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BODY:

Comcast's recent decision to shut down its Flint public access TV studio and close its local access programming department on Dec. 14 may be good for business, but it's bad for us.

Why? Because it makes the access a little harder for the public, and is likely to silence some of the colorful, original and sometimes odd voices that fill the air waves seven days a week on the cable company's public access Channel 17.

It also kills the Community Calendar where local groups could have listed their events for Comcast's more than 90,000 Genesee County subscribers.

Comcast claims it's not killing public access - though skeptics are wary - just streamlining it. The company plans to have producers on some of its systems in the Detroit and Flint areas submit show tapes and DVDs to a programming office in Southfield.

The programs will air on the channel just like usual.

So what's the problem?

By closing the station's smallish studio, it is forcing producers and hosts like Bob Leonard, Therese Leyton and others to find new places to tape their shows.

Some, like longtimer Paul Herring, have studios and equipment, but many of the producers do not.

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If they don't have access (there's that word again), maybe they'll just give up. And you can't help but wonder if that's the goal.

Herring told me earlier this week that he believes Comcast wants to turn its unprofitable access channels, once mandated by law, into revenue generators by replacing them with commercial programming.

That remains to be seen. Comcast's Derek Knight, its Michigan programming director, said in a Nov. 5 letter to producers that it will "provide more information about the options for alternate studio locations in the area."

Let's hope so.

Public access is a public trust, something that highly profitable cable companies like Comcast should preserve whether they want to or not. It used to be mandated by law. But this year's so-called "net neutrality" bill, which provided cable provisions backed by major companies like AT&T, changed the rules and let companies like Comcast off the social responsibility hook.

Look, cable access programming isn't the best TV. It's usually low-quality, amateurish and often unwatchable. At its worst, it's like bad community theater.

But that's not the point. At its best, it provides an outlet for local voices and alternative points of view that usually can't get messages out on mainstream broadcast media.

Could you imagine cranky former Genesee County Prosecutor Bob Leonard ranting and raving about Don Williamson on a commercial TV station that sells ads to the Don's wife's car dealership? Neither can I.

"People who are not normally allowed easy access to the mass media find a powerful resource for local expression through public access."

Who said that? Comcast, on its www.accesschannel.com site. Hear's hoping they mean it.

Not So Miz-erable: Local Internet radio station Miz Radio (www.streetlevel.biz) offers a mix of local shows, featuring hip-hop DJs Jack Frost, Boosto and Isaac Lowe, and national ones that highlight aspects of hip-hop music and culture. One of the newer ones, "Hyphydrinalen Rush," was created by Miz Radio czar Eric Thomas and its San Francisco Bay Area host DJ D LO. It explores the sounds of Northern California's hip-hop culture. D LO will have a special guest on today's two-hour show at 3 p.m. - model, cyber-pinup girl Bambi Lashel.

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