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What the Industry Reads First

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Navigating On Demand: InDemand Says More MVPDs Working on Theatricals

When **Universal** came out with the news that it would be releasing some of its theatricals early for in-home on demand viewing starting Friday, there was some confusion over just who could see the titles. **Comcast** and **Sky** customers would definitely have access given they are all part of the same company. **Amazon** and **Apple** were also mentioned as distributors. But what about other MVPDS? **InDemand** evp, programming and general counsel *Michael Berman* told **CFX** that it's an evolving situation, but added that it's "apparent that a number of MVPDs will be getting Universal's 'Invisible Man' and other movies as well." Additional MVPDs are expected to begin offering the Universal films Friday at the suggested \$19.99 price point. And deals with other studios are in the works. "Multiple studios and multiple MVPDs are talking and working on deals right now. With so many people at home for the foreseeable future, it's obviously a great time for consumers to have access to as many movies and programming options as possible," he said. While it's likely movie theater closure will push more studios to do similar arrangements, an area of confusion continues to be the various out-of-market league packages, like **NBA League Pass** and **MLB Extra Innings**. "Everything is really up in the air right now because of the evolving circumstances of the various sports leagues," Berman said. **MLB Extra Innings** is probably the least affected series right now because the baseball season hasn't started yet, and most consumers haven't ordered their packages. **NHL** and **NBA** are actually more affected because both were already nearing the ends of their regular seasons. It's not clear if they'll finish their regular seasons or perhaps proceed directly to playoffs, which aren't included in regular packages. "We're in constant communication with all the leagues, and are all working in tandem to come up with solutions that will benefit everyone—the leagues, their media partners, and consumers—during these unprecedented times," Berman said.

R U Ready for RDOF?: The **FCC** has released the [preliminary list](#) of census blocks and a map of areas that have been deemed initially eligible for the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund Phase I auction. The Wireline Competition Bureau is conducting a limited challenge process, giving parties until April 10 to identify census blocks that they believe should be ineligible. RDOF is the \$20.4bln in funding that will be pushed out over the next 10 years to build and connect unserved rural areas with broadband. Phase 1, slated to start later this year, makes \$16bln available to target

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census blocks that are unserved with speeds of at least 25Mbps/3Mbps. The FCC's public notice also asks whether there are areas that should be deemed eligible and provides potential bidders with preliminary info about reserve prices of areas potentially eligible for bidding.

Game Show Network Freebie: Game Show Network has started offering a national free preview through the end of April, with no additional licensing fees. We hear it's already received interest from some large and small operators, including **Sling**. **Sony Pictures Entertainment** acquired 100% ownership of the channel in November, paying about \$500mln for **AT&T's** 42% stake in Game Show Network.

Gray Pulls TEGNA Offer: Gray Television has withdrawn its bid for **TEGNA** due to concerns about the impact coronavirus will have, according to a report from *Reuters*. Its initial offer was about \$8.5bln, including debt, and was quickly followed by offers from private equity firm **Apollo Global Management** and *Byron Allen*. Gray had offered \$20 a share in combined cash and stock, and Gray's stock price had plummeted 41% from March 5 until the offer was reported, but rebounded slightly after news the offer was pulled.

ViacomCBS Suspends Black Rock Sale: Coronavirus has postponed **ViacomCBS'** efforts to sell CBS' former Black Rock headquarters in NY. In an **SEC** filing, the company said it has received significant interest in the asset; however, with the safety precautions related to Covid-19 in place, it has decided to postpone the sale process until interested parties can visit the property in person. ViacomCBS will relaunch marketing efforts once the situation stabilizes and anticipates completing a divestiture of Black Rock in 2020.

Adjusting to Coronavirus: Disney ad sales pres *Rita Ferro* posted a blog Wednesday that pulled back the curtain on how the company is adjusting its programming to adapt to the impacts of the coronavirus outbreak. To fill the void left behind by live games, **ESPN** ramped up production of its live studio programming like "SportsCenter" and "First Take." Ferro said Disney has seen increased audiences and engagement across its linear and digital platforms, including **Hulu**. Starting tomorrow, "Jimmy Kimmel Live" will be shifted to an hour earlier on ABC and daytime news coverage of current affairs will be expanded. Ferro is also looking to attach advertisers to franchises like "Good Morning America" and its **Freeform** series. -- With production suspended and post-production delayed, **Showtime** is amending its on-air schedule. "Black Monday" will shift from two episodes to premiering one episode/week starting this Sunday through April 12. The premieres of docuseries "Outcry" (scheduled for April 3) and "Love Fraud" (scheduled for May 8) have been postponed with future dates to be announced in the coming weeks. "Penny Dreadful: City of Angels" and the fifth season of "Billions" will still

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premiere on their previously announced dates, April 26 at 10pm and May 3 at 9pm, respectively.

Free Offerings For Covid-19: Nickelodeon's DTC learning service for preschoolers **Noggin** will be offered for free for three months for millions of kids in need, beginning next week, in partnership with the **National Head Start Association** and **First Book**. Noggin's free trial period will also be extended to 60 days to all new subscribers, effective at the end of the month. Additionally, Nickelodeon launched its #KidsTogether multi platform prosocial initiative, giving kids and families tips for staying healthy as well as ideas for activities within the home. Using characters from its popular shows, it is also intended to serve as an additional resource for parents. -- **Fox News** has ended its **Twitter** hiatus, posting for the first time since November 2018. Its first tweet encouraged people to keep up with Covid-19 news by watching the channel, noting that it can be viewed online with no authentication required. No word on how long the no authentication will last. -- **Sling TV** launched an initiative Wednesday to provide Americans with free access to news and entertainment during the Covid-19 outbreak. Called "Stay in & Sling," the free experience includes news from streaming channel **ABC News Live** as well as access to thousands of shows and movies suitable for kids and families. The free experience can be accessed by downloading the Sling TV app on a **Roku**, **Amazon** or Android device or by visiting Sling.com. Sling TV is also offering a discount on its best news service, Sling Blue. New customers will receive their first month for \$20, a \$10 discount on the service's regular price.

LLA Buying Back Stock: Liberty Latin America's board authorized the repurchase of up to \$100mln of the company's Class A and Class C shares over the next two years. Under the program, Liberty Latin America may acquire its Class A common shares, Class C common shares or any combination of the two. The program may be suspended or discontinued at any time.

FCC Adjusts Rural Health Care, E-Rate Rules: The **FCC** waived its gift rules related to its Rural Health Care and E-Rate programs until Sept 30, giving service providers the opportunity to offer, and Rural Health Care and E-Rate program participants to solicit and accept, improved connections or additional equipment for telemedicine or remote learning during the coronavirus outbreak. The waiver applies to WiFi hotspots, networking gear and other services used to support doctors, teachers and librarians. "We are giving service providers the chance to step up and give health care providers more tools to fight the ongoing pandemic and serve patients more effectively," FCC chmn *Ajit Pai* said in a statement.

Programming: **NBC Sports** teamed up with **TVG** for "Trackside Live" horse racing, beginning Saturday. Coverage kicks off at 4pm featuring the \$1mln Louisiana Derby. NBCSN will also simulcast Trackside Live the following weekend on all three days, including the Florida Derby, if races continue to be held. -- With live games on hold, this week **MSG Networks** will air the top Rangers, Islanders and Devils moments, as well as some classic games from as early as the 80s. The net will start airing Knicks games from the season next week. -- **Nexstar** will host a live virtual town hall meeting with Texas governor *Greg Abbott* on Thursday at 7pm CT. The governor and other state officials will address the statewide response to the coronavirus outbreak. The special will air exclusively on 14 Nexstar stations across the state. -- **Hallmark Movies & Mysteries** will premiere four new movies this spring. "Mystery 101: An Education in Murder" airs March 29 at 9pm, followed by "Ruby Herring Mysteries: Prediction Murder" April 5, 9pm, "Aurora Teagarden Mysteries: Heist and Seek" on April 12 at 9pm, and "MatchMaker Mysteries: A Fatal Romance" April 25 at 9pm. -- **Animal Planet** is raising everyone's spirits with a 94-hour marathon of "TOO CUTE!" It kicked off Wednesday at noon with each episode showcasing precious milestones in the lives of animals. Fan favorite encore episodes from the marathon will air Sunday from 6am-8pm.

C2HR's Compensation Survey: **C2HR** is seeking participants for its yearly compensation survey, which identifies industry-specific benchmarks on salaries, incentives and other compensation components. The survey will be separated into two participant categories: connectivity providers (including MSOs, satellite and telecom companies) and content developers (digital content creators, cable programmers and broadcast nets). C2HR has commissioned the **Croner Company** to collect and analyze the data to identify industry trends and benchmarks.

Media Institute Reschedules March Luncheon: The **Media Institute** has postponed its March Communication Forum luncheon until April 27 due to coronavirus concerns. **FCC** commish *Michael O'Rielly* is still scheduled to appear on the new date. "Consistent with our concern for health and safety, we hope to provide Washington's media and telecom leaders with a full complement of engaging events as the year progresses, even if timelines have to be modified," Media Institute pres *Richard Kaplar* said in a statement.

People: *Chris Wood*, svp and associate general counsel for **Univision**, has been named to the **NAB Television** board. He takes the seat previously occupied by *Jessica Herrera-Flanigan*, who left Univision for a position in the DC office of **Twitter**.

Think about that for a minute...

C-SPAN

Commentary by Steve Effros

I need not dwell on the fact that we are in trouble. All of us. The coronavirus is changing our lives, probably permanently in some ways, and how we, as a world, a nation and an industry deal with it will be critical to hoped-for success. The cable/broadband industry is going to be integral to answering that “how” question. Luckily, I think we have some long-developed tools to help.

The first, of course, is our core infrastructure. Communications flows are radically changing as we are all, essentially, told to “shelter in place” until further notice in an effort to break the cycle of infection. Those who can are going “on line” from home. There are already fearful articles suggesting that the “system” may not be able to handle the load. But from what I have been told by many of the top engineers in the business, that’s not the case. We have built a very robust system that currently can handle a far larger load in most places, admittedly not all, than is usual. We deal with streaming video at prime time. Home working data flows, assuming everyone does not need a video connection to everyone else, are easily within our limits.

The other challenge of the communications industry is to do what we can to assure that the information being distributed by television, radio, cable, streaming etc., is as accurate and reliable as possible. That, I think, is where C-SPAN comes in.

Long-time readers know that I have often described C-SPAN as the true gem of the cable industry. We created it in 1979 when most folks thought it was either crazy or a political gimmick. It was neither, and it has proved its mettle and reliability over the years. That’s exactly what we need right now. With some news out-



lets and commentators just now finally acknowledging the reality of Covid-19 and the devastation it could wreak, and others belatedly conceding that this is neither a political “hoax” nor unwarranted hysteria, the time has come to focus on a well recognized, reliable, nonpolitical source of information. I think that could well be C-SPAN.

This is a channel that has long recognized differing points of view, allowed them to articulate their positions, but never took “sides” in the debate. Brian Lamb taught his staff well. That’s going to serve us all well going forward. To be sure, what I am suggesting is going to require a bit of a change. C-SPAN will have to curate in a way it usually doesn’t do. Information from the CDC, from Tony Fauci, from well balanced panels of medical (and political) experts will have to be the focus. But the point is, C-SPAN, unlike our political community, our “news channel” community or many of our largest news sources has not been, fairly or unfairly, labeled as in one “camp” or another. The President, to my knowledge, has never accused C-SPAN of disseminating “fake news.” That is indeed a rare gem in today’s world, and we should put it to use.

C-SPAN, to use terminology from an old, very popular science fiction novel, (Stranger in a Strange Land/ Robert Heinlein) can well be considered the “Fair Witness” of this time. We should be proud to have created and nurtured it, and now it’s time to use it. I know this is asking the folks there to engage in a slightly different form of journalism than they are used to. But this is not a normal time, and C-SPAN is not a normal source.

Steve

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(Steve Effros was President of CATA for 23 years and is now an advisor and consultant to the cable industry. His views do not necessarily reflect the views of Cablefax.)



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