

Cablefax Daily™

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What the Industry Reads First

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COVID Ratings: Sports Mostly Falls, News/Entertainment Rises in April

April marked the first full month with much of the country sheltering in place, with Nielsen numbers showing many are turning to TV. Despite the lack of live sports, **ESPN** still ranked among the top 10 ad-supported cable networks—with P2+ viewers down just 7% over April 2019, according to **Nielsen**. The net averaged 1.038m viewers for the month, down from 1.111m a year ago. ESPN benefited from the NFL Draft and its release of the Michael Jordan doc “The Last Dance,” and actually ended up 10% among 25-54s in prime, finishing April in third place for the demo. The Last Dance has averaged 5.8m viewers across premieres for the first six eps, with May 3’s two eps averaging 5.5m viewers across ESPN and ESPN2. Less surprising is that news ruled the month. **Fox News** continued its lengthy reign, handily winning the month in prime (3.681m) and total day (2.23m). **MSNBC** took second place in prime for April (2.038m) followed by **CNN** (1.948m). All of the news nets were up YOY in viewership, with CNN rising the most (which makes since as its numbers were the lowest among the newscasters) to record a 154% increase in prime. Fox was up 54%, while MSNBC was at 23%. The nets recording the biggest declines in April were largely sports channels. **NBC Sports Network** was down 81% to 127K viewers in prime. **Tennis** plunged 72% to 15K, **NBA TV** dropped 69% to 37K, **MLB** shed 61% to average 61K and **Golf** channel dropped 55% to 56K. **TNT**, which lost NBA and March Madness games fell 49% in prime to 814K from 1.595m a year ago, according to Nielsen data. **Fox Sports 1**, which has had some success with esports, ended the month down just 17% in prime at 115K. **Discovery, Inc** nets did especially well, with 11 nets growing double digits (no other programmer had more than four nets with double digit growth). Shining stars in the Discovery portfolio were **DIY** up 51% in prime (298K) and **TLC** +49% (1.203m). **Investigation Discovery** fell 29% in the month to 659K, though it still ranked as a top 20 network. Some of the nets posting gains show the power of family friendly fare. **Hallmark Drama**, which has steadily been increasing carriage with recent deals inked with **Verizon** and **Midco**, saw a 117% jump in prime viewership to 130K. **Game Show Network’s** April prime average soared +40% to 569K, and **INSP** was up 16% to 683K, finishing the month in 15th place in prime. Edgier nets also recorded gains, including **Sundance TV** (+42% to 265K), and **Lifetime** (+24% to 627K). **Pop** saw 1.3m viewers tune in for the April 7 finale of “Schitt’s Creek.” It was up 65% to 203K in prime for the month.

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Lack Out at NBCU: Andy Lack is stepping down as NBC News Group pres amidst a restructuring led by NBCU CEO Jeff Shell. Lack will transition out of the company at the end of the month and Cesar Conde will rise to the newly-created role of chmn, NBCU News Group. Conde, who arrived at Telemundo in 2013 after spending a decade at Univision, now oversees NBC News, MSNBC and CNBC. Mark Lazarus is now chmn of a new division, NBCUniversal Television and Streaming, which includes upcoming streamer Peacock, NBC Entertainment, Telemundo, the cable entertainment nets and international networks. Lazarus is still responsible for the NBC Sports Group, owned television stations and affiliate relations.

Optimum Sports Tier Moves: Come June 16, Optimum will remove six channels from its Premier level of service, making them available via its a la carte Optimum Sports Pack. The nets are Fight Network, Game+, Mav TV, NFL Red Zone, NHL Network and Willow. It's offering the package for a discounted monthly rate of \$5/month. "This re-tiering is driven by the rising rates that programmers who provide sports content charge the company to carry their programming," the operator said.

Retrans Settlement: Howard Stirks Holdings admitted it violated good faith negotiation requirements for retransmission consent and agreed to pay a \$100K civil penalty. All of this dates back to the FCC upholding a retrans complaint from AT&T last fall against Howard Stirks and several other station groups all managed by Sinclair through shared services agreements. The broadcast owners collectively were represented by Max Retrans' Duane Lammers during the retrans negotiations. They unsuccessfully argued that because they were jointly represented, there were in effect in constant negotiations. AT&T sued Lammers in federal court, but that case was thrown out.

Fubo Releases Financials: fuboTV released financial information to the investment community for the first time Monday after becoming a public company due to its merger with FaceBank Group. The combined company currently trades on the OTC market under the symbol "FUBO," but plans to up-list to a major stock exchange soon. Revenue in 2019 increased 96% YOY to \$146.5mln driven by growth in fuboTV's paid subscriber base, ad sales and user engagement. In 1Q20, revenue is expected to increase by more than 75% YOY. Subscription revenue made up the bulk of those 2019 revenues, totaling \$133.3mln. Fubo expects that to rise by more than 70% in the first quarter. The company ended 2019 with more than 315K paid subscribers and its users (paid and trial/free) streamed 298.7mln hours.

Sinclair On Deck for Comcast: Comcast's retrans deal with Sinclair for its broadcast stations and Tennis Channel is set to expire in July. No word of any movement at this time. Keep in mind that Comcast continues to be a

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holdout for the Chicago Cubs-Sinclair JV **Marquee Sports Network**. The pressure to get a deal done has lessened with the season delayed, but it's possible the renewal will include the RSN (particularly since the **Fox RSNs** Sinclair bought are thought to be nearing expiration later in the summer).

Fans Really Missing Sports: **ESPN** commissioned a coronavirus lockdown fan study diving into current perceptions around the pandemic and its impact on sports. The report found that nearly twice as many fans would prefer to watch televised sporting events without crowds than those who think sports should only restart when fans can attend (65% vs 35%). Additionally, 76% said they support the return of sports without fans if players were quarantined in hotels and their contact with others was closely monitored. Many people are feeling the absence of live sports, with 67% of fans reporting that sports would be a way to feel a semblance of normalcy among the pandemic.

Trouble at the Mouse House: **MoffettNathanson** downgraded **Disney** to "Neutral" Monday due to the risk of the coronavirus having longer impacts on the company's balance sheet. "The economic impact of social distancing is obviously most severe for the two divisions (Theme Parks and Studio Entertainment) that have driven free cash flow in the recent term. In addition, the acceleration in cord-cutting, coupled with **ESPN's** high fixed cost base, could further negatively impact Media Networks," **MoffettNathanson** said in a note. "On the brighter side, **Hulu** and **Disney+** should be gaining strength from this crisis, but do not contribute free cash flow to offset the erosion elsewhere."

Doing Good: **Liberty Latin America** established an employee emergency assistance fund to provide direct relief to eligible employees and their families who are facing financial distress or hardships due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The fund will be seeded with an initial contribution of more than \$300K from the LLA board and additional funds will be raised through an online giving campaign. -- **Reelz** is launching its "Independence Happens Here" PSA campaign in support of independent businesses across the US. The campaign is comprised of a resource website, social media outreach and on-air PSAs to help people and businesses impacted by COVID-19. The website includes state-by-state and national resources for independent business owners and consumers about what is open, health and operating guidelines and how to help independent businesses.

FCC Loses NYT Suit: A federal judge ruled Thursday that the **FCC** must turn over net neutrality comment details that it said it couldn't provide to the *New York Times*. The NYT sued the FCC in Sept 2018 for denying a FOIA request the publication said could offer more info on if there was Russian interference in the FCC's proceeding to repeal Title II regulation.

Distribution: **ESPN** and **Eclat Media Group** reached a deal to televise six regular season KBO League games per week in the US, beginning open day on Tuesday at 1am. Games from South Korea's most popular baseball league will now air each day Tuesdays-Fridays at 5:30am on **ESPN2** and the ESPN app, at 4am Saturdays and 1am Sundays. Opening Day will air on ESPN. -- **FreeCast** signed a deal with **Herring Networks** to bring **One America News Encore** and **AWE Encore** to the company's SelectTV and SmartGuide-powered streaming services.

Ratings: **Fox News'** virtual town hall with *Donald Trump* Sunday night pulled in nearly 4mln viewers. At 3.819mln total, viewership fell slightly short of the net's record from March 5, which pulled in 4.2mln viewers.

Programming: **Black News Channel** announced extended COVID-19 coverage by altering its 9pm newscast, beginning Monday. The first 30 minutes will be a standard review of the days' top stories, and the final 30 minutes will be a comprehensive look at all things COVID-19 related. -- Four-part miniseries "Ghost Adventures: Quarantine" will premiere on **Travel Channel** June 11 at 9pm. -- **AMC** greenlit four additional episodes of "Friday Night In with the Morgans," the video-chat-based series hosted by *Jeffery Dean Morgan* and *Hilarie Burton Morgan*. The next episode premieres Friday at 10pm. -- **HGTV** renewed "Celebrity IOU" for Season 2, tentatively slated to premiere in early 2021. Since the show's initial premiere April 13, the series has pulled in more than 18.9mln total viewers. -- **Syfy** is premiering "Syfy Wire's The Great Debate" on June 18 at 11pm. The series is transformed from the stage to the screen and puts celebrities head-to-head to answer fandom's burning questions. -- **HBO** docuseries "I'll Be Gone In The Dark" will premiere June 28 at 10pm. The series is based on *Michelle McNamara's* book investigating the Golden State Killer.

People: **Starz** named *Christina Davis* its new pres of original programming. Davis served as the head of drama series development for at **CBS** for 11 years.

Obituary: Former **CBS Corp** communications chief *Gil Schwartz* died Saturday of natural causes. He was 68. Schwartz headed communications from 1996 to 2018, writing three novels under the name *Stanley Bing*. "For the better part of three decades, Gil Schwartz led CBS Communications with creative flair, craftsman-like expertise and an abundance of personality," CBS said in a statement.