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What the Industry Reads First

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All Opposed: Cable, Other Media Entities Speak Out Against Sinclair Merger

Trade associations representing cable companies, edge providers and other entities across the media landscape set aside their differences on net neutrality Monday to stand together against **Sinclair Broadcast Group's** pending merger with **Tribune Media**. A coalition of opponents to the deal made it clear during a press briefing that there is no room for compromise when it comes to this game-changing transaction. "We're not looking to impose conditions," said **ACA** pres/CEO *Matt Polka*. "The scope of this merger warrants denial simply by the fact that it breaks the law and harms the public interest." Joining Polka on the call, and in filing comments to the **FCC** in opposition, were **One American News Network**, the **Computer and Communications Industry Association**, **Competitive Carriers Association** and former FCC commish *Michael Copps* on behalf of **Common Cause**. **DISH**, which was not represented on the call, also filed a nearly 200-page petition to deny Monday. Copps, a Democrat who has also been a vocal critic of the FCC's plans to roll back Title II, said, "This proposed Sinclair acquisition of Tribune is a particularly sad chapter in a decades-long dark story of the evisceration of TV journalism, local community news and, at its heart, it's all about the ascendancy of media giants who have and are inflicting perhaps irreparable damage on our democracy." He accused Sinclair of imposing its conservative agenda on its nets' editorial coverage, and named that as a key concern. One American pres *Charles Herring*, whose independent cable net also has a conservative bent, worries that Sinclair following the merger could use its leverage to force MVPDs to carry its nets at higher rates. He pointed to Sinclair-owned **Tennis Channel** as an example of this already occurring. "They're able to ask for excessive rates currently for their broadcast services. This raises prices for the consumer and, more importantly, it consumes programming budgets, preventing independent sources of programming from being able to complete deals with the major MVPDs." **Competitive Carriers Association** svp, legislative affairs *Tim Donovan* noted Sinclair following the merger would control more than 200 stations that would be part of spectrum repacking, a process he said Sinclair has sought to impede. "Delays that could result from this transaction, intentionally or otherwise, go directly against current law," he said. "Because of daisy chain issues, delays from Sinclair-owned stations could throw the entire repack schedule off the rails." **DISH** in its filing cited post-merger Sinclair's unprecedented size, higher prices for consumers, harms to localization and violations of FCC rules as grounds for denial.

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NAMIC Adding Two Chapters: NAMIC is set to announce the launch of two new chapters in Virginia and Detroit. The addition comes as membership continues to grow, with more than 3,500 professionals utilizing its 18 chapters. The presidents of the Detroit and Virginia chapters will be **Comcast** vp, human resources *Mikel Slater* and **Cox Communications** vp, human resources, Virginia region, *Vonya Alleyne*, respectively. See Cablefax.com for more on the new chapters.

Comcast to Offer Ad-Free FX Service: Comcast customers will be able to watch current-season episodes of **FX** and **FXX** originals on demand and without commercials for a monthly fee. **FX+**, which will launch on Xfinity systems in September, costs \$5.99/month and also includes past seasons of current and former FX series. The FX-Comcast partnership follows a similar deal between the cable provider and AMC Networks last month that launched **AMC Premiere** on Xfinity systems for \$4.99/month. The network group plans to introduce a temporary download function that will allow subscribers to watch episodes on the go without an Internet connection, as well as select series in 4K.

CBS Reaches Deal with DirecTV Now: AT&T and **CBS** have reached a deal that will see virtual MVPD service **DirecTV Now** carry the CBS broadcast net, along with **The CW**, **Pop** and **CBS Sports Network**. **Showtime** will also be available for an additional \$8/month. Local CBS affiliates will initially be available in 14 markets, including the US' six largest. **Sling TV** is now the only major vMVPD without CBS broadcast nets, while The CW is not on **PlayStation Vue** or Sling. The addition of CBS is particularly critical with football season approaching, as the broadcast net has rights to **NFL** and **SEC** games. DirecTV Now also plans to launch at least 30 additional **Fox**, **NBC** and **ABC** affiliates in the coming weeks, bringing the service's total to 170 live broadcast nets across 80 metro areas.

Mediacom Lineup Changes: Mediacom added motorsports net **MAVTV** and news net **i24 News** to its channel lineup. I24 will be available on Family TV, Mediacom's most widely distributed tier, in most areas, while MAVTV will be part of the additional Sports & Information pack. The operator also moved **Fox Business** and **Viceland** to Family TV from optional channel tiers.

Fight for Free: **DISH** is offering the \$100 PPV telecast of the upcoming *Floyd Mayweather-Conor McGregor* fight to customers at no cost when they refer a friend. The referred friend can also have the price tag for the fight waived.

City Lights: The **Cable Center** will hold the 2018 Cable Hall of Fame celebration in New York, the first time the event heads to the Big Apple. Next year's ceremony is scheduled for April 4 at the Ziegfeld Ballroom. The venue will be the home of the annual event through at least 2020. The celebration in recent years had moved annually. The Cable Center will announce members of the 2018 Cable HOF class in early October. The organization is looking for an afterparty sponsor.

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Fox Sports Breaking New Ground with VR Push

Fox Sports takes plenty of flak—some of it fair—for giving a platform to loudmouth hot-take artists. Rarely, however, does the net get any credit for its commitment to innovation. The net for years has been one of the most enthusiastic adopters of live virtual reality, particularly among sports outlets, most of whom have only dabbled in the medium. Fox Sports' most recent offering around last month's **CONCACAF** Gold Cup soccer tournament showed how far the net has come and what the future could look like.

After working primarily with **NextVR** on its VR streams for several years, Fox Sports recently partnered with **Liveline** to create a social VR experience. Traditionally, VR has been an individual experience, particularly when users strap on a headset. Fox Sports and Liveline sought to let viewers of the Gold Cup watch together online and interact with one another.

The end result was a first for sports VR. Users have the perception they are watching the game from a virtual stadium suite. Look straight ahead and you see the match unfolding on the pitch below. Look left, right or behind you, and you're in a plush skybox with your friends that has interactive graphics. Each user has an avatar and can speak with one another while watching the game.

Fox Sports svp, technical and field operations *Michael Davies* said the watching with friends taps into the tribal nature of sports fandom. He is particularly excited about the potential to reunite college buddies virtually during NCAA football games in VR this season.

In addition to breaking new ground with the social component, Fox took a big step in terms of sponsor integration and monetization of VR. The virtual suite environment was decked out with **Buffalo Wild Wings** branding and, more notably, users who looked at the plate of

virtual chicken wings in front of them were prompted to place a delivery order for real ones.

"Until right now, the promise of VR for sponsors has been sort of theoretical," Davies said. "They'd say, 'Wow it would be great if you could do this or you could do that or whatever,' but now we're actually starting to do it. We can check the click-throughs or how many people are playing around with the brand offerings."

E-commerce functionality like ordering wings currently requires headset users to take off their devices to enter payment information. Should a sponsor express an interest in investing more, Davies envisions developing a more seamless experience.

"What will happen in the future, when it makes sense, is that it will just take you to another virtual room that will be a representation of the website," he said. "So, all of that is theoretically possible if it makes sense to put that kind of work in for the numbers that you're going to get."

Davies acknowledges that Fox Sports has barely scratched the surface in terms of exploring VR's capabilities for delivering live sporting events. Since most users still access the experiences via smartphone or tablet, the net is currently forgoing offerings for high-priced VR headsets in favor of ones that allow for maximum reach.

Still, the biggest step for Fox Sports will be offering a regular slate of events in VR. The net currently only bothers with VR for occasional tentpole events, but Davies hopes to roll out a regular schedule of games as soon as this college football season.

"We need partners to help us out with this and whatnot, but we think that being a little bit more predictable in terms of what we do is going to be a big key to driving the popularity," he said.

VR isn't yet conducive for watching a game from start to finish, but Fox Sports has created an enjoyable and monetizable supplement to the action on TV.



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