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What the Industry Reads First

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Tick Tock: FCC Challenge Deadline Nears for Billions in Broadband Dollars

Cable operators have a lot of priorities right now as they work to keep America connected during the COVID-19 pandemic. And that may make it difficult for them to dig into the **FCC's** preliminary maps for the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund [RDOF] Phase 1 auction. Challenges to the list of census blocks that have been deemed initially eligible are due to the FCC Friday. "I think we are going to run out of time. Too many other pressing projects at the moment," *Tom Larsen*, **Mediacom** svp, government & public relations, told **CFX**. Phase I, slated to start later this year, makes \$16bln available over 10 years to target census blocks that are unserved with speeds of at least 25Mbps/3Mbps. Not speaking up means risking being overbuilt with government money down the line. FCC officials have indicated the agency doesn't plan to delay an Oct 22 start for the RDOF auction. A final list of eligible areas for Phase 1 is expected to be released in late May/early June. Some challenges have already made their way to the FCC. **Cal.net** has four projects in the works that are being subsidized by the California PUC's California Advanced Services Fund, which provides state funding for broadband development in unserved and underserved areas. It said there are 155 census blocks on the RDOF preliminary list that overlaps with Cal.net's four projects. Other challenges are similar to that of **Brady Communications** of Brady, TX, which has made significant infrastructure upgrades since its June 30, 2019 Form 477 filing that would make several census blocks on the list ineligible. As of our publication deadline, **Charter** hadn't filed a challenge in the docket, but had held a phone conversation last week to express concerns. "Charter discussed the importance of stretching the Commission's scarce Universal Service Fund dollars as far as possible by preventing Rural Digital Opportunity Fund money from being used to overbuild areas that will certainly have broadband in the near term," an ex parte said. In addition to the eligible areas of service, the FCC is receiving input over how the process will work. **NCTA** and **ACA Connects** are encouraging the FCC to use census block groups as the smallest biddable unit instead of census tracts. "Cable operators participating in the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund are likely to be expanding their existing networks. If the Commission adopts an overly large bidding unit, cable operators may be unable to participate," NCTA warned. A census block approach is supported by several commenters, including **AT&T** and the **National Rural Electric Cooperative Association**. Networking and communications equipment provider **Adtran** has weighed in on the proceed-

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ing, saying it's concerned the current RDOF language might prematurely allow some unproven technologies, such as non-geostationary satellite systems, to qualify for the highest speed tiers. **Vermont's Department of Public Service** has filed a petition for reconsideration that asks the FCC to reconsider its decision to exclude from Phase 1 census blocks that receive state broadband subsidies, making a case for federal-state partnerships. Vermont's petition has the support of the **Maine Public Utilities Commission**. "Maine, like Vermont, is a rural, sparsely-populated state with a significant need for broadband funding. Having the RDOF funding complement, and not supplant, state-based broadband funding is a common-sense solution that will provide the maximum benefit to states, like Maine, who most need support," the Maine agency said.

FCC Commish Meets with Telecom Crews: FCC commissioner *Brendan Carr* is hosting WebEx calls with telecom crews that are on the frontline. On Wednesday, he connected with **Mediacom** techs in Iowa, Florida, Illinois & Minnesota before they headed out into the field and thanked them for their service. We're told he anticipates making similar calls in the days and weeks ahead as these crews work to keep Americans connected during the COVID-19 crisis. Since joining the FCC, Carr has made it a priority to highlight the work of tower crews and other broadband technicians. And yes, he's even climbed a couple towers as part of that effort, including a 2000-foot guyed tower in South Dakota.

Goodbye, Schitt's Creek: The finale of **Pop TV's** series "Schitt's Creek" Tuesday evening was the series highest-rated episode ever. It aired across Pop, **Comedy Central** and **Logo** and pulled in 1.3mIn total viewers. Viewership was up double digits across every key demo, and the final season performed 103% better than the prior. Additionally, Schitt's Creek was the No 1 most social show across all TV for the day and was the No 1 trending topic worldwide on **Twitter**.

Distribution: **INSP** renewed its affiliation agreement with **NCTC** for its member companies throughout the US. -- **ESPN** signed an agreement with video game developer **Riot Games** to become the official US linear and authenticated streaming platform for the 2020 League of Legends Championship Series Spring Split Playoffs. Matches will air live on **ESPN2** or the ESPN app, with all matches available on demand in the ESPN app immediately following competition. The first match to air as part of the deal is 100 Thieves vs TSM on April 8 at 4pm on the ESPN App and ESPN.com. -- **Wurl Network** upped its lineup, now carrying more than 400 streaming channels. The service added **A+E Networks, AMC Networks, Bloomberg Media, Endemol Shine Group, Game Show Network, Janson Media** and **Travelxp**.

WICT Signature Luncheon Reimagined: In light of the coronavirus pandemic, **WICT** is taking an innovative approach to its Signature Luncheon. The organization reimagined the event as a video celebration of the PAR Top Companies for

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Women to Work. WICT is working with a production firm to create a celebratory video that will be easily shareable across all multimedia platforms. The org's goal is to launch the video this summer, and celebrate the PAR Top Companies and Signature Luncheon sponsors in-person during Diversity Week with a reception at the WICT Leadership Conference.

Doing Good: **Cox Media**, the advertising arm of **Cox Communications**, is offering local restaurants free TV advertising to assure patrons that they remain open for takeout or delivery services as well as to share new hours of operation. -- **BET** established a COVID-19 relief fund in partnership with **United Way Worldwide** to support African Americans that have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Donations will be used to disburse resources in NYC, Atlanta, New Orleans, Detroit and Chicago. More information on the fund will be rolled out in the next few days with collections beginning on Friday. -- **NewsGuard**, which publishes trust ratings on internet news articles, has removed its \$2.95/month paywall for its browser extension through July 1. "Misinformation about COVID-19 is spreading quickly across the internet and endangering lives," said NewsGuard co-CEO *Steven Brill*. "We're enlisting a wide range of companies and organizations to help address this with an urgent but simple public service campaign to help fight back."

FCC Rural Broadband Pilot Proposed: Reps *Rob Whitman* (R-VA) and *Bill Johnson* (R-OH) introduced a bill Monday that would direct \$500mln towards expanding rural broadband. The Serving Rural America Act would create a five-year pilot grant program at the **FCC** and authorize \$100mln/year to expand broadband in unserved areas of the country. To be eligible, an ISP would be required to partner with a locality, city, county, wireless authority or planning district commission to consider input of residents. The pilot program would also feature a challenge process that allows the public or other existing service providers in the proposed service area to ask the FCC to determine whether the proposed project would overbuild existing broadband service. New mapping measures would also be introduced, and the FCC would be required to report to Congress annually on the program's progress.

Google Restricts Stadia Bandwidth: With folks stuck at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, **Google** is offering people in 14 countries free access to Stadia Pro, its cloud gaming platform's membership, for two months. The service will cost \$9.99/month following the free period. Anyone who signs up will also gain access to nine games. Google also said that it would temporarily be downgrading the default screen resolution used by Stadia from 4K to 1080p in an effort to reduce its load on the internet.

Cox Techs To Virtually Perform Service Calls: **Cox** launched its "On-site with Virtual Assist" tool for all residential and business customers Wednesday, which allows technicians to handle service requests from outside the home. Cox partnered with remote technology company **Help Lightning** on the tool. To access On-site with Virtual Assist support, Cox customers request help as they normally would on the Cox website or the app.

Charter Partners to Prevent Robocalls: **Charter** is promoting **Hiya's** free anti-spam app for customers looking for protection against fraud and nuisance calls. The free features help users identify spam calls, block individual numbers and identify calls from businesses. Charter customers can also choose to subscribe to Hiya's premium app for a fee to gain access to automatic spam call blocking.

'Tiger King's' Crown: People just really can't get enough of **Netflix's** "Tiger King." The series started off slow when it was released on March 20, seeing an average minute audience of 280K US viewers and reaching 741K consumers. But after home page promotions and social media buzz, Tiger King is now the first Netflix series to rival "Stranger Things 3," according to data from **Nielsen**. By March 26, the average minute audience was nearly 2.1mln viewers. By day 10, its average minute audience was just under 19mln people, passing Stranger Things 2 (17.5mln) and nearly reaching ST3 (20.5mln).

Programming: With traditional production shut down, content producers are getting creative. **Lifetime** greenlit the series "Married at First Sight: Couples' Cam." The self-shot series follows the domestic life of Married at First Sight couples from its ten seasons. The series premieres May 20 at 8pm. -- Sports networks are increasingly turning to esports given the lack of games. **Univision's TUDN** is teaming with Mexican soccer league Liga BBVA MX for an EA Sports FIFA 20 gaming tournament "eLigaMX by BBVA Tournament." Player reps from each Liga MX club will compete in a 17-matchday season on Playstation 4, beginning Friday at 3pm. -- **WarnerMedia Networks** will simulcast "Sesame Street: Elmo's Playdate" special across **HBO, HBO Latino, TBS, TNT, truTV, Cartoon Network** and **Boomerang** on April 14 at 7pm. -- **ViacomCBS** extended trial periods for two of its streaming services in the Americas, beginning April 13. **Noggin, Nick Jr.**'s service for preschoolers, will extend the trial period from seven days to a month for all new users, and **Paramount+** will also extend to a month.

People: **Starz** upped *Alison Hoffman* to pres, domestic networks. She previously served as the programmer's CMO.

Think about that for a minute...

Thank You

Commentary by Steve Effros

In the Jewish tradition the dead are supposed to be buried as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours, but at most in a few days. This reality hit home this week as one of my sons, Jamie's, close friends lost her father to the coronavirus.



Jamie lives in Brooklyn where he met and worked with the man's daughter for years. She had moved to California over a year ago. Her dad still lived in the New York City area. Her brother and their mother, similarly, no longer lived anywhere near. Even in the best of times the rapid burial tradition creates major difficulties as families try to quickly convene to honor the deceased and support each other. But during this pandemic, it becomes impossible.

The "solution" if it can be called that, in order to provide love, comfort, support and closure came in the form of a video feed from the graveside. Jamie volunteered, went to the cemetery and met with the Rabbi. They were the only two there. A video "chat" was established with mother and children in other parts of the country and they participated in the service. Everyone found it both powerful and healing. We live in strange times. Passover Seder and Easter Services will be celebrated by video this year as well.

I tell you all this because it occurred to me that while we have all spent a great deal of time, appropriately, recognizing our valiant health care workers, doctors, nurses, first responders, police, firefighters, and all those who are keeping food available to us during this lockdown, very little has been said about the folks who are maintaining the telecommunications infrastructure that allowed Jamie to do what he wonderfully did for that family.

Our industry has been designated as an "essential service" throughout the country. The men and women who are still going out on service calls, putting lines back up when rain, wind or tree limbs take them down, and responding to calls for technical help are truly essential. It's not just so that folks can have their kids watch something while they try to telecommute. It's not just to provide a little "binge" diversion to ease the claustrophobia. It's for all of us to be able to communicate, to be with each other, to commune, if you will, in one of the very few ways that is safe right now.

I noted with dismay the other day that EMT's in New York get an annual salary of less than \$40,000 a year. The transit workers in New York City, providing the transportation via bus or subway that allows nurses and doctors to get to the hospitals report that 1300 of their workforce have tested positive for the virus. 41 have died. Once this crisis has passed we are really going to have to look at where we have placed our priorities and how we have valued our workers.

But for now, the least we can do is recognize what they have done, and what they are doing now. I would hope that every telecom company involved in this effort, particularly the ones that made it possible for Jamie to do what he did for his friend and her family, let their employees know how important they are, how appreciated they are, and that what they are doing is indeed "essential" in ways they may never have dreamed of. I hope, later, we can do more, but at the very least, we should all say a heartfelt "thank you!"

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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