

Free Local TV - No Antenna, No Cable, No Problem

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What is Locast? And is it Legal?

Locast was actually inspired by a major cable TV company. In 2010, while locked in a contract dispute with Fox that led to a blackout of the World Series in New York, Cablevision called for a government or nonprofit entity to re-transmit the over-the-air broadcast of the Series to Internet users. U.S. copyright laws allows such entities to re-transmit broadcast signals without the producers' permission, Cablevision claimed. Attorney and sports fan David Goodfriend accepted that challenge, creating Locast as a nonprofit organization.

[Locast takes broadcast TV signals from the air and converts them to streamable Internet content.](#) A subscriber can stream content to their computer, TV, Roku, smartphone, or other device, enabling them to watch favorite shows anywhere or record them for later viewing. Yes, that means you can watch The Price is Right, Judge Judy, or local news broadcasts, even if you don't have an antenna on the roof, or cable TV service.

Copyright law restricts nonprofit re-transmissions to local markets in which a nonprofit's antenna receives broadcast signals. So unlike Aereo, Locast sets up physical facilities in each market it chooses to serve. Since launching in New York City in January, 2018, Locast has expanded to Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Rapid City, San Francisco, Seattle, Sioux City, Sioux Falls, and Washington DC. Those markets include 36% of U.S. TV households, or about 42 million people.



Apparently I'm in that 36% since I'm within an hour's drive from New York City. I created a free account on Locast and was greeted with a "Live TV Guide" menu showing all the local channels, and what will be playing for the next 7 days. The format of the listings is quite similar to what you'd find in a local paper. I was able to stream content from 18 local channels, including WCBS, WNBC, WABC, WWOR, and WPIX. Locast uses "geo-fencing technology" to make sure that if you are within the local market boundary.

So who is likely to use a service like Locast? **Locast can be a boon for viewers who have poor over-the-air signal reception.** Many city dwellers cannot receive local TV broadcast signals, because tall buildings can make it difficult to receive an over-the-air signal in an apartment or condo.

Cordcutters who want to end high cable TV bills may also find Locast attractive. Locast would provide an option to watch local channels that were lost when cancelling cable service. Frequent travelers who don't want to miss favorite local shows are others who might want Locast.

You can view local channels via Locast on your computer, smartphone, or your living room TV with a Roku or Apple TV streaming box. So far, Locast has signed up over 1 million users, says the company. That's without spending a dime on marketing yet. Funding has come from Goodfriend and donations thus far.

When you start a new show, there's a brief pitch for a \$5/month donation to support the Locast service. That's optional, but eventually, Locast may have to charge a subscription fee. It can do so legally as long as fees do not exceed the costs of providing service. Another potential revenue stream is selling viewer demographics and viewing data to broadcasters. Goodfriend is also seeking corporate sponsorships, and is courting Samsung to include Locast in smart TVs.

Goodfriend seems driven to prove the legality of Locast's business model, not to carry it to economic success. He's hoping that other nonprofits will provide services like Locast to their local communities. "It could be any nonprofit. It could be a church, local government, a university..." he told the New York Times. Perhaps they will, if Locast can demonstrate how to do it legally at low cost.

In 1976, the U.S. Congress passed a law making it illegal to retransmit a local broadcast signal without a copyright license. But Congress made an exception. According to Locast, "Any non-profit organization could make a secondary transmission of a local broadcast signal, provided the non-profit did not receive any 'direct or indirect commercial advantage' and either offered the signal for free or for a fee 'necessary to defray the actual and reasonable costs' of providing the service."

Locast is interesting from a legal standpoint. It's not clear if they will survive the inevitable legal challenges, or how many people stand to benefit from it. In July 2019, major broadcasters including ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC filed a lawsuit asking the court to shut down Locast. Locast then filed a countersuit. You can read more about the legal issues in this [NY Times article](#).

Cordcutting is not as simple as canceling cable service and signing up for another service. But locast is one more tool that cordcutters and urban dwellers can use to roll their own video viewing packages.