

Cablefax Daily™

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What the Industry Reads First

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Kick Off: XFL Debut Bodes Well for Networks

The inaugural weekend of the **XFL** comeback brought in some big numbers for networks. The *Vince McMahon*-owned league is the successor to the defunct **WWF** (now **WWE**) and **NBC** league that ran for a single season in 2001, and this time around partnered with **ABC/ESPN** and **Fox**. The kickoff game on ABC Saturday at 2pm between the Seattle Dragons and the DC Defenders averaged 3.3mln viewers, peaking at 4mln from 4:45pm-5pm. Viewership peaked at the end of the broadcast, implying that viewers not only tuned in, but stuck around. Seattle-Tacoma had the highest market (6.4), followed by Cleveland (4.6) and Columbus, OH (4.5). Though it may be surprising Ohio ranked so high since it's not a state home to one of the eight initial XFL teams, Ohio, especially Cleveland, loves its football. It also doesn't hurt that the DC starting QB also happens to be *Cardale Jones*, who led Ohio State to a National Championship against Alabama in 2014. Sunday's game between the St. Louis Battlehawks and the Dallas Renegades on ESPN also delivered strong numbers, averaging 2.495mln viewers, peaking from 7:30pm-7:45pm. Its telecast generated 3.4mln video views across **Facebook** and **Twitter**, ranking as the most video views of any live sports programming on Sunday. Combined, ABC and ESPN averaged 2.9mln viewers across both networks. "We are delighted with the success of XFL opening weekend. The overwhelmingly positive reaction from fans is a testament to Vince McMahon's vision, the hard work and planning from *Oliver Luck* and his team and America's love of football," said *Burke Magnus*, ESPN's evp, programming acquisitions and scheduling. "We feel great about our coverage and the incorporation of unprecedented in-game access to bring fans closer to the game they love." Fox's debut game between the L.A. Wildcats and the Houston Roughnecks at 5pm also pulled in strong numbers, scoring a 2.3/6 metered market rating. Top markets were Houston (5.7/6), St. Louis (4.1/9) and Tampa Bay (3.7/8). Ohio isn't the only state following along despite the absence of a team. *The Patriot-News* out of Harrisburg, PA, excitedly [reported](#) on former Penn State QB *Matt McGloin*, who scored the first touchdown in the XFL for the New York Guardians on Sunday. *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* [wasn't as excited](#) about *Aaron Murray*, an SEC record passer for Georgia, who made his debut in the league for the Tampa Bay Vipers against NY and threw two interceptions in the first half. It wasn't just game action that had people talking. Social media lit up over the league's first stalker, and former Hokie *Ricky Walker* did not impress fans with the XFL's first ejection after throwing a punch. Sports betting also

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saw some major wins. Betting partners **DraftKings** and **FanDuel** saw roughly 20 times the handle that the first two AAF games did last year. Handle on XFL games increased 55% from Saturday to Sunday, and bet count increased 31% over the days on FanDuel, according to official league partner **Action Network**. Nearly 25% of bets placed on DraftKings were on the XFL. The big challenge will be if the league can sustain viewership. The original XFL debuted in 2011 with 14mln viewers and a 9.5 rating, but ended with just 2.1 in its final week. In 2019, **AAF**, the last attempt at an NFL competitor, folded after just eight weeks of play. That league debuted on **CBS** averaging 2.9mln viewers for its first two games. If the XFL can last two seasons, it'll be the most successful competitor to the NFL since the American Football League, which merged with the NFL in 1970. All eyes are on next week, with two games on ABC, one on Fox, and one on **FS1**. Throughout the season, games will air both on broadcast (Fox and ABC) and on cable (FS1, ESPN and **ESPN2**).

Hopkins to Amazon: *Mike Hopkins* is joining **Amazon** as svp, Prime Video & Amazon Studios, reporting to *Jeff Bezos*. He's served as **Sony Pictures TV** chmn for the past two years. Before that, Hopkins spent four years as CEO of **Hulu** and more than 16 years at **Fox Networks Group**. In fact, his appointment reunites him with Amazon Studios co-head TV & COO *Albert Cheng*, with the two working together in distribution at Fox 20 years ago. Amazon Studios head *Jen Salke* and Amazon Video vp *Greg Hart* will report to Hopkins, who is assuming the entertainment duties that previously fell to senior exec *Jeff Blackburn*.

It's 2021 Budget Season: President *Trump* released his proposed FY 2021 budget on Monday. Once again, the administration is proposing eliminating funding for public broadcasting. Trump hasn't had any luck on getting that passed, with Congress in FY2020 actually approving the first increase for public broadcasting funding in over a decade. "We are hopeful that Congress will again increase funding for public media in this year's appropriations cycle and beyond, to restore the nearly \$100 million in purchasing power public broadcasting lost over a decade of frozen funding," **America's Public Television Stations** pres/CEO *Patrick Butler* said in a statement. Trump's \$4.8 trillion budget provides \$718mln for the **National Institute of Standards and Technology** to advance US innovation. It doubles NIST's AI funding and would designate \$25mln to **NTIA** to modernize spectrum management systems. Efforts to narrow the rural divide include support of \$690mln in telecommunications loans through the **USDA**. Other proposals include \$1.1bln for **Department of Homeland Security** cybersecurity efforts. As for the **FCC**, it's requesting \$343,070,000, up 1.2% from the FY 2020 appropriated level of \$339,000,000. That includes a 1.5% increase to \$134,495,000 for the spectrum auctions program. Once again, the administration is proposing a spectrum license fee, which would let the FCC set user fees on unauctioned commercial spectrum licenses. Both Republican and

Cablefax: March What's happening...

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Cablefax will cover this annual gathering in Washington, DC, where small- and medium sized operators make their voices heard in the halls of Congress and beyond.

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Events

ACA Connects Summit
March 17
Washington DC

Democrats have tried to push these fees through with no success for years. The proposed budget estimates that the fee collection would bring in \$4bln over the next decade.

C-Band Incumbents Worry About Service Disruption: **ViacomCBS, Univision, Fox, Disney, NBCU and Discovery** are the latest to throw in their two cents on **FCC** chmn **Ajit Pai's** C-band auction plan. The content companies filed a joint ex parte Friday that asked the Commission to do all it can to protect the services that are currently delivered over the C-band while clearing spectrum for enabling 5G. A Univision spokesperson told **CFX** that the company is studying the order and "is pleased that the FCC recognizes the need to protect the existing satellite service used to deliver network programming to affiliated stations and MVPDs." Still, navigating the transition of existing services from the lower 300MHz of the C-band to the upper 200MHz will be a challenge, and the content companies want to make sure no one is counting their chickens before they've hatched. "Success in this proceeding will be defined by a transition that preserves continuity of service and final rules that ensure a stable operating environment for all stakeholders going forward," the content companies said. In order for that transition to go as smoothly as possible, the content companies told the FCC to name the **C-Band Alliance** the clearing coordinator, rather than an independent clearinghouse, for the public auction scheduled to begin on Dec 8. They also reiterated the need for interested stakeholders to work together to ensure there is no interference prevention during the process. The FCC has incorporated that suggestion, initially made by **Comcast**, into the public order. The FCC's Office of Engineering and Technology will convene a group that, at a minimum, should include representatives of incumbent earth stations (including MVPDs and broadcasters), incumbent space station operators, mobile network operators and network equipment manufacturers. That group will release its findings on interference mitigation and enforcement when directed by the OET.

Future Today Makes Moves: OTT platform **Future Today** partnered with **Comcast** to launch **Fawesome.tv, HappyKids.tv** and **FilmRise** on Xfinity X1 and Flex. The AVOD launched its first OTT channel in 2011, and now operates more than 700 content channels and manages a library of more than 200K TV and digital content assets. The company also named **David Di Lorenzo** its new svp, kids and family programming. He will lead content acquisition, distribution and monetization for its platform business, as well as spearhead the growth of HappyKids.tv. He comes over from VOD network **Kabillion**, where he served as pres.

Cox Buys Ohio Newspapers: **Cox Enterprises** is repurchasing three Ohio newspapers, the *Dayton Daily News*, *Springfield News-Sun* and *Journal-News*. Last year, Cox sold its TV stations and the newspapers to **Apollo Global Management**. A September court ruling overturning **FCC** media ownership rules meant Apollo wouldn't have been able to operate the stations along with the newspapers publishing daily. The sell solves that.

Charter Still Down with Opt-In Approach: **Charter** is speaking out again on the need to protect consumers' privacy online, applauding **House** and **Senate Commerce** proposals for including elements of opt-in choice for certain consumer data and for applying the law consistently to all businesses. "These proposals show that the issue is complicated and will require careful deliberation in order to establish a new privacy framework. But there are also shared priorities, and consumers have reason to be hopeful a solution is on the horizon," Charter evp, government affairs **Catherine Bohigian** wrote in a [blog post](#) Monday.

NAD Tackles T-Mobile TVision Ads: The **National Advertising Division** has recommended **T-Mobile** discontinue certain claims for its TVision service following a challenge by **Charter**. The challenged video ad described the wiring in and around the cable TV set as "a rat's nest of devices and wires," but NAD noted that T-Mobile's service requires the same number of wires. It recommended that claim be discontinued. Charter also argued that T-Mobile's ads imply TVision is wireless. NAD determined that the disclaimer, "Home connectivity and connected set top box required," does not communicate that the set-top requires a wired connection and recommended T-Mobile discontinue the implied claim that its service is wireless, for example by showing TVision's three wires or by using a conspicuous disclosure that three wires are required. NAD also determined T-Mobile's claim that cable companies offer "crappy cable interface" is not truthful, accurate, and narrowly drawn, and recommended it be discontinued. T-Mobile agreed to comply with NAD's recommendations, saying that "TVision is a relatively new product and its manner of delivery and other features and services available to TVision customers are evolving, as is our advertising for the service. We appreciate NAD's recognition of this fact."

Distribution: **Liberty Global** and **Netflix** announced a multi-year deal that will continue to offer 11mln video customers in Europe access to Netflix's service. Liberty Global's **Virgin Media** in the UK was the first TV and broadband provider in Europe to launch Netflix, and today the streamer is available on the company's Horizon platform in nearly every country it operates in.

CFX TECH

Coronavirus Threatens MWC 2020

Mobile World Congress Barcelona has taken pride in being the largest mobile event in the world, last year drawing more than 100K visitors and over 2.4K exhibitors. Don't expect to see those statistics replicated following this year's show, which is scheduled for Feb 24-27. The coronavirus outbreak has caused a number of MWC's major exhibitors including **Amazon, Sony, LG, Amdocs** and **Ericsson** to pull out of MWC less than three weeks ahead of the show.

Not wanting to waste the chance to make a splash with product announcements planned for the conference, Sony said it will air its MWC press conference on Feb 24 via its official Xperia YouTube channel. Ericsson will put the demos and content it created for MWC to use at local events called "Ericsson Unboxed."

"This is not a decision we have taken lightly," Ericsson pres/CEO *Börje Ekholm* said in a statement. "It is very unfortunate, but we strongly believe the most responsible business decision is to withdraw our participation from this year's event."

The US cable community is also weighing whether it's worth it to attend the show and risk exposure to the pneumonia-like virus. **ViacomCBS** CEO *Bob Bakish* is scheduled to deliver a keynote at the show and **FCC** chmn *Ajit Pai* is currently listed as a featured speaker. **Comcast's Xfinity Mobile** division is listed as an exhibitor as well. Neither ViacomCBS or FCC officials responded to our requests for comment on attending the show, but Comcast told **CFX** that its team members still plan to attend. The company is monitoring the situation and will follow any travel advisories issued by the State Department.

The **GSMA**, the organization that produces MWC events, has moved quickly to implement safety measures designed to prevent additional losses from the speaker lineups and exhibitor lists. On Sunday, the

organization announced that all travellers from China's Hubei province will be banned from attending this year's event, and all other Chinese travelers will need to show proof that they have spent two weeks outside China prior to the event. Historically, 5-6% of the show's attendees have traveled from China. Temperature screenings will be implemented and onsite cleaning and disinfection will be increased. "While the GSMA confirm some large exhibitors have decided not to come to the show this year with others still contemplating next steps, we remain more than 2800 exhibitors strong," GSMA said in a statement.

The impact of the coronavirus on the Barcelona show has drawn the attention of local authorities. MWC has traditionally been a major source of revenue for the city with economic analysis showing MWC Barcelona 2019 contributed approximately €473 million and more than 14K part-time jobs to the local economy.

"The health system of Catalonia is prepared to diagnose and treat novel coronavirus, in perfect shape to give the most appropriate response," Catalan health minister *Alba Verges* said in a press conference Saturday. "This must be taken into account by Catalan citizens and by all visitors coming to the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona in the upcoming days." The government is enhancing the visibility of medical facilities in the exhibit halls and said coordination meetings are being held this week between the public health system and the MWC healthcare services.

Some Chinese companies are taking matters into their own hands, implementing additional measures to ensure they won't carry the coronavirus to the exhibit halls. **Huawei** and **ZTE** have confirmed they'll still attend, but are ordering any staff based in China to self-isolate ahead of MWC. European staff will be called in for those unable to make the trip from China. **TCL** is cancelling a separate press event, but is still attending the show. — *Sara Winegardner*

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