

Cablefax Daily™

WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

Decisions, Decisions: COVID-19's Delta Variant Delays Returns to Office

It has been 17 months since the COVID-19 pandemic, and while much has changed, just as much has remained the same. Remote work has become a way of life for many, and just as some companies across cable and media were preparing to return to the office, the Delta variant reared its head.

Companies now are in re-evaluation mode, trying to strike the right balance between remote work, in-office meetings and encouraging their employees to get vaccinated.

WOW! employees had been working remotely for much of the pandemic, and a slow transition back into the office was initiated at the start of the summer. Much of those plans have recently shifted in light of the Delta variant.

"We began re-opening offices to employees on a volunteer basis on July 12 as part of WOW!'s Hybrid Work Model," a company spokesperson told **CFX**. "However, only a few weeks later, as the Delta variant began to cause spikes in cases across the country, we paused our phased approach to reopening offices and our non-essential employees are back to working remotely." WOW! currently has no plans to require vaccinations for its employees.

ImOn Communications was preparing to bring its employees back into the office when the Delta variant caused a notable increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in Iowa. In-person meetings are on hold for now, but the provider is continuing to remain agile enough to easily flow between a

socially distanced environment and what was business as usual in 2019.

"We've learned how to work remote and we can move to a remote configuration very, very quickly," ImOn president/CEO *Patrice Carroll* said in an interview. "Although our intent is to bring everybody back to work because it supports that kind of culture that is important to our company, we live in a state that has lots of snow and blizzards... there's definitely some benefit from learning that we actually can go virtual."

The majority of **Charter's** employees have been in the field or working in a hybrid environment during the pandemic. The operator has been encouraging its employees to get vaccinated and has promoted the various vaccination options to its workforce, offering information on each and hosting on-site vaccination clinics for those interested.

Programmers are facing the same decisions: to bring folks back to the office or continue encouraging remote work. **Via-comCBS** has pushed back the "Green phase" of its return to office, which would signify most of its employees returning to the office, until October 18 in light of the Delta variant. While the company is in its "Yellow phase," it is requiring that employees working in its U.S. locations be fully vaccinated with some exceptions for certain union, production and essential staff.

"We are assessing if we will make this vaccination requirement mandatory for all employees returning to the office in the Green phase, and will update you with the specifics of this policy as soon as it is finalized, with sufficient time for

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WINNING RECIPE

Kristin Johnson | *Co-Founder*
Hotwire Communications

MY PERSONAL SUPERPOWER IS: BUILDING GREAT TEAMS

Johnson began her career as a chef, but has figured out the ingredients to excel in the telecom space. She has built Hotwire into a lightning-fast ISP that consistently scores well on PCMag's speed index. During the pandemic, the company grew 30%, installed more fiber and activated its network in more properties than in 2019 and 2018 combined. All that hard work hasn't gone unnoticed. Funds managed by Blackstone Tactical Opportunities and Blackstone Infrastructure Partners announced an investment in Hotwire in April that should help Johnson and team continue to innovate and challenge incumbents. She's also determined to play a key role in bringing the internet to all, with Hotwire launching the nonprofit arm Empowering Communities Foundation and scoring more than \$5.1 million in RDOF support.



BULLISH OUTLOOK

Jonathan Bullock | *EVP, Corporate Development & Government*
Hotwire Communications

MY PERSONAL SUPERPOWER IS: I CAN FISH ALL DAY AND CATCH NO FISH



Bullock seems to have his hand in almost everything at Hotwire, with a special passion for bringing broadband to every home. That made him a natural fit to serve as director of Hotwire's newly established charitable arm, Empowering Communities. The foundation brought fiber internet to the South Dade migrant community, but Bullock knew broadband alone wasn't enough. He ensured students received a "Connection Kit" consisting of a backpack filled with a laptop and other school supplies, while also arranging computer training for students and families. To keep narrowing the gap, Bullock took the lead on Hotwire's successful application for Rural Digital Opportunity Fund support and will head the multi-year efforts to provide 1Gbps service to parts of Florida.

DIRECT LINE OF COMMUNICATION

Mandy Esposito | *SVP, Operations*
Hotwire Communications

MY PERSONAL SUPERPOWER IS: EMPATHY

Esposito joined Hotwire from Altice in 2018 and immediately got to work overhauling customer service. During the pandemic, she led the charge for virtual, contactless service without losing the white glove approach. It meant launching a new SMS-enabled text message service called Fision Direct to streamline customers' experiences. She also helped launch an AR-enabled product called TechSee several months ahead of schedule in order to meet the unexpected, sudden need. It relies on the use of AR-powered cameras on customers' smart devices to allow contactless visits.



you and your teams to satisfy any mandatory requirements,” ViacomCBS president/CEO *Bob Bakish* said in a memo to employees last week. “Please know that we’ve made these decisions out of an abundance of caution for the health and safety of everyone in the ViacomCBS community, which has and will always be our priority.”

FUBOTV NOT AFRAID OF SPORTS DTC MOVEMENT

fuboTV CEO *David Gandler* isn’t afraid of a potential increase in the movement of some sports onto direct-to-consumer platforms. **NBCU’s Peacock** has just finished delivering a slew of Olympic content to its users and **ViacomCBS** has kept **Paramount+** top of mind in its acquisition of sports rights since the platform’s launch. Gandler said during an investor conference appearance Wednesday that he doesn’t see a world where a sports-centric vMVPD like his could lose access to a worrying amount of content. “I think a worst-case scenario is probably the fact that you’ll see games concurrently on an SVOD app and an app like fubo, which is a unified aggregation of all the channels. So it’ll give you a chance to pick a \$15 **CBS** app or **Peacock** app. Or, at some point in time, you get the whole bundle in one place with a really great user experience and potentially a whole betting experience that’s overlaid on top of that for extra interactive engagement,” he said.

CABLE REACTS TO INFRASTRUCTURE BILL PASSING

The cable industry is celebrating the Senate’s passage of the bipartisan infrastructure plan negotiated between *President Joe Biden* and Senate Republicans, one that provides \$65 billion for broadband expansion and affordability. **NCTA** and **ACA Connects** are both supportive of the legislation and how

it directly addresses the need for service in unserved areas and increased support for low-income citizens that may need a helping hand to get connected. “The bipartisan infrastructure legislation demonstrates that policymakers can find common ground on issues that are important for America’s future, including the need to get all Americans connected to robust and reliable broadband service,” **NCTA** president/CEO *Michael Powell* said in a statement. “Our industry looks forward to being a productive partner in the effort to close existing digital gaps and to continuing our ongoing investment in networks that will speed our country on the path to 10 gigabit speeds.” **Public Knowledge** applauded the legislation as a significant step towards closing the digital divide, but said Washington will need to do more if it wants to commit to making affordable broadband available to all. The consumer advocate expressed disappointment that the Affordable Connectivity Fund reduced the low-income subsidy established in the **FCC’s** Emergency Broadband Benefit program from \$50/month to \$30/month. It also said the bill falls short when it comes to the amount of money needed to completely close the divide, and everything needs to be done to eliminate risk of waste. “We will also need states and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration to ensure that the deployment funds available through this legislation prioritize projects that build future-proof networks that can add capacity over time,” **Public Knowledge** president/CEO *Chris Lewis* said in a statement. “Most can agree that network demand will only increase, so we must build with decades of growth in mind, not incremental improvement.”



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OLYMPICS DELIVER UPTICK IN PEACOCK VIEWERSHIP

Peacock has been flying high thanks to the athletes that gathered in Tokyo to battle it out for a gold medal over the past few weeks. About 1 in 8 Tokyo Olympic viewers (12%) said they watched the Olympics on the streamer, according to the latest research from Hub. For those who watched on Peacock, 75% were current subscribers, 25% had never sampled Peacock before or were lapsed subscribers. Most of the Peacock viewers who were not current subscribers prior to the Olympics said they would continue to watch the service following the Olympics.

CONNECTED NATION, AT&T DELIVER FREE INTERNET

Nonprofit **Connected Nation** completed the deployment of 35,000 hotspots equipped with more than a year of free internet service last week. **AT&T** committed \$10 million to fund the initiative and worked with the nonprofit to implement it. The program opened in November 2020 to nonprofits and schools seeking to help their most vulnerable students, including those experiencing homelessness, in foster care or have disabilities. A list of awardees, which included 124 schools and nonprofits across 26 states, was released in February. Awardees were granted the opportunity to seek up to 500 hotspots per application. Some organizations opted to delay their hotspot and internet service delivery so the year of free internet service would coincide with the start of the fall school semester.

SENATORS TAKE AIM AT BIG TECH

Senators *Richard Blumenthal* (D-CT), *Marsha Blackburn* (R-TN) and *Amy Klobuchar* (D-MN) took another stab at Big Tech Wednesday, introducing a bill that would set clear and enforceable rules to protect competition and strengthen consumer protections within the app market. The Open App Markets Act would open up competitive avenues for startup apps and third-party app stores while preventing app stores from disadvantaging developers. Safeguards would also be put in place to

further protect the privacy, security and safety of consumers. “For years, **Apple** and **Google** have squashed competitors and kept consumers in the dark—pocketing hefty windfalls while acting as supposedly benevolent gatekeepers of this multi-billion dollar market,” Blumenthal said in a statement. “This bipartisan bill will help break these tech giants’ ironclad grip, open the app economy to new competitors, and give mobile users more control over their own devices.”

CARRIAGE

Legal and true crime network **Law&Crime** is now available on **TDS** and **TDS TV+**. – **Frndly TV** has struck a new partnership with country music and lifestyle network **Circle** that will make the latter’s content available to Frndly TV subscribers. The linear net arrived on the provider Wednesday and Circle’s VOD library will become available to Frndly TV customers within the next few weeks. This marks the seventh new channel on Frndly since February and 21st overall. – **Future Today** is launching three free streaming services on **Rogers Ignite TV** and **Ignite SmartStream**. Apps **FilmRise**, **Fawesome** and **iFood.tv** will bring more than 10,000 hours of content to Rogers Ignite Entertainment customers. The companies have also expanded their partnership, and **Rogers Sports & Media** will now provide advertising sales representation for all of Future Today’s streaming channels across Canada.

PROGRAMMING

Nickelodeon is expanding the “Spongebob Squarepants” universe with 52 episodes across the three series. The network greenlit 13 additional episodes of “The Patrick Star Show” and Season 13 of the original “Spongebob Squarepants” series. **Paramount+** renewed “Kamp Koral: Spongebob’s Under Years” for a second season and added more episodes to the first season. – **HBO Max** is renewing series “Wahl Street” for a second season. – Docuseries “Fiasco” premieres Sept 19 at 10pm on **Epix**. – Documentary “Detainee 001” debuts on **Showtime** Sept 10 at 9pm.

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Change

Commentary by Steve Effros

This is, in part, one of my continuing journalism rants. I've worked at two broadcast networks and the New York Times. Each time in the newsroom. I've just never seen the type of reporting I'm witnessing these days. And I'm not talking about the obviously positioned advocates, I'm talking about the general press; the folks who think they are simply providing "the news."

There is no such thing as "unbiased" reporting. That's ok. We all come to any situation, witness or report on any event with our own history, our own knowledge and that has to be reflected in our reporting even if we try to "balance" it. But it seems to me the current crop of reporters has lost any sense of just plain old reality. The best example of all this is how the press is currently reporting "change."

The disaster that is COVID-19 and the Delta variant is indicative. The government, the medical community, the scientists all focused initially on keeping surfaces clean, washing our hands, spraying every tabletop and door handle. But then they subsequently learned that this particular virus spreads primarily through the air. So the focus shifted. Masks, social distancing and the like. It was a change. And then again, when the vaccines turned out to be extremely effective they were touted, and still are, but the variant replicates so fast that even vaccinated folks can (in statistically very rare numbers) turn up with a lot of virus in their nose. It doesn't hurt them as much, but it's there. That's a change.

So how is this reported? Well, the seeming focus of a lot of articles is that somehow the government, the scientists, the doctors are "confusing" us by adopting different paths as they recognize changes! How is that "confusing"? That's what they're supposed to do, and it befuddles me that we seem to have a generation of reporters who think, or expect, that once a statement or recommendation is made it cannot or should not ever change! That it's confusing to do so, and the public can't understand what's happening. That's just not reality, and it's lousy reporting.

Just follow that "anti-change" logic a little bit and see where it goes. As an example, what if all those roads they are building around major cities to deal with the crush of commuters suddenly are less used because something happened that resulted in a lot of folks, and companies, deciding they really did like distributed working, "Work at home". Would we really need all those new roads? Would anyone seriously reconsider those public works extravaganzas?

In our business, for instance, the government is about to spend billions of dollars focused on spreading ultra-high-speed broadband throughout the country. I won't argue here about the debate over the need for all that speed, but I will point out that it's entirely possible, within a short period of time, that technology will provide us with different solutions. What if the satellites that Elon Musk is putting up, or the successor to "5G" wireless technology actually work at scale, with speed? Admittedly, today, there's a lot of engineering doubt about that. But what if? The wise thing to do would be to acknowledge that change in circumstances and at least redirect a whole lot of money. Think that will happen? Are we so immune to reacting to change these days that once a course is set we refuse to change it? That certainly seems to be where our politics has gone.

It just seems to me that we need to start somewhere to regain perspective, and good journalism is not a bad place to do that. It could start by acknowledging that change is not confusing, it's normal, and it's necessary for us to change with it.



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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