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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

Go Big, Go Home: COVID-19's Major Impacts on Reality TV Production

From production postponements to casting shifts, the pandemic has affected television in myriad anticipated, and unexpected, ways. In the reality sector, nearly 21 months of many viewers sticking closer to home and social distancing finds production houses and networks putting a new spin on an old question: Go bigger—as in showcasing grander homes, bigger vacations, more aspirational content—or go home—with more self-filmed, DIY-focused content?

The answer is decidedly in the former camp at **Discovery Inc.** and its stable of networks including **HGTV**, **Food Network** and **TLC**.

Kathleen Finch, Discovery chief lifestyle brands officer, says viewers are definitely thinking “bigger is better” these days, and they’ll get it in spades from HGTV, for one, with new series ‘Lil Jon Wants To Do What?’ and new seasons of “Celebrity IOU” and “Rock the Block.”

“You’ll also see more lavish homes in our **Discovery+** follow-doc series like ‘Kendra Sells Hollywood’ and ‘Selling the Hamptons,’” Finch said.

“After so much time at home quarantining, people were watching TV series that had to be scaled down out of necessity. I think viewers have built up an appetite for big, daring programs,” said *Matt Sharp*, CEO of **Sharp Entertainment**, which produces the “90 Day Fiance” franchise among other content.

“The size of new content has had to be limited as the world has battled the virus for nearly two years. The audience is ready to explore vast new worlds and see shows that are epic in scope,” added Sharp, who said his company has been developing programming “with an eye toward what I believe the audience craves and have several large scale productions in the works for 2022.”

“Living through quarantine has everyone thinking about their homes differently and wanting them to be as comfortable and functional as possible,” she said. “Home renovations are at an all-time high, as is relocating to new, larger homes. Working from home has people creating high-tech home offices, building gourmet kitchens because they’ve gotten into cooking, and constructing high-end home theaters and lavish in-home gyms.”

Discovery networks have also evolved the way they are looking at their talent. “Seeing talent go through the pandemic in personal ways like that really emphasized the important example of real, genuine experts. It’s made that factor even more important in our talent choices going forward,” Finch said, recalling a pandemic moment from *Ina Garten* of Food Network’s “Barefoot Contessa.”

“Who can forget Ina Garten’s giant Covid cocktail made in her Hamptons kitchen and shared with millions of fans?” she said.

Whether it’s cocktails or condos, Finch believes one thing’s for sure. “Viewers no longer want to see the pandemic

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featured in reality programming. Early on HGTV could cover a home makeover story that involved FaceTime design consultations, a TLC '90 Day Fiance' story with drama unfolding over **Zoom**, or an episode of 'Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives' focusing on take-out meals," she said.

"But Covid fatigue has everyone wanting to escape and to avoid storylines that remind them of the pandemic. We're greenlighting series that bring us back to the before days when home makeovers and dating and restaurant visits didn't require masks. We're all about happy endings and happy stories and giving viewers a chance to escape from the real world for a bit." – *Cathy Applefeld Olson*

WARNERMEDIA-DISCOVERY GETS OK FROM EUROPE

Discovery announced Wednesday that the European Commission has granted unconditional antitrust clearance of its proposed acquisition of **WarnerMedia** from **AT&T**. "Today, we move one important step closer to creating Warner Bros. Discovery, a premier entertainment company that will be one of the world's leading investors in premium content and one positioned to serve consumers with what we believe will be the most complete content offering under one roof," Discovery President/CEO *David Zaslav* said in a statement. The transaction is still expected to close by mid-2022. Under the terms of the deal, which was announced in May, AT&T would receive an aggregate amount of \$43 billion in a combination of cash, debt and WarnerMedia retaining certain debt.

T-MOBILE AND MORE WITHDRAW FROM CES 2022

The surge of COVID-19 cases tied to the Omicron variant

has a number of companies rethinking their plans for **CES 2022**. **T-Mobile** CEO *Mike Sievert* was scheduled to deliver a keynote at the show, but he'll no longer be doing so, in-person or virtually. Additionally, the wireless carrier said it will "significantly limit" its in-person participation. "T-Mobile will continue to serve as a CES sponsor and title sponsor of the DRL Championship Race but the vast majority of our team will not be traveling to Las Vegas," T-Mobile said in a statement. "T-Mobile's entire team looks forward to an in-person CES 2023, which we hope includes an on-stage keynote in front of a live audience. We extend our sincere thanks to the entire CES staff for their hard work during these challenging times." **Amazon**, **TikTok**, **Twitter** and **Meta** (formerly known as **Facebook**) have also all decided to end their plans to attend the conference in-person. The show is scheduled to be held in-person in Las Vegas from Jan. 5-8 and is requiring all attendees to be fully vaccinated. Masks are required indoors, and the show's organizers are prepared to adjust health protocols as necessary.

CTIA, AVIATION GROUPS SHAKE HANDS ON C-BAND

CTIA, the **Aerospace Industries Association** and **Airlines for America** announced Wednesday they will be officially working together to ensure the deployment of C-band spectrum for 5G preserves aviation safety. "We are pleased that after productive discussions we will be working together to share the available data from all parties to identify the specific areas of concern for aviation. The best technical experts from across both industries

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will be working collectively to identify a path forward, in coordination with the **FAA** and **FCC**,” the groups said in a joint statement. “Our belief is that by working collaboratively in good faith on a data-driven solution, we can achieve our shared goal of deploying 5G while preserving aviation safety.” The announcement comes after **Verizon** and **AT&T** delayed deployments of C-band spectrum into their networks for 5G service in light of pushback from the FAA. The agency claimed there were a number of safety concerns that needed to be addressed in terms of if or how the deployment of that spectrum could interfere with aviation equipment, including landing gear. The issue even gained the attention of a number of past FCC chairs, who urged all stakeholders to come together to ensure spectrum managements like this don’t arise in the future. CTIA said the wireless industry remains fully committed to launching 5G in the C-band on Jan. 5.

IGER ON WHAT DISNEY+ NEEDS TO GROW

Disney veteran *Bob Iger* is retiring at the end of the year after nearly five decades with the company, and he’s proud of the legacy he’s leaving behind. He’s passed on the CEO reins to *Bob Chapek*, but he still has plenty of ideas on what Disney needs to do to maintain its position in the streaming wars. One of his top priorities were he to stay on longer would be to diversify **Disney+**’s content offerings. “We have to continue to evolve and all that that means, not just changing but taking advantage of opportunities aggressively,” Iger said in an interview with **CNBC** Tuesday. “I think there probably needs [to be] more volume. There probably needs to be more dimensionality, meaning more programming and more content for more people, different demographics. But [Bob Chapek] is aware of that. He’s addressing those issues.” He also took the moment to look back at his career, including missed opportunities. Top among them: **YouTube**. “I remember when YouTube was sold. One of the things I always rued because when YouTube emerged, we didn’t see it first,” he said. “I’m the one who put ‘America’s Funniest Videos’ on ABC in 1989, which was user-generated content... It’s evolved tremendously. Why didn’t I think of that?”

STREAMERS SHARE 2021 VIEWING DATA

Hulu is offering subscribers the opportunity to see their personalized viewing data from the last year. Subscribers can visit YourTVDNA.com to see their personalized viewing habits from throughout 2021, breaking down everything from their most watched genres to how many pieces of content they streamed through the platform. As for overall data from the streamer, adult animation was the top genre based on hours watched. It was a strong year for Hulu originals with “Only Murders in the Building” emerging as Hulu’s top comedy series while “Nine Perfect Strangers” clocked in as the platform’s most-watched series ever. It was the first year of Hulu Watch Party, the streamer’s co-viewing experience, and subscribers used it to watch

favorites like “Love Island,” “The Handmaid’s Tale” and “My Hero Academia.” Over at **Paramount+**, “Star Trek: Discovery” surfaced as the streamer’s peak original series followed by the revival of “iCarly.” Live sports was the key driver of new subscribers with top performing sports properties being the **NFL**, **UEFA** and **Concacaf**. Scripted series “Mayor of Kingstown” is the most-watched series on the service this quarter and claimed the title of the most-watched original series in its first 30 days. As for what Paramount+ subscribers are bingeing, it continues to be all about “Spongebob Squarepants.”

HBO MAX CELEBRATES WHAT IS TO COME

HBO Max released a campaign showcasing its lineup of original programming for 2022. Viewers will be able to preview never-before-seen footage from upcoming series like “Pretty Little Liars: Original Sin,” “Julia” and “Love & Death.” The spot also introduces Warner Bros Streaming Exclusives, a collection that includes a number of films made exclusively for the streamer. “House Party,” “The Fallout,” and “Scoob: Holiday Haunt” are among those scheduled to debut in 2022.

DOING GOOD

WOW! made a \$15,000 donation to the **American Red Cross** to support communities impacted by the tornadoes that touched down in six states earlier this month. The **Verizon** Foundation also stepped up to help, donating \$100,000 to the organization for regional disaster relief. “By partnering with the American Red Cross, we know that people in the areas devastated by tornadoes over the weekend will receive the resources they need to begin to rebuild their lives and recover from these storms quickly.”

PROGRAMMING

VH1 reality series “My Celebrity Dream Wedding” joins the network’s Monday night lineup on Jan. 3 at 9pm. The 20-episode series follows top wedding planners offering engaged couples celebrity-inspired ceremonies and receptions on a budget. – **TV ONE** is airing a town hall breaking down the year’s pivotal moments and how they’ve impacted the African American community. “Represent Our Voice: 2021 A Year In Review” will premiere on Dec. 26 at 12pm ET and be moderated by **CNN** Political Analyst *Karen Finney*.

PEOPLE

Disney named *Horacio Gutierrez* SVP/General Counsel/Secretary, effective Feb. 1. He’ll join from **Spotify**, where he most recently served as Head of Global Affairs and Chief Legal Officer. Gutierrez will succeed *Alan Braverman* who is retiring after nearly two decades as the company’s General Counsel.

EDITOR’S NOTE

The next issue of **Cablefax Daily** will be published on Jan. 3. We will keep you apprised of any breaking news, including carriage disruptions, via Cablefax.com and news alerts.

Think about that for a minute...

Realignment

Commentary by Steve Effros

Last week I wrote about the potential impact and value of “new eyes” on issues and the equal value of “old eyes” providing needed background and perspective. This realignment, the “new eyes,” be they newly elected officials, newly appointed regulators or newly named corporate leaders always bring with them not only pre-existing biases, but a willingness to see things in a different light. They are more willing to effectuate change. Indeed one of their biggest problems from my point of view is they often come with the assumption that their job is to create change, no matter what.

The “old eyes” tend to try to keep things the way they are, because they have seen why decisions and actions have been made the way they have. It’s also easier to resist change than to embrace it. As I noted, this is all going to play out on a very public stage in the coming new year when it comes to telecommunications.

The “old” folks are still around, and they continue to push in the same direction they’ve been traveling for years. A great example is Senator Markey’s reintroduction of a bill, with lots of “old eye” support, to help fund PEG channels, that’s the public, educational and government channels that were built into the old cable rules. Those rules restricted a franchise authority from imposing a tax (they call them “fees”) on cable companies of more than five percent. Those “fees” wind up being paid by customers as part of the cost of their service.

The game played for a long time was to impose the franchise fee, and then have additional requirements to fund studios, equipment, training, and all sorts of other stuff for the PEG channels. The cities and towns did not want to include all those costs as part of the fees they were charging. The FCC said they were part of that ceiling. Court challenges went in the FCC’s direction and now Mr. Markey and friends want to turn that around with the “Protecting Community Television Act.” The result would be more costs for cable customers, the only ones required to provide PEG channels.

The irony is that since the PEG channel idea was initially

promoted by folks like Mr. Markey, we have had the blossoming, indeed the explosion of the internet, broadband, streaming, and the ability of anyone to say or show just about anything they want at any time on a distribution system, broadband, that has swept away any notion that there is a problem being able to communicate. Indeed, if there is any problem these days, it’s that we’re communicating too much!

But “old eyes” also are aware that cable is one of the only forms of that communication which is still regulated to the point that they have the ability to tax it for specific communications purposes. They’re looking backwards, not forward.

On the other side, the “new eyes” are looking at the internet and concluding that they were not necessarily wise, insisting on a “wide open west” lack of regulation of broadband “edge” providers. That “freedom” has now resulted in massive companies using algorithms to promote use at the expense of privacy and the intentional foment of conflict. Politicians and regulators now want to use new mechanisms, such as the FTC, antitrust laws and new oversight to regain control.

In the midst of all this, the various competitive companies are realigning, getting rid of some of their older lobbying associations and starting a slew of new ones because different companies, with different business plans, are finding they cannot effectively combine to represent themselves. For cable, the NCTA and the ACA are in constant search of new identities and clarity on exactly what and who they represent. More on that as we enter 2022. Have a good one.



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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