

# Cablefax Daily™

Monday — February 22, 2016

What the Industry Reads First

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## 5 Questions: Linda Cohn Celebrates 5,000th ESPN SportsCenter

“SportsCenter” anchor Linda Cohn will celebrate her 5,000th episode this Sun, Feb 21 at 8am on ESPN. She’s hosted more shows than anyone in the program’s 36-year history. We spoke to her about this impressive milestone, how the broadcasting business has evolved and her best advice for aspiring, young female sports anchors. **How does it feel to celebrate your 5,000th episode?** Whatever job one does, you show up. You try to be the best you can each and every day. So when I heard that number I was like, ‘oh wow, that is a lot!’ But with a journey, you’re never counting that. For me personally, I’m always doing something I just love. And it’s especially nice to know that a woman has done the most SportsCenters—in a male-dominated profession. **You wrote a book in 2008, Cohn-Head: A No-Holds-Barred Account of Breaking Into the Boys’ Club. What helped you break in?** One avenue of the book was about how I used playing hockey with the boys as a way to prepare me—the best way anyone could be prepared to deal with criticism, to deal with people who did not accept you because it wasn’t the norm at the time. In high school I became a back-up goalie [for the boys]. I was significant; I could win or lose a game. People looked to me to be a difference maker, whereas in real life that wasn’t the case at all. It was really good to have those ups and downs—and sports gave that to me. **ESPN has changed over the years, certainly from a technology standpoint. What stands out for you as having the greatest effect on your career?** Plenty stands out. But I like to share this story. Back in the ‘90s, before the latest news was at the bottom of the TV screen, [ESPN] arranged a talent meeting with the bosses. We were told, we know you anchors write your own stuff, but while people are looking at you on camera... we’re going to show at the bottom of the screen who already won the game you’re talking about. I cannot tell you how much outrage there was in this meeting from us anchors. And as it turns out, of course, we are lost without that. We think something’s wrong with the TV or the particular network if there’s no bottom line at the bottom of the screen. That’s one of many things in sports broadcasting that has taken place, but now we welcome and cannot live without. **As you know, a lot of young people are not getting cable subscriptions today. So how can networks like ESPN stay relevant to those cutting the cord?** It’s a big challenge, no question. You get anything you want at any time, on any tablet or phone. The thing is this: What made SportsCenter so successful back in the day was that there was an emotional connection. After 23+ years,

### FEATURED SESSION:

#### When Content Attacks: No Structure, No Distribution... No Problem

The onslaught of OTT has gone beyond pioneers like TheBlaze and WWV—and now it’s part of the mainstream, with established players ranging from HBO to Showtime to ESPN offering OTT options to consumers. But while it’s an exciting time, programmers still depend on license fees even as they dip their toes in the OTT waters.

**In this session, we’ll ask:**

- Where we go from here?
- What’s the end game and the monetization strategy in a world in which bundles are disintegrating before our eyes?
- How can the best marketing and content strategy teams leverage consumer OTT trends to grow the overall business.

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**Cablefax**  
**Multiscreen Summit**  
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I get into the situation where people say, "I grew up watching you." And I take it as a compliment. And ESPN made it easy for SportsCenter to be on other things—like WatchESPN. **Any advice for young women getting into the business today?** That's really important to me. I've been trying to mentor a lot of young women and help them along in their journey—times have changed. But the number one thing I always tell them is to be resilient. Don't give up, block out the noise, don't let people discourage you from the task at hand. You never want to look back and say you didn't work hard. Exhaust every avenue that you can.

**Verizon's New Skinny Offer:** Verizon FiOS, which launched its ESPN-less Custom TV skinny bundle last year, updated the offering with 2 packages: One with sports nets (including ESPN) and one without. ESPN sued Verizon over breach of contract last year after the telco's initial Custom TV launch. Verizon's Custom TV-Essentials package includes 75 channels such as **CNN, FX, Disney Channel, Discovery Channel, Nick, Bravo** and **Fox News**. The new Custom TV-Sports & More package includes all the regional sports channels in the sub's service area, as well as 55 channels such as ESPN, **ESPN2, Fox Sports 1, NFL Network** and non-sports nets like **Cartoon Network, Syfy** and **TNT**. Both packages start at \$55 a month. Subs have the option to add up to 3 additional genre-based add-on packs for \$6 each, including the Movie Lovers Pack, Kids Teens & Family Pack and the Global Sports Pack. The new packages are set to launch Sun.

**Sling Adds ABC:** DISH's Sling TV, which offers a package of 21 basic channels (including ESPN) for \$20 a month, added ABC as part of a new "Broadcast Extra" add-on bundle that costs \$5 a month. The Broadcast Extra tier, which also includes **Univision**, is only available for Sling TV subs in areas including Chicago, Fresno-Visalia, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Raleigh-Durham, and San Francisco.

**Cox Flare Update:** Cox is shutting down all Flare digital services starting next week and is notifying customers. All Flare services will be turned down by mid-May, a spokesman said. The MSO tested several digital services with the Flare platform, including myFlare for storage, FlarePlay for gaming, and FlareKids for web videos. While the platform drew more than 300K users, Cox was unable to monetize the platform effectively, the spokesman said. The company will continue to explore new services, particularly the ones leveraging its broadband platform, he said. For Flare gaming, Cox is giving customers a full refund for the game controllers they had to purchase. It's also providing pre-paid envelopes to them to be disposed of in an environmentally friendly way, as they will not work with other platforms.

**Closed Captioning:** The FCC on Fri released its new closed captioning rules, which continue to place primary responsibility on video programming distributors, including cable operators. The rules also state that before a distributor passes a complaint on to programmers, it must certify that it has exercised due diligence to determine that it's not responsible for the captioning issue. However, the order amends the rules to extend some responsibility for ensuring closed captioning quality to video programmers. The order also holds programmers responsible for a lack of captions when they fail to provide captions on non-exempt programs. The order revised the captioning complaint procedures to reflect the shared responsibilities of both distributors and programmers. The Commission also established a "compliance ladder" to encourage companies to resolve reported problems through "corrective actions that make enforcement action by the Commission unnecessary."

**Raycom Media Retrans Deal:** Raycom Media said it renewed retrans agreements with 12 cable ops at the end of 2015. The renewed contracts represent more than 2.3mln subs in 30+ markets nationwide, the broadcaster said.

**RCN Goes HBO:** RCN launched the HBO Go app through its TiVo set-top box in Chicago, NY, Boston, DC, Philly and the Lehigh Valley, PA. The streaming service from HBO is now available to RCN subs with a HBO subscription.

**Programming:** EPIX acquired *Katie Couric* doc "Under the Gun," a Sundance Film Festive official selection that examines gun violence. The feature-length doc will debut May 14 as part of an EPIX free preview weekend. EPIX is pairing it with a social marketing campaign that includes a grassroots program to mobile affinity groups across the country at local screenings and town hall events. -- **FYI** set March 15 as the premiere for docuseries "Bride & Prejudice," which features couples who want to get married, but family members don't approve.

**Business/Finance:** Scripps Nets Interactive increased the company's quarterly dividend rate and declared a dividend of 25 cents/share, up from 23 cents. It's payable on March 10 to shareholders of record at the close of business Feb 29.



**SPECIAL REPORT: Black History Month**

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## Black History Month on Cable: From the Past to Today

When it comes to Black History Month, the first images that come to mind are often from the Civil Rights Movement, particularly the period of the 1960s. This, of course, makes sense given the era's rich story—from *Martin Luther King, Jr.* to *Rosa Parks* to the Selma marches—but this year's Black History Month programming is using a wider lens to examine important people and events in the history of American blacks.

**WGN America** is opening the history book to African Americans' earliest chapters in the US with "Underground," a scripted drama that follows the plight of plantation slaves plotting their 600-mile escape from Georgia. While the series, executive produced by musician *John Legend*, doesn't premiere until March 9, WGN America has used Black History



**Underground:** Aldis Hodge as Noah and Jurnee Smollett-Bell as Rosalee in WGN America's 'Underground.' Both participated in a screening and discussion this month at the DuSable Museum of African American History.





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TV One's 'Change Agents: History in the Making': A look at the short film "Off Broadway: Frenchie Davis" by Jeanine Daniels (Courtesy: TV One)

Month to spark interest in the story of the revolutionaries of the Underground Railroad. In addition to airing first-looks throughout February, star *Jurnee Smollett-Bell* participated in **Macy's** Black History Month celebrations by leading a panel discussion in various cities with a host of emerging stars. At each of the Macy's Black History Month events, store customers receive exclusive Underground items and get a sneak peek at the series. WGN America also hosted a special screening with the cast in Chicago on Feb 9 at The DuSable Museum of African American History, as well as screenings at Historically Black Colleges and Universities across the US.

"Underground captures all the qualities we look for in a show—thrilling

storytelling, an emotional narrative, a unique world on the television landscape and relevance to America today," said *Matt Cherniss*, president and general manager, WGN America and **Tribune Studios**.

"When we came together to create Underground we had one mandate, and that was to be bold," said creator/executive producer *Misha Green*. "We wanted to be emotionally bold in our storytelling. 1857 was a desperate and dangerous time in America, and it bred desperate and dangerous people... We wanted to be visually bold in our look and feel. Antebellum South is often portrayed as a painting hanging on a wall, and our director *Anthony Hemingway* helped us rip that painting down, and live in it..."

Creator/executive producer *Joe Pokaski* added, "We wanted to be musically bold to connect the past to the present. Our fellow executive producer John Legend has infused the old and the new, using contemporary music, with all its bass and synth to drive our soundtrack, as well as traditional work songs, and period specific music to add cultural context."

With **TV One** being the exclusive home of the **NAACP** Image Awards, February is always a special month. So much so that the network chose it to introduce a new brand promise to viewers. During the Image Awards on Feb 5, it rolled out "Represent" in its tagline and logo to show that it will "represent the best of black culture and entertainment—past, present and future." In keeping with that theme, it's recognizing Black History Month with "Change Agents: History in the Making," a series of short films that focus on current day achievers and change agents from college campuses, the community, corporate America, government, technology and beyond.

"We were starting to go down that same track of looking back, [asking] what should we do for Black History Month, and then we said, 'Wait a second. Why are we always looking back?'" said TV One president *Brad Siegel*. "Every network is always looking back and looking at



history as something that happened in the past. Let's defy expectations and look at history in the making. We're in the midst of the biggest Civil Rights movement since Martin Luther King's Civil Rights movement."

Change Agents films premiere every weeknight on TV One in February, with encores every weekend and a longer version posted at TVOne.tv. Those profiled include *Tyree Guyton*, whose art has brought attention to the East Side of Detroit, a neighborhood largely abandoned after the 1967 riots (film by *Alton Glass*). Another film looks at the African American-owned talent agency, **Gil Hayes Talent** (film by *Che Rhymefest*). "We paid and funded these five filmmakers to make these short films. They have important voices, and we gave them an opportunity to elevate their voice and also the voices of the subjects they chose," Siegel said. "That's one way that one of our values and principles got manifested in Black History Month. Another [value] is taking risks... I think doing history in the making and taking risks on young, new filmmakers who have something to say is another example of that."

**BET** is honoring history in the making with "New Black History," a digital effort that gives a nod to events from the past 30 years, including *Barack Obama* becoming the first African American president and *Rihanna* becoming the first black female ambassador for **Dior**. Web series "Send Me" is about a woman (*Tracie Thoms*) who has the power to send black people back to the days of slavery. Her husband is determined to stop her even though there are people who want to go. Linear networks **BET** and **Centric** will air the "American Black Film Festival Awards: A Celebration of Hollywood," which celebrate black culture and recognize individuals, movies and TV shows that had a significant impact on American entertainment (Feb 23) and the basic cable premiere of "Twelve Years a Slave" (Feb 27).



**WE tv's PSAs: Rep. John Lewis (D-GA) talks about how Martin Luther King, Jr gave him hope in WE tv's Black History spots.**

**WE tv** has taken a different approach to Black History Month, creating a series of PSAs on the network and online with Members of Congress sharing stories and perspectives about the importance of the month. Congressman *Danny Davis* (D-IL) talks about young people making history today as they advocate for change, while Congresswoman *Karen Bass* (D-CA) reflects on how *Harriet Tubman* can be an inspiration to a new generation.

Other than a brief flash of the words "WE tv Salutes Black History Month," there is nothing about the spots that makes you think of the network. "That was really part of the strategy," said WE tv svp, marketing *Rosie Pisani*. "This is the 2nd year we're doing Black History Month PSAs with elected officials. Prior to that, we had used our talent, which was wonderful. However, from a positioning standpoint, I felt like nobody had owned Black History Month and there was a benefit in us not having it self-serving. We're the number one destination for African American women most nights of the year. That means they understand our commitment to providing programming, and this was really an effort outside programming."

With college hoops and the **NBA** in full swing, you might forgive **ESPN** for

not creating content specifically for Black History Month. But it's an important tradition at the sports network. "We've been celebrating the month since 1999. The ultimate reason why we do it is we recognize that our fans are very diverse, and we want to celebrate and honor that diversity through our coverage," explained *Ashley O'Connor*, ESPN's senior manager of programming & acquisitions.

The centerpiece of ESPN's Black History Month programming was an hour-long "SportsCenter" special titled "Rise Up" (debuted Feb 14). It featured four segments with prominent African Americans discussing events in the news cycle that impacted their lives—including Chicago Bulls' *Taj Gibson* on losing four friends to gun violence in the last four years to former tennis pro *James Blake*'s tackle and arrest outside a NYC hotel and his commitment to help stop profiling. "A couple years ago, we did a special focused on the 'n-word.' We definitely have no problem going to the current issues that need to be discussed and people want to hear about," O'Connor said. "It's obviously called Black History Month. We want to honor the people who have gotten us where we are, but we also want to let people know it's still something that we want to be focused on into the future."