

# civic media builds social capital: The Ethics of Government Access in the Marketplace of Ideas

*"Information is the currency of democracy."*  
— Thomas Jefferson

In the American ideal, open public discussion improves our society. By including the contributions of our brightest minds, the best solutions are found to build a better community. Civic media, including broadcast and cable TV, print and online media, are those media utilized to engage citizens in decisions by their governments.

Local news is the most prevalent form of civic media, but there are many more. From the obvious political advertisement for a candidate or ballot measure to the most obscure morning show guest appearance by an industry or special interest lobbyist, civic media play a critical role to inform or misinform citizens.

Commercial media outlets dominate the marketplace of ideas, but government access media holds a very special niche. Understanding and appreciating the context of government access in the larger media sphere, local programmers can build support and extend the value of program offerings. By developing your relationship with the news media, the fourth



**BY SEAN McLAUGHLIN**

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# Civic Media

estate can help you to brand your access services as important public resources that are necessarily independent of traditional political subversion, like patronage or partisan leverage.

The common ethical foundations of government access and news media are fundamental. But to support a healthy and diverse marketplace of ideas, it is also essential to understand the principled functional differences between access and news. News media are imbued with “gatekeeper” principles and embedded with private commercial interests that introduce distinct legal and ethical liabilities. Access media is a public service with a different set of liabilities; our job is to keep the gate open so every citizen has a voice that can be heard. From the perspective of news media, access media can be more like gatecrashers!

So remember the first rule: know thyself. By understanding the principles and ethics of government access media, local programmers can actively position their services to maximize opportunities and limit friction with other media players and with core constituencies, like elected officials and citizens.

## ■ Who's the Boss?

While the electoral process of American style democracy places elected officials at the top of our legislative and executive agencies, these elected officials in turn appoint officials who manage government on the public's behalf. Government access managers may or may not be civil service employees, but the policy makers who set the agenda ultimately answer to citizens and voters. Don't forget this basic axiom or your government access media operation will be subject to the fickle, politically-charged judgments of the day. In the convoluted worlds of media and politics, the mere perception that government access TV services are subservient to political or private interests rather than public interests can cripple the support base on which your operation ultimately depends.

Remember and promote the idea that effective self-governance requires “sunshine” provisions such as open records and free access to public information. That's why the primary service of government access is providing access for the public to the local government. Access for government agencies to reach the public must be secondary. The dynamic tension of these competing imperatives will keep life interesting for government access media managers.

At the core of government access media services is the public's expectation of freedom of information and transparency of public agencies. Your function as a reliable public record is the bedrock principle of government access media. Official public deliberations are expected to be recorded and transmitted freely, without censorship. This is clearly a distinct role from that of the news media, whose duty as gatekeepers is to edit and compose reports to ensure balanced and fair coverage.

Ethical and reliable documentation and unedited recording of open public deliberations are the keys for creating a public record and making local government

accountable to the citizens. Editorial policies of government access coverage – unedited, uncensored and unbiased are absolutely essential qualities for clean transparent access.

## ■ Common Ground

Consider the similarities of your ethical principles as a government access manager with two key organizations representing news media producers and managers – Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ <http://spj.org>, and Radio & Television News Directors Association (RTNDA <http://rtnda.org>). Headings from their ethical codes are listed below.

### Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct Radio-Television News Directors Association

<http://rtnda.org/ethics/coe.shtml>

Public Trust  
Truth  
Fairness  
Integrity  
Independence  
Accountability

### SPJ Code of Ethics

[http://www.spj.org/ethics\\_code.asp](http://www.spj.org/ethics_code.asp)

Seek Truth and Report It  
Minimize Harm  
Act Independently  
Be Accountable

Make sure you understand the ethical similarities and differences between government access and news media. For example, a journalist has a responsibility to place primary value on significance and relevance. Conversely, a government access provider has a primary duty to place equal value on issues without pre-judging the relevance to viewers.

The common civic media role of informing public participation in our self-governance is solid ground to establish positive working relations with news media. But if we stray too far from this fundamental purpose, access media efforts can become exposed and vulnerable to the slings and arrows of partisan politics. So keep in mind the documentarian's perspective of the dispassionate observer — remaining neutral and disengaged from issues of the day.

The first step to build a positive relationship with news media is to make your programming as readily accessible as possible. Remember that most news media are under strict deadlines – be efficient and professional. An example could be as simple as maintaining video/audio distribution points at the meeting site, providing a ‘clean feed’ without graphics or making timely dubs on formats they prefer. By offering your program feeds in real time, news media will see your service as a reliable source of useful content. If you take this step properly, every news outlet in your town will have TV monitors dedicated to your programming.

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### ■ Practical Examples Exist

The principled bias of government access programs to support direct citizen participation can also get you in trouble, so pay attention. To accomplish the larger mission, simple non-discriminatory policies need to be supplemented with proactive outreach that enables and empowers voices of the public – particularly those voices without resources of their own.

Government access programs serving this purpose can sometimes take a form very similar to news coverage. Ethical issues that are familiar to news media can arise. For example, when government access managers are involved with selection criteria for meetings to be covered, creation of ‘executive summary’ programs with edited segments of meetings or production of stories informing viewers on how to participate or access the proceedings of government.

One example is a project called “Open City TV” that was launched in Honolulu in the early 1990s. The Honolulu City Council, utilizing production resources of the city, supported the project. Editorial oversight was shared with University of Hawaii faculty and students in the Journalism Department. “Open City TV” produced weekly 30-minute summaries of the City Council’s deliberations. In addition to reports using meeting clips, voice overs and additional footage from City departments, many segments were produced in cooperation with the Clerk’s Office and the Office of Council Services to help citizens participate – explaining the process and public information resources available in the city and county government.

University faculty and students met each week to review coverage assignments, and script meetings were convened to ensure that program content was accurate and balanced. Because of this editorial design, “Open City TV” was able to withstand political pressure and attempts by elected officials to interfere in the editorial judgments of the program. The editorial mission of “Open City TV” was timely accurate information to support public participation in City Council proceedings. Although the program was discontinued when resources were redirected to captioning services, the project was a resounding success. Today most of the students who were involved are working in local news media!

Government access programs can also provide a

fantastic resource of ‘public domain’ footage for use by independent producers who are developing their own civic media projects. Local documentaries and public affairs programs that utilize government access coverage are creating a mutual benefit by extending the usefulness of the access programs and further informing the marketplace of ideas.

Another example of a collaborative working relationship with local news media: Tasked with providing coverage for county boards and commissions without the resources to cover them all, we were challenged to make an editorial determination of which two or three meetings to cover of the more than 20 meetings occurring each month. This can be particularly difficult when board or commission members have political aspirations of their own, or when pending issues are particularly controversial. Different interests will encourage or discourage coverage of certain meetings.

Our solution for Maui County is an independent Media Advisory Group (MAG) composed of local news editors representing diverse perspectives. University of Hawaii journalism professor Gerald Kato (the same co-creator of Open City TV) chairs the Group. At the outset, MAG helped to draft the selection and editorial guidelines. Perhaps more importantly they are now in place to review any complaints or questions raised about a particular day-to-day editorial judgment. During our last election cycle, this proved to be a critical support structure.

### ■ Civic Media Builds Social Capital

Government access and news media are essential components of a free and healthy marketplace of ideas. Each uncensored voice is making a unique and valuable contribution to public discourse. Civic media provide that every voice has a right to be heard, and every person has a right to access public information. In this way, informed citizens make individual contributions, offering their vision to the collective society. By cultivating the strengths of government access and developing positive working relationships with other local media, your operation can elevate and enrich democracy in your community.

To restate Jefferson’s concept, we might say, “Civic media is minting new currency for the marketplace of ideas.” ■