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What the Industry Reads First

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Managing in Chaos: Companies Adapt to COVID-19 with New Perspective

When COVID first started disrupting the workplace, there was an initial concern that productivity would suffer. That's no longer the case, according to a trio of female leaders on a panel at **WICT's** Leadership Conference Monday. "That's the least of our worries. The worry is that people are working too much and are facing burnout," said **TV One** gm *Michelle Rice*. "So it's really just about getting that message out and leading by example, and taking your PTO time."

There's a realization that we won't be going back to the old normal, even once the pandemic ends. "I can't believe how much time I now am not spending on airplanes or at dinners or checking in or out of hotels. And the productivity is double fold," said *Kathleen Finch*, **Discovery's** chief lifestyle brands officer. "I think we have now opened bridges to doing things differently... Do we really think everyone's going to go back to an office 9 to 5 after this? That seems impossible to imagine because we've proven we can do it. It makes life more sane for a lot of people."

Liberty Global's *Soraya Loerts* reminded the panel that not everyone is working from home. "We have some very, very important jobs where those people can't work from home, and we have to be very mindful of that," said Loerts, who serves as vp, product quality. "Although 50-60% of everyone is working from home with different challenges, at the same time, we have people out there going to customers' homes, going to businesses who have different forms of anxiety—like literally scared of catching the virus. So what we have done from the start is put all of our focus on wellbeing."

Companies are looking for ways to keep the workforce connected during COVID. Rice, who was used to walking the floors of TV One's offices and interacting with employees, has taken to hosting a virtual Monday lunch or coffee chat with six employees each week from across the company to just check in. Discovery created a **Facebook** group early on for employees who are living alone so they could get together. Loerts said she has completely pivoted as a leader. "I'm almost ashamed to say that being in the office, 90% of my day was arranging stuff, making sure that things would happen, etc," she said. "Now in the remote world it's clear things will happen even if I'm not there and I need to spend more time with the teams."

COVID's also changed companies outwardly, with brands like **HGTV** and **Food Network** putting cameras in the hands of talent for self-produced shows. "It actually has enabled us to think so much more creatively, to pivot and

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work very quickly in brand new ways that we never thought we could,” Finch said, adding that Discovery ended up having its highest 2Q ratings ever.

Like other ISPs, Liberty Global, which operates across Europe, saw the primetime of network usage moving from 7pm to 7am and basically continuing until people went to bed. TV One also jumped into virtual productions, but looked for ways it could “put a little medicine in the food,” as Rice put it. “Being a network that targets People of Color, African American, one of the things we really felt a responsibility to do was to also use our platforms for information,” she said. “You saw a lot of PSAs about wearing masks and being safe because COVID has definitely impacted our community disproportionately.”

As for what the next business normal will be, Finch predicts it will be a customized approach. “I’m amazed at the three companies that are represented here. We have not missed a beat,” she said. “Our companies are doing well. Our employees are being taken care of. Everyone is feeling like they can keep moving and keep our customers happy... It’s whatever the situation requires and the rules should not necessarily be the same thing for every single person.”

Comcast Begins Issuing Sports Refunds: With the MLB regular season wrapping up, video providers are revisiting those RSN games that weren’t played in April-June. **Comcast** has begun applying courtesy adjustments to customers’ accounts in their October billing statements. The amount of the adjustment will vary depending on the markets, applicable RSNs and the relevant adjustment period. And the credit is only in markets where RSN costs are being refunded back to Comcast. For example, customers in Georgia, who receive **Fox Sports South**, saw a \$11.54 credit on their bills. Comcast said it is committed to giving 100% of what it receives to customers as a credit. Those who paid RSN fees in April through June, but are no longer a customer can complete an online form by Jan 5 for a credit or check. While some other Leagues have missed games, refunds sound iffy. “Because the NBA and NHL regular seasons were close to completion when they paused in March, we are less likely to receive adjustments from the RSNs or Leagues for those sports. In the event we do receive any adjustments from RSNs for those or other sports, we will offer a courtesy adjustment to our customers of 100% of what we receive,” Comcast said. No other providers we talked to Monday had as specific a plan as Comcast. “We are continuing to work through the details with all the affected networks for any COVID-related rebate for canceled sports programming. As stated previously, we are committed to passing any rebate back to our customers and we will do so once the details are finalized,” **Charter** said. **Cox** reiterated that if it receives money back from networks, it will pass all of it along to customers.

FCC Tackling Net Neutrality Again: The debate over net neutrality will make an appearance at the FCC’s October open

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meeting. FCC chmn *Ajit Pai* has circulated an Order for consideration that addresses three issues tied to the Restoring Internet Freedom Order that the **US Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit** asked the Commission to take a closer look at: the Order's effect on public safety, its effect on the Commission's ability to regulate pole attachments and its effects on the Lifeline program's ability to support broadband. "Having reviewed the input received, the law, and the facts, I am confident that the regulatory framework we set forth in the Restoring Internet Freedom Order appropriately and adequately addresses each issue," Pai said in a blog post Monday. Democratic commish *Jessica Rosenworcel* said rather than taking an opportunity to right something it got wrong, the FCC is choosing to double down on its mistakes. "It's insane that this is happening now, during a pandemic when we rely on internet access for so much of day-to-day life," Rosenworcel said in a statement. "It's also cruel that this is our priority when the crisis has exposed just how vast our digital divide is and how much more work we have to do for broadband to reach 100% of us—no matter who we are or where we live." Pai also circulated rules to establish a 5G Fund for Rural America, which will be voted on during the meeting. The program would use multi-round reverse auctions to distribute up to \$9bln, in two phases, to bring voice and 5G broadband service to areas of the country unlikely to see deployment of 5G-capable networks without subsidies.

D&I Homework: Over the last decade, businesses have increasingly stepped into societal conversations, including those about race and equity. *George Floyd's* death escalated corporate involvement, which **NCTA** pres/CEO *Michael Powell* said shouldn't be dismissed. "Pledges are never enough, but I wouldn't take them too lightly," he said during the first day of **WICT's** Leadership Conference. "They're public declarations for the cause, but also a commitment to be part of the solution." He said businesses run on metrics and must measure themselves on D&I and pay equity. But he also encouraged companies to get more creative and branch out beyond employee resource groups and chief diversity officers. "Most companies don't think of themselves as educational institutions. What I realized is that so much of America's racial experiences are completely misunderstood by contemporary people, Black and White," Powell said, giving a shout-out to *Isabel Wilkerson's* book "Caste." "I would love to see companies—I'm trying to do it in mine—say, 'look, we're going to read this book and we're going to have this class, and we're going to have these people come in. And we're going to learn a little about what lynching was and prison reform...' Make it a requirement of your employees to have a richer knowledge and experience base for dealing with these issues. Otherwise, you're just giving them tasks, metrics to try to game."

Gearing Up for NAMIC: Diversity Week may look a little different in 2020, but that hasn't stopped **NAMIC** from hosting its annual conference, coinciding with the org's 40th anniversary. The event usually takes place over a day and a half in NYC, and this year will be spread virtually over four days, beginning at 12pm on Tuesday. "We're still offering a rich slate of professional development and networking opportunities to help our participants meet their diversity and inclusion goals," said NAMIC pres/CEO *A. Shuanise Washington*. Those include things such as virtual happy hours and meet-and-greets, joint sessions with **WICT** and annual awards ceremonies. And while this is the first virtual conference for NAMIC, the org has seen some benefits. Registration is up 40% YOY, and will feature a mix of live and pre-recorded content. NAMIC's conference is split up into four themes by day: Teamwork Tuesday, Workforce Wednesday, Tech and Culture Thursday and Future Leaders Friday. Washington holds a soft spot for Friday's programming, saying that the theme is part of her strategy to introduce NAMIC to college students and other emerging leaders who are interested in becoming involved in cable and communications. This year's theme is "Building a Legacy: The Future is Now," with **ViacomCBS** pres/CEO *Bob Bakish* and **Black News Channel** pres/CEO *Princell Hair* serving as honorary co-chairs. "Throughout every aspect of the conference, we were really thinking about who represents legacy, and who represents the future?" said Washington. "[Bakish] has been a staunch supporter of diversity and inclusion, and represents more than two decades of legacy. [Hair] represents the future opportunities to build legacy in our industry." This year's conference will also feature Town Hall, "The Missing Pieces: Race & Relevancy in the Workplace," which Washington described as a "key point" behind this year's conference. It will be made up of CEOs and C-Suite execs, including Bakish, Hair, *Monica Gil*, evp, chief administrative and marketing officer at **Telemundo**, and *Detavio Samuels*, co-head and COO at **REVOLT Media**. "They will have an opportunity to talk about what this current climate means in the context of their companies, what actions they have taken, what lessons they have learned, and what they would still like to learn," said Washington.

WICT Notebook: **WICT's** 2020 Leadership Conference kicked off Monday with a poetry reading from US youth poet laureate and activist *Amanda Gorman*, and its message of doing what's necessary to build a brighter future for all Americans rang through the rest of the opening session. "2020 has been a testament to your resilience and dedication—resilience to pivot and bounce as life dictates, be it with family, friends, your community, your company. And dedication to charting this new course with strength and resolve as well as empathy and vulnerability," **WICT** pres/CEO *Maria Brennan* said. "As we reflect on the months that have passed, we're reminded of the importance of using our voices and our platforms to celebrate both our similarities and our differences." **Comcast** chief diversity officer/evp, administration *Karen Buchholz*

addressed the civil unrest in recent months, calling it an empowering time for her as someone working in D&I, but a mad-dening one as well. “Be empathetic and be open to hard conversations,” she advised. “For me, that growth mindset has led me to dedicate myself to allyship, which I believe is my most powerful tool for battling racism and injustice as a white woman working in an industry and system where many decisionmakers are white men.”

Rovner In At NBCU: Susan Rovner has finally been named chmn of **NBCU**'s entertainment programming division. Rovner exited her position as pres, **Warner Bros TV** on Friday, and stepped into her new role Monday. Rovner's purview will include scripted and unscripted content, late-night shows, NBC's cable portfolio and Peacock. Her appointment is the latest move in a restructuring by NBCU chmn, television and streaming *Mark Lazarus* and NBCU CEO *Jeff Shell*. “Susan is the bold creative force we need as we rethink the future of our business,” Lazarus said in a statement.

Distribution: **Frontier** dropped **MSG Networks** from its lineup as of Oct 1. “Frontier worked diligently to negotiate a fair deal up until the contract with the programmer expired. Unfortunately, we were unable to reach an agreement due to the provider's financial demands,” said Frontier. MSG said it was disappointed. “We encourage subscribers to switch to one of the many alternate operators that carry MSG Networks' award-winning programming, which includes hundreds of exclusive live games of seven local sports teams,” a spokesperson said. Frontier has lost several RSNs recently. Last month, Frontier lost **YES Network** as well as several of the **Fox Sports** RSNs now owned by **Sinclair**, including **Fox Sports Southwest** and **Fox Sports Sun**. It dropped NY RSN **SNY** last year. Frontier filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganization earlier this year and is targeting exiting the process in early 2021. -- **Altice USA** is adding **Stingray Karaoke** Subscription on Demand to Optimum's SVOD offerings. Customers can subscribe to its for a monthly rate of \$7.

Generation Stream: **Hulu** unveiled additional research from its Generation Stream report during a panel at (virtual) **Advertising Week** on Monday. The fourth chapter of the report takes a deeper look at implications for advertising among the 90% of Americans aged 13-54 that stream video content. *Julie De Traglia*, vp & head of research and insights, said that the method of viewing, mood and intent behind consuming content all have implications for advertising on a streaming service. In the report, eight “macro moods” emerged for when a consumer watches content. Those include social (everyone is talking about it); cultured (beyond social circles, a deeper drive into cultural conversations); intelligent (leaning toward documentaries, horizon expanding); productive (looking to feel inspired); gratuitous (a binge, lean into personal preferences); emotional (shows that pull at heartstrings); soothing (predictable, calming, nostalgic); and relaxing (easy to watch, connects to culture). “Although one would think that Generation Stream would be exhausted by the abundance of choice, they're not,” said De Traglia. Indeed, 86% of respondents said they were not overwhelmed, with 75% wanting “lots of choice” for content. Additionally, the report found that viewers pay 33% more attention to ads when it comes to on demand content versus live content, and that longer viewing or binge sessions lead to higher attention to ads.

4K Tennis: During the French Open, **Tennis Channel** is teaming with **Altice USA**, **Comcast** and **DirecTV** to bring live 4K coverage—the first time tennis is being shown in the US. The live 4K video of the tournament's *Philippe Chatrier* main court will continue throughout week two of the 15-day event, Sept 27-Oct. 11.

Ratings: **CNN**'s newest original series “First Ladies” debuted Sunday night at 10pm, becoming the most-watched in cable news among total viewers and A25-54. The episode *Michelle Obama* earned 2.155mln viewers, and was the net's best original series premiere since the 2016 debut of “Race for the White House.”

People: **ACA Connects** named *Nathan Penrod* its digital media specialist. He most recently served as a marketing and graphic design specialist at KY municipal utility **Frankfort Plant Board**. -- The **Telecommunications Industry Association** tapped *Melissa Newman* as its vp, government affairs. She previously held roles at **CenturyLink** and the **FCC**.



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