

Cablefax Daily™

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What the Industry Reads First

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Back to School: Dems Weigh in on What's Needed to Support Virtual Learning

The school year is rapidly approaching, and while many schools are embracing remote learning, many families are still without the devices and broadband connectivity needed to enable those virtual classrooms. Minority communities are being hit particularly hard by the pandemic, and **FCC** commish *Geoffrey Starks* and *John B King Jr*, former secretary of education under Obama, organized a panel Monday to explore what actions are needed from the FCC and Congress to close the digital divide in Latinx communities in particular. "We already had a homework gap before COVID-19 that had a disparate impact on students of color. What COVID-19 has done is exacerbate not only that gap, but its consequences," King said. Due to a lack of internet access or the needed number of devices to support all children in school-age households, King said there is an estimated seven months of learning loss across all children. For Latinx students, that number rises to nine months and for Black students, it hits 10 months. "If we want a better fall than we had a spring... we need Congress to step up in this next stimulus to make sure that every kid has the internet, has a device so that they can continue to learn," King said. In his remarks, Starks described broadband access as a civil right, something that needs to be accessible to all right now. "Broadband access is a civil right we can't afford to lose, but many cannot afford to have," Starks said. In an op-ed for *Essence*, Starks, *Reverend Al Sharpton*, **MMTC** pres/CEO *Maurita Coley* and others wrote that research indicates that low-income families can only afford to pay around \$10/month for broadband. And many of those families may not know of the internet offerings targeted toward low-income customers, like **Comcast's** Internet Essentials or **Cox's** Connect2Compete. *Daiquiri Ryan*, strategic policy counsel at the **National Hispanic Media Coalition**, said that while affordability is one of the reasons the Latinx community has fallen behind on broadband, many also lack digital skills and an understanding of how many opportunities broadband access offers. Ryan said the Latinx community also suffers from poor infrastructure, being the largest non-white population in rural America and the fastest-growing. Former FCC commish *Gloria Tristani* urged Congress not to forget about Puerto Rico, where she said up to 36% of households do not have a computer. The island has also had its fair share of natural disasters, all of which have devastated its telecom infrastructure. In January, earthquakes kept children from being able to attend school. The country was still recovering

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Bonny Roberts

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for Business, Information
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Roberts is the Director of IT Portfolio Management for the non-clinical business of Centura Health, a 17-hospital system based out of Denver, CO. In this role she works with HR, Marketing, Supply Chain, Finance and Legal to research new solutions, introduce and scope requests, and serve as the advocate for the business within IT.

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when COVID-19 hit. “For a long time, the federal government and the FCC, including when I was there, have kind of benignly neglected Puerto Rico,” Tristani said. “There are students in the southern part of Puerto Rico who haven’t had a school day, let alone distance education.” And while the start of the new school year is only a month away, there’s still plenty of time for Congress to push through legislation that could ease the impact of the homework gap. King pointed to legislation from Sen *Ed Markey* (D-MA) that would establish a \$4bln emergency connectivity fund to strengthen the FCC’s E-Rate program. Qualifying schools would be allowed to use the funds to purchase WiFi hotspots, routers and other connected devices for students during the pandemic. Companion legislation from Rep *Grace Meng* (D-NY) calls for an additional \$2bln in E-Rate funding. King also mentioned Rep *Anna Eshoo’s* (D-CA) Supporting Connectivity for Higher Education Students in Need Act. The bill provides \$1bln to colleges and universities to pay for at-home internet connections for students in need. Funding would be prioritized for HBCUs, minority-serving institutions and rural-serving institutions. “Both of those things should be in the next stimulus if we’re going to be prepared for a school year where distance learning and hybrid learning are very much a reality,” King said.

Scripps Dark on DISH: DISH lost Scripps stations in 42 markets Saturday evening, with the two unable to agree to a new retransmission consent deal. Scripps stations are telling viewers to rescan their TVs to pick up the signals with their antennas. Both sides are encouraging viewers to voice their frustrations on social media, with DISH even providing a script that customers can copy and paste: “I am a DISH customer asking for returned access to my stations. It’s not fair that I as a consumer am unable to watch my content while a negotiation is taking place. Please return your channels to the air on DISH while you work to reach a deal.” Scripps has said the impasse isn’t due to rates, but an inability to agree on distribution terms. A spokesperson said DISH is insisting on replacing standard contract terms previously agreed to with new terms that are off-market and in their favor. DISH contends Scripps is seeking a rate increase of nearly 250% of the fees paid today.

CBRS Auction Update: The FCC’s ongoing CBRS auction may not be bringing in mega bucks, but that’s not the point. “The CBRS auction is not about how much the spectrum is worth. It’s about whether there are new disruptive business models for niche services,” **New Street Research** wrote in a note. Through the end of Monday, the auction in the 3550-3650 MHz band has brought in gross proceeds of \$486,519,700. Cable operators are expected to participate as the spectrum is seen as a way to offload traffic from their MVNO providers. New Street notes that the smaller geographic licenses make it easier to obtain spectrum only in their wireline footprints. “They are therefore quite attractive for a cable operator looking to offload traffic from their wholesale wireless capacity provider – in the event the CBRS license isn’t usable at a

We are so proud of our industry and the many ways companies are responding to the pandemic. Free internet, fresh content, employee safety and much more.

The Cablefax Editorial Team is reporting on vital industry updates every day. We want to hear from you so please reach out to share your news and stories.

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The Collapse of Theatrical Windows?: With theaters shuttering, will day-and-date releases become the norm? **Universal Pictures** is the first out of the gate, announcing “Trolls World Tour” will be available April 10 for a rental. Other in-release movie titles are set to be available as soon as this Friday. The movies will be available on **Comcast, Sky** and a “broad range of on-demand partners.” Titles to be made available include “The Man” and “Emma” with a suggested retail price of \$19.99 in the US.

Tuesday — March 17, 2020 *What the Industry Reads First* Volume 31 / No. 050

For Now: Providers Set Aside Disputes During Coronavirus Outbreak

As they face the common enemy that is the coronavirus pandemic, **Cox Media Group** and **DISH** have set aside their retrans dispute for now so that DISH can resume its carriage of 10 CMG stations in New York, Oregon, Washington, Arizona, Louisiana, California, Mississippi and Idaho. No word on how long the truce will last.

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Friday — March 13, 2020 *What the Industry Reads First* Volume 31 / No. 050

New Normal: Companies Roll Out Contingency Plans in Face of Covid-19

With a growing number of students and employees working from home, it’s mission critical for the nation’s broadband providers during the Covid-19 pandemic. Operators big and small are up-ending their day-to-day operations to ensure service continuity.

Wednesday — March 18, 2020 *What the Industry Reads First*

Covering Covid-19: Content Companies Step Up Efforts

Programmers are shuffling schedules to respond to the coronavirus crisis. **The Weather Channel** is airing live programming at 50 minutes past the hour to share educational content. **Netflix** is offering free access to its library of educational content. **Pledge** is offering free access to its library of educational content. Topics include why thunder happens, how rainbows form and how to stay safe during school closures.

From the Commission: Another 116 broadband and telephone service providers have taken the **Keep Americans Connected Pledge**, agreeing to take specific steps to keep Americans connected for 60 days. Some notable names taking the pledge include **Hotwire Communications**, **Midco**

given time, the cable operator can still rely on their MVNO relationship,” the analysts noted. Several cable ops, including **Comcast, Charter, Cable One, Cox** and **Midco**, are among the 271 entities that qualified to participate in the auction. In addition to cable possibly using shared spectrum to provide their own wireless services, new providers who control specific areas (such as universities) could use the spectrum to offer niche services. “A successful CBRS auction would likely lead to increased interest (particularly if Biden wins) in the shared spectrum paradigm,” New Street concluded.

Sect. 230 Rulemaking: The **NTIA** filed a petition for rulemaking with the **FCC** asking the agency to develop rules to monitor online content under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. The move was directed by a May executive order from President Trump. If the FCC makes changes, it could curb some of the protections offered by Section 230, including its shielding of social media companies from liability tied to content posted by users.

C-band Updates: The **Besen Group** launched a Spectrum Evaluation Tool for enterprises who are planning to bid in the **FCC**’s C-band auction in December. The firm estimates that the auction will raise over \$40bln with the average cost of \$0.46 per MHz-POP for the continental US and Alaska. -- **Harmonic** is partnering with **SES** for technology upgrades associated with the latter’s plan to transition operations off the lower 300MHz of the C-band. SES will use Harmonic’s software solutions to maintain the quality of its satellite video delivery while fast-tracking the freeing of spectrum for 5G.

AT&T Starts Tender Offers: **AT&T** is offering to purchase for cash any and all of 18 outstanding notes, in any and all offers. The offer expires at 5pm on Friday, and tenders of notes submitted may be validity withdrawn at any time prior to the deadline. AT&T is also offering to purchase up to the maximum tender amounts for three additional notes. The early tender deadline is 5pm on Aug 7.

Daytime Emmys: The Daytime Emmys unveiled the winners for the children, lifestyle & animation categories Sunday evening. **Amazon Prime Video, HBO** and **Netflix** each won six Daytime Emmys. **Disney Channel** brought home five, and **Disney Junior** earned four.

Doing Good: Sparklight is donating Chromebooks to students at several Title 1 schools in Mississippi, Washington, Missouri, Texas, Arkansas and Idaho. The donations are part of a Sparklight initiative to improve student access to tech in Title 1 schools. Over the past seven years, Sparklight has donated more than 1.5K Chromebooks to Title 1 schools in the markets it serves.

More Basketball: **ESPN** is expanding its **WNBA** slate, adding 13 more games to bring the total to 37 games. This is the largest WNBA schedule ever for the net, and inclusive of the previously announced 24-game schedule, each team in the league will now appear at least four times throughout the regular season. The announcement follows a massive start to the season over the weekend, with the opening match on **ABC** between the LA Sparks and Phoenix Mercury averaging 540K viewers, the most watched opener since 2012 and up 20% from the 2019 opener on ABC.

Baseball in the Age of COVID: Three **MLB** games on **Fox** all saw boosted YOY ratings over the weekend. The Yankees at Nationals was up 17% over Fox’s full-season average for primetime last year, and was the best regular-season rating for Washington on the net since 2018. The Giants at the Dodgers was a 31% increase over Fox’s 2018 average for daytime baseball telecast, and the Brewers at the Cubs was up 15% over Fox’s 2018 average for daytime baseball on the net. Games are already being canceled though because of COVID-19. Just four days after the **MLB** season kicked off, at least 14 players and staff for the Miami Marlins tested positive for coronavirus. The news comes less than 12 hours before the team was supposed to play their home opener against the Baltimore Orioles, and the game has been postponed. Players first tested positive during the opening series against the Philadelphia Phillies, and Monday night’s game between the NY Yankees and the Phillies has been postponed. The games had been limited to local TV stations.

Programming: **Discovery** and the **Science Channel** are teaming up to capture the return of SpaceX’s Crew DragonX. “Space Launch Live: Splashdown” will air live on Aug 2, 1pm. -- **Freeform** bows “Love in the Time of Corona” as a two-night event on Aug 22 at 8pm, and continuing Aug 23 at 8pm. The series will be on **Hulu** the following day. -- **MotorTrend** ordered a Season 2 of “Faster with Finnegan” for its streaming service on the MotorTrend App, set to premiere in 1Q21.

People: **Comcast, Charter** and **ViacomCBS**’ data TV platform **Blockgraph** made its first announcement since launch as a separate entity. The group named **Aleck Schleider** as its first CRO. He was most recently svp, client and data strategy for **Amobee** and **Videology**.

Just Released: The Cablefax 100 issue is [here!](#) We rank the industry’s top execs and quiz them on everything from how the pandemic has changed the industry to why “Tiger King” was such a phenomenon. Congratulations to the 100 honorees, and don’t forget to register for our virtual event celebrating the 100 as well as our Top Ops, Work Culture List and FAXIES winners.

MSO OF THE YEAR **WOW! Internet, Cable & Phone**

Since its founding in November 1996 in Denver, WOW! has made its name as an overbuilder, offering an alternative to the providers that dominated the region. It's worked, and as of March 31, WOW! counted 838,000 total subscribers across its 19-market footprint.

"We entered the marketplace really as a challenger brand and that gave us the opportunity to learn from what our competitors weren't doing well and really fill that niche," says CEO Teresa Elder. "Having an alternative for customers is really what we do well."

Since taking over the driver seat in 2017, it has been Elder's goal to bring WOW! back to its very customer-centric roots. "Our vision is really about connecting people to the world through the WOW! experience, and that is reliable, easy, pleasantly surprising every time," Elder said.

WOW! has aligned all of its employees around that vision and seen record highs for both employee and customer net promoter scores. Voluntary turnover rates have plummeted as a result of those efforts, and the benefits of putting the customer first are starting to have a real impact on what trickles back to WOW!'s investors. "As we have evolved toward being broadband-centric, which is a natural evolution of everything we've done, we're seeing that really go to the bottom line for our investors," Elder says.

WOW! was one of the first to offer 1 Gig services in over 95% of its footprint, surpassing the milestone in March 2018. Just a few months later in July, WOW! made its Whole-Home WiFi solution available across its entire footprint. The customizable mesh network solution allows customers to stream, work or browse the internet from any corner of their home.



Standing: (left to right) Teresa Elder, CEO; Mary Harrison, Katina Hayward
Seated: (left to right) Ronald Jones, James Fambrough, Willie Wright

But as operators embrace the power of their connectivity businesses, the story around video becomes a more complicated one. “Customers have more ways and more choices to watch video than ever before, and they’re clearly embracing that,” says Scott Barton, WOW!’s product SVP. “What’s really key for us is to make it as easy as possible for them to consume that content.” WOW! has experimented with a number of options in recent months, but it all began with a trial of its streaming offering at the top of the year with partners like fuboTV, Philo, SlingTV and YouTube TV in the Charleston, SC, market.

“What we found is that that was just overwhelmingly successful, and now we have launched that as our primary offering coupled with our high-speed data offering across all of our markets,” Elder explains. “We also know there are some customers who also love a curated, traditional video package and that’s where WOW! tv+ comes in.”

The operator is now rolling out WOW! tv+, an Android TV-based service, in select markets including Cleveland and Columbus, Ohio.

WOW!’s leadership has also recently experienced some change. Nancy McGee retired from her position as Chief Marketing and Sales Officer on June 15, and while she’s been proud of how much the company has invested in its people while growing its HSD subscriber base over the last few years, the way WOW! responded to the pandemic topped it all.

“We moved 1,600 employees to a work-from-home status in a matter of days, including our customer care employees. This could have been very disruptive, but our employees adapted to that move quickly and almost immediately showed us they could be as productive, or even more productive, than ever before,” McGee says. “Although I will not be at WOW! after July, I’ll be watching with great interest, and I expect great things from the team.”

Much like their competitors, WOW!’s network has been put to the test, experiencing traffic volumes like never before. In June, the operator was experiencing a 50% increase in total traffic YOY where it normally would see only 24%. At the peak of the pandemic, it saw as much as a 74% increase over normal volumes. Particular areas of increased use included the usual suspects: video conferencing, gaming and social media.

WOW! managed to navigate this difficult time even when Elder was admitted to the hospital with her own case of the coronavirus. Bill Case, WOW!’s chief information officer, served as acting CEO while Elder recovered and got back on her feet.

“The way that the team came through when I was so suddenly out and in the hospital for three weeks, they just rose to the occasion without missing a beat,” Elder says. “At the core, what this has done is made me realize how much we at WOW! really live our values, and those values are respect, integrity, a spirit of service and accountability.”



WOW! employees at work



CONGRATULATIONS TO ALL THE HONOREES!

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