access users who
address controversial topics may do so without fear of prohibition. It also
provides enough flexibility to allow a community enough control to protect
itself from truly offensive and obscene material. Those involved in public
access have always been aware that they must abide by the \textit{Miller}
guidelines. As T. Andrew Lewis, executive director for the Alliance for
Community Media said, "Public access has always had to comply with
existing obscenity laws. Public access is not above the law."\textsuperscript{168}

While it is undisputed that obscenity is a boundary applicable to
access regulation, indecency remains an ambiguous area. The best way to
avoid excessive prohibition in the area of indecent and objectionable
material would be to restore operators' immunity from liability for program
content and not allow prohibition of "indecent" programming. Reverting to
the 1984 Cable Act provisions forbidding editorial control would help
prevent the potential for excessive prohibition; operators would overregulate
when threatened with criminal liability. An operator would still be expected
to prohibit any program that clearly violated its state obscenity statute.\textsuperscript{169}
Criminal sanctions for obscenity would exist for the party who should have
the greatest responsibility for the program's content—an access program's
creator. The user would face liability for creating a program with obscene
material and giving it to an operator without proper notification.\textsuperscript{170}

The \textit{Miller} test is by no means perfect, but it has consistently been
held by the courts to be the best standard to balance competing interests.

\textsuperscript{167} Id.
\textsuperscript{168} Duryea, \textit{supra} note 85, at 1B.
\textsuperscript{169} This view assumes the state statute does not exceed the boundaries for regulating
In cases of true controversy, the decision to prohibit will rest in the people of the community, instead of one operator under the looming shadow of the FCC.

A. Regulating Indecency—Creating Dual Channels

One suggestion for balancing the needs of expression and protection of indecent access programming is found in the 1992 Cable Act provisions for leased access programming.\(^{171}\) This idea offers the possibility of creating two public access channels—one for the programs considered “safe” and the other for indecent programming.\(^{172}\) The controversial channel would begin as a blocked or scrambled channel, and could only be available upon subscriber request.\(^{173}\) Separation would help provide protection for viewers and further notice concerning channel content. Economics and municipal attitudes toward public access, however, would make this solution virtually impossible. As noted, users of just one access channel have plenty of trouble receiving enough funds for production and daily operations. Most systems also have difficulty receiving enough programming for their access channel. Two channels would only dilute the funds and increase difficulties already faced by those involved in access.

The Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit in *Alliance* remanded the segregation provisions for indecent programs on leased access promulgated by the FCC.\(^{174}\) Leased access are channels offered for commercial use by any entity not affiliated with the operator.\(^{175}\) The court held that singling out one channel for regulation, while leaving other commercial channels which carry the same material untouched, was an unconstitutional content-based restriction and was not the least restrictive means for protecting children.\(^{176}\) The FCC would have to prove that the access channel is so prevalent and severe that it demands unique protection for children in comparison to other channels in order to pass First Amendment scrutiny. So far they have been unable to put forth evidence that makes access content any more problematic than that aired on other cable channels.

\(^{174}\) Alliance for Community Media v. FCC, 10 F.3d 812 (D.C. Cir. 1993), *vacated pending reh'g en banc* 15 F.3d 186 (D.C. Cir. 1994).
\(^{176}\) *Alliance for Community Media*, 10 F.3d 812.
B. Controlling Access Content Through Local Limitations

Another approach would require that access programs contain at least 50 percent local production and that only people within the cable area could use access facilities.177 Such a rule would effectively end the national access programs that are distributed by videotape to local communities. These programs have been the greatest source of controversy. Local limitations are not a viable alternative for both theoretical and practical considerations. Many users are not able to produce the funds necessary to create and produce their shows and need to rely on national offices for programming. Examples include a national animal rights group, a Vietnamese cultural group, and even the Ku Klux Klan. Public access acts as a soapbox for each community. A person within a community that sponsors a program produced elsewhere should have the right to have others in that specific community see and listen to that viewpoint. Taking this “conduit” of communication away would violate the purpose of public access.

C. Certifying a Program for Access as a Way to Anticipate Indecent Programming

As previously noted, one of the powers an operator has over the access channel is deciding when to schedule a program. If operators know a program is offensive, they can schedule that program later at night to protect young viewers. Section 10 of the 1992 Cable Act authorized cable operators to require programmers to inform the operators if the shows produced would be indecent under Commission regulations.178 The FCC proposed that the information should come through a certification process for programming, where an operator could be warned if any of the access material fell under that which was proscribed under Section 10(c).179 While the FCC wanted the certification process to help enforce program prohibition, the certification process could also be an effective way for an operator to decide when to broadcast a certain program. The FCC notes that

177. See, e.g., ACLU Complains About Access Channel Limits, NEWS MEDIA & THE LAW, Fall 1990, at 34, 34. Peoria, Illinois was the site of the proposed regulations. The provisions were seen as a way to restrict white supremacist Tom Metzger in California from airing his program Race and Reason. Id.
179. 1992 Cable Act Second Report and Order, supra note 91, para. 25. The proscribed areas included indecency and unlawful conduct.
certification is a relatively easy process and that many operators already use such a mechanism.\textsuperscript{180}

Access users voiced concerns about the original proposal that certification would create an enormous amount of paperwork and might hinder programming. A simple form could be created, however, that could be filled out by the program promoter and satisfy the goals of informing the operator. If operators felt a program was obscene, they could then in good faith refuse to air the program. If a dispute existed, it would be one for the trier of fact under the \textit{Miller} test, instead of a solely subjective decision for the cable operator. Certification could effectively serve as a deterrent for obscenity. Indecent programs would not be prohibited, but only aired at a later time that corresponds with the show's content matter.

This certification would apply to live call-in access shows as well, a growing area of access programming. As the FCC proposed, the producer of a live show could use reasonable efforts to ensure against obscenity and measure the possibility for indecency.\textsuperscript{181} Users would then not be deterred from experimenting with call-in shows, strengthening the trend towards "interactive" television.

\section*{D. Disclaimers and Programming to Inform the Viewers of Objectionable Access Material}

Another tool that would help protect minors would be for operators to publicize their programs in a scheduled format, either through mailing guides to subscribers or through an electronic "calendar" between programs. Public access operators most likely would not have the benefit of knowing months ahead what shows would be submitted for airing. Requiring seven day advance notice from users, however, would not be unduly burdensome and would still provide a reasonable amount of time to make viewers aware of certain controversial programming. Compared to the alternative under the 1992 Cable Act—where liability can be imposed for improper pre-screening—the cost of such scheduling seems a small price to pay. As one access user put it, under the strict FCC content regulations an operator might "have to pay someone $10 an hour to pre-screen all that stuff."\textsuperscript{182}

With a scheduling guide an operator could also air a disclaimer before any access program, warning viewers of potential indecent or controversial subject matter. The only way operators would have knowledge about

\textsuperscript{180} Id. para. 26.  
\textsuperscript{181} Id.  
\textsuperscript{182} Duryea, supra note 85, at 1B.
program content would be through what they learned in the certification process, further emphasizing the importance of certification.

Successfully increasing viewer knowledge, then, ultimately rests on the honesty of the access user and effective use of the certification process. While nothing can be guaranteed, removing the operator’s “discretion” to prohibit indecent material would help both sides clarify what type of programming can be banned. A further safeguard might be to require access programmers to indemnify an operator for any liability incurred by the programmer’s failure to follow certification guidelines (provided the operators have not already been granted immunity). Cable operators would then be able to effectively use their scheduling authority to protect minors from indecent and controversial programming, while still allowing users the chance to be freely heard on public access.

E. Lockboxes

One of the key differences between cable and broadcast television is that cable subscribers have the means to block out or scramble a certain channel in their homes without affecting the availability of the channel to others. The most common type of blocking device is the lockbox. The box uses a type of numeric “key” to lock out a channel through the cable converter, which simply deletes that channel from the subscriber’s available system. The 1984 Cable Act promoted such a device as the least restrictive means by which to block a leased access channel. The Act also included an “income neutral” provision so that the lockbox was not used as a tool for financial discrimination. The court in ACLU v. FCC held that the lockbox provision was valid and ruled the FCC could not exclude a certain set of channels from being subject to a lock-out.

Attempts to place control of content in the hands of the FCC and cable operators have led to constitutional and practical problems. Lockboxes provide a means for restoring the power of choice to the viewer. The problem is that operators are not required to advertise the availability of a lockbox to the subscriber. Therefore, lockboxes have not been adequately used in practice. Cost provides another reason why lockboxes have not been widely used. The 1984 Cable Act stated that a subscriber needed to

purchase or lease the box from the operator.\textsuperscript{187} Perhaps in order to fully realize Congress’s goal of cable being an “income-neutral” service, lockboxes should be provided free of charge by the operator. If this came into effect, however, the lockbox cost would be indirectly borne by subscribers through an increase in basic rates, thereby raising potential objections from those who do not want to pay the cost for scrambling devices.

The better result would be to increase viewer awareness about the availability of a lockbox. Since the cable regulations provide no guideline about proper rates for lockboxes, the FCC should become more involved in setting a type of flat fee across the board. If Congress intended public access to provide a voice for the people, provided that voice does not include obscenity, lockboxes allow each viewer a choice without infringing on the rights of the speaker.

Comedian George Carlin said after the \textit{Pacifica} case: “On the radio there are two knobs. One turns it off; the other changes the station.”\textsuperscript{188} The court ultimately disagreed with Carlin’s solution to “regulating” indecent broadcasting. His underlying logic, however, provides the easiest solution to concerns about access. With a lockbox, a parent can be sure that a child will not tune in to a program that may be offensive in that particular household, an option currently unavailable with broadcast media. The job of “censorship,” then, can rest with the individual person or parent and not the government. The difficulty lies, however, in getting people to use their individual power. When Manhattan Cable offered and publicized free lockbox service for any of their 228,000 subscribers who wished to block Manhattan’s Channel J (now Channel V), only nineteen homes replied.\textsuperscript{189} Robin Byrd, who acknowledges her show is not for everyone, said, “If children watch [my program] it’s because parents aren’t doing their job.”\textsuperscript{190} Indifference should not be a factor in allowing stricter regulation of objectionable expression.

\textbf{F. Aggressive Counter-Programming}

Another way for viewers to effectively counter those shows considered controversial or indecent is to respond with a show that attacks these viewpoints. Kansas City ACLU Director Dick Kurtenbach notes, “The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{188} Corliss, supra note 115, at 72.
\item \textsuperscript{189} Id. at 73.
\item \textsuperscript{190} Id.
\end{itemize}
proper response to speech you don’t like is more speech.” People who find a certain program offensive, although not legally obscene, should solicit the franchising authority to allow them to present their message either before or after the objectionable program. TCI Cable of Westchester, New York, adopted this strategy with success by placing a show from the American Jewish Committee after an anti-Semitic program. Because an operator has the authority to decide when to air a program, this remedy avoids any constitutional concern about content prohibition.

There would be benefits to a cable operator actively soliciting community members to respond on public access. Indecent and hate shows may actually help tie a community together. Administrative Director Robert Purvis of the National Institute Against Prejudice and Violence stresses that “public access is potentially far more valuable in improving intergroup relations than it is in harming them.” Responding to these racist shows in particular might help viewers realize the hatred and prejudice inherent in the disputed message, “as the televised reports of [CBS news reporter] Edward R. Murrow finally did in the 50’s for the Communist-baiting Sen. Joseph McCarthy.” Martin Dyckman, a columnist in Florida, attempted to encourage people to use public access in his community to protest against anti-Semitic comments made on an access program, warning that “[s]ilence in the face of bigotry condones it.”

It would also be far more effective to create a vigorous debate over shows that may contain nudity and sexual content, but also have a social or artistic value. Getting on the “soapbox” to talk about these programs, rather than suppressing them, will only educate. This knowledge becomes even more important in society where problems like teenage pregnancy, AIDS, and racial tension exist.

CONCLUSION

Since its inception, public access has been the medium for those whose message cannot be heard elsewhere. With the expansion of cable television, Congress and the FCC have attempted to assure that public access has a place in the channel spectrum. The result has been struggles

192. Berger, supra note 6, at 34. The show at issue is It’s Time to Wake Up, hosted by Ta-Har. See supra text accompanying note 6.
193. Zoglin, supra note 5, at 63.
between operators, users, and viewers over what content can be prohibited. This puts a strain on user involvement and diminishes any positive operator incentive towards the use of access. Because of the difficulty the courts have had in defining a proper indecency standard for cable television, access content should only be prohibited if it violates the *Miller* standard of obscenity. Placing the choice in the hands of the operator threatens to severely limit the power of access, no matter how beneficial programs may be behind possible rough edges.

As cable finds itself facing a future of almost unlimited channel capacity, the diversity found on the small “voice” of public access needs to be protected. The rules promulgated by the FCC under the 1992 Cable Act threaten the expression that is essential to access by placing the tool of censorship in a single person. The best way to preserve a channel that provides a voice for the people is to give the control over what to watch and what is received in the home to an individual viewer. Only then will the marketplace of ideas be able to succeed.