

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

FCC Consumer Facts

Background

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

What Is "Signal Bleed?"

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

How Does Section 504 Address a Signal Bleed Problem?

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

How Does Section 504 Address a Signal Bleed Problem? (cont'd.)

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

Other Mechanisms Available to Block Programming or Channels

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

(More)



Other Mechanisms Available to Block Programming or Channels (cont'd.)

- **Lockbox** - A "lockbox" is a device that a subscriber may lease or purchase from the cable company or from a retail store. By using a lockbox, you can literally lock specific channels so that the programming cannot be viewed.
- **V-chip** - Federal law now requires that most programming available on television be rated to alert viewers if the program contains violence, inappropriate language, or other material that you may find offensive. A V-chip is the circuitry in a television that is capable of identifying these ratings and blocking the programming that you find inappropriate. As of January 1, 2000, all 13-inch or larger screen televisions that are manufactured or imported for use in the United States are required by law to be equipped with the V-chip. If you have an older model television, you may purchase a V-chip and attach it to the television. The V-chip may be used to block individual programs or it may be used to block one or more channels entirely.

Filing a Complaint

If you are experiencing signal bleed, first try to resolve it with your cable service provider. If you are unable to resolve the issue, you can file a complaint with the FCC. There is no charge for filing a complaint. You can file your complaint using our online complaint form found at www.fcc.gov/complaints. You can also file your complaint with the FCC's Consumer Center by calling 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice or 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY; faxing 1-866-418-0232; or writing to:

Filing a Complaint (cont'd.)

Federal Communications Commission
Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

What to Include in Your Complaint

The best way to provide all the information the FCC needs to process your complaint is to thoroughly complete the online complaint form in full. When you open the online complaint form, you will be asked a series of questions that will take you to the particular section of the form you need to complete. If you do not use the online complaint form, complaint should include the following:

- your name, address, email address and phone number where you can be reached;
- name, phone number, city and state of the company that you are complaining about;
- network, program name and date and time of program if you are complaining about a particular program; and
- any additional details of your complaint, including time, date and nature of the conduct or activity you are complaining about and identifying information for any companies, organizations or individuals involved.

For More Information

For information about other communications issues, visit the FCC's Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau website at www.fcc.gov/consumer-governmental-affairs-bureau, or contact the FCC's Consumer Center using the information provided for filing a complaint.



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