

Cablefax Daily™

WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

Continued Fallout: IMD, Comcast Dropping Russian-Language Channels

It's not just English-language, Russian state-owned **RT** disappearing from some U.S. distributors. **International Media Distribution** (IMD), a division of **Comcast-NBCUniversal**, informed U.S. pay TV distributors that it would be removing Russian-language channels **RTN-WMBD**, **Channel One Russia** and **THT Comedy** as of midnight tonight.

IMD provides international channels in the U.S. to a slew of MVPDs, including **Altice USA**, **Charter**, **Comcast**, **Cox**, **fubo TV** and **Verizon**.

Xfinity customers are already without those channels, as well as several other Russian-language channels, including movie net **RKINO**. "In light of recent events in Ukraine, we have removed the Russian channel offerings and programming packages from our television platforms," a Comcast spokesperson said.

The company made the decision to drop all Russian-language programming on Tuesday, which has resulted in some grumbling online. "This is wrong. My mom just watches movies and Russian jeopardy and soap operas. She is a U.S. citizen, but she doesn't speak English that well. Let her enjoy her programs. We hate Putin as much as anyone. If you want to cancel Russian propaganda then cancel *Tucker Carlson* and *Faux News!*," reads one comment on an Xfinity forum.

Comcast said it will provide credits for any customers impacted by the move. Distributors generally sell tiered offerings

geared toward a specific language. The subscriber numbers for a particular language tier make up a very small percentage of overall customers, but they can be heavily reliant on such packages.

DirectTV and **Roku** made the decision on Monday to drop Kremlin-financed, English-language network RT, which has been criticized over the years as Russian-influence media. Comcast hasn't carried RT in any markets since 2018. In addition to free phone calls to the Ukraine, Comcast is providing customers with information and resources on the evolving situation. By saying "Ukraine crisis" into X1 Voice Remotes, customers can access a new destination across X1, Flex and XClass TV featuring the latest news as it develops, information on how to support those in need, and resources to help parents talk about the situation with their children.

STATE OF THE UNION

Broadband got a mention—briefly—during President *Biden's* State of the Union address Tuesday. "We're going to provide affordable high-speed internet for every American, rural, suburban, urban and tribal communities. Four-thousand projects have already been announced—many of you have announced them in your districts," Biden said. He thanked members from both parties for helping to pass his infrastructure bill. "We're done talking about 'Infrastructure Weeks.' We're now talking about an 'Infrastructure Decade,'" he said. **Fox News** had the most viewers for the address, averaging 7.2 million total viewers from 9pm-10:15pm, according to **Nielsen**. Fox News'

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broadcast goes down as the most-watched State of the Union under a Democratic president in cable news history. **ABC** was runner-up with 6.3 million during the time period, followed by **CBS** (4.9mIn), **CNN** (4.8mIn), **NBC** (4.7mIn) and **MSNBC** (4.1mIn). According to **C-SPAN**, Biden's address was 62 minutes, the fourth-longest out of the previous seven presidents' first State of the Union addresses.

FREE CALLS TO UKRAINE

Charter is waiving charges for all calls to Ukraine for Spectrum Voice and Spectrum Mobile customers through the end of March. The fees will automatically be waived from their monthly bill and standard SMS text messages are already included at no extra charge for those customers. **Altice USA's** Optimum Mobile and Optimum and Suddenlink phone customers will also be able to place calls from the U.S. to Ukraine at no cost through the end of the month. **Comcast** is waiving those call charges to Ukraine through March 10 for Xfinity Mobile, Xfinity Voice, Comcast Business Voice and Comcast Business Mobile customers. **Cox Communications** is stretching its net a little wider, offering Cox Voice customers free long-distance calling to Ukraine, Hungary, Romania, Poland, Bulgaria and Moldova. That offer will last through Monday at least.

CNN+ CRITICIZED FOR LACK OF DIVERSITY

The **National Association of Hispanic Journalists** is calling out **CNN+** for a lineup of journalists that it claims is lacking in diversity. **CNN** announced the lineup last week with the news network's *Kate Bolduan, Sara Sidner, Bianca Nobilo, Chris Wallace* and *Wolf Blitzer* all slated to host programs on the streamer. "We expect *Chris Licht* to do better to ensure that CNN hosts delivering the news reflect

the communities they cover, and that diverse candidates are given equal opportunity," NAHJ said in a Wednesday statement. "Despite a reckoning over race that has motivated many newsroom leaders to commit to diversifying their newsrooms, many news organizations continue to do a dismal job." The organization demanded that CNN's leadership rectify the oversight.

OPERATORS TALK NETWORK VALUATIONS

A study conducted by **Beta Research** looked at the value of cable networks to cable operators. The study found **ESPN** at the top of the list of basic networks with an average perceived value of \$1.05. **Fox News** followed at \$1.03, with **ESPN2** and **Disney Channel** taking third and fourth with \$0.91 and \$0.78, respectively. **CNN, HGTV** and **TNT** had little difference between them, with CNN at \$0.77 and HGTV and TNT with \$0.76. **Discovery Channel** and **USA** averaged \$0.73, and **TBS** rounded out the list with \$0.71. When it came to rating network groups on their helpfulness with dealing the impacts from cord-cutting, networks were ranked on a five-point scale. Disney and ESPN Media Networks received a four or five in 58% of responses, while **Hallmark Networks** (56%), **Discovery Networks** (51%), **NBC Universal** (48%) and **Fox Corporation** (45%) followed behind. ESPN topped another list, this one being the most requested by customers to have on their lineup during the pandemic. The sports network checked in at 30%, followed by news outlets Fox News and CNN at 24% and 21%. Hallmark, HGTV and Disney had 19%, 16% and 15%, respectively, while **MSNBC** and **Food Network** had 15% and 11%.

ISPOT BUYS TUNITY FOR OOH MEASUREMENT

Measurement company **iSpot** is upping its cross-platform viewing verification capabilities ahead of the upfronts, acquiring analytics



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firm **Tunity**. Tunity specializes in out-of-home measurement, and its capabilities will be fully integrated into iSpot's measurement stack. Tunity Founder *Yaniv Davidson* will remain in his position after the acquisition as will Tunity Head of Research and Analytics *Paul Lindstrom*. Tunity will also continue to operate its app allowing users to hear live audio from muted televisions on their mobile devices.

FCC SIGNS MOU WITH GEORGIA

The **FCC** and the National Communications Commission of Georgia signed a Memorandum of Understanding Wednesday tied to cooperation in telecom and media policy. The two agencies will share ideas on telecom regulation in hopes that the exchange will lead to the continued development of advanced communications in their respective nations. They'll also work together on the technical front when it comes to telecommunications and related facilities and services.

CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SOUL NABS 1091 MEDIA

Chicken Soup for the Soul Entertainment acquired **1091 Media** for approximately \$15.6 million. This doubles Chicken Soup for the Soul's content catalogue as 1091 brings around 4,000 movies and TV series. Chicken Soup for the Soul Entertainment expects to recognize more than \$10 million in revenue in the next 12 months as a result of the agreement, which is expected to close this month.

MTV RALLIES FOR MENTAL HEALTH

MTV is tackling the nation's mental health crisis head-on, naming a cohort of 30 mental health activists to take part in a Mental Health Youth Action Forum in coordination with the Biden-Harris administration this May. Prior to the forum, participants will spend six weeks in a facilitated program designed to solidify and define problems prevalent in their communities. They'll then come up with a campaign to present at a White House event with government officials as well as non-profit and media executives.

NETFLIX DIVING DEEPER INTO GAMES

Netflix is continuing its experiment into gaming, entering into an agreement Tuesday to acquire Finnish studio **Next Games**. The streaming giant dipped a toe into gaming in November, making a selection of mobile titles available globally. It slowly plans to expand that lineup. "While we're just getting started in games, I am confident that together with Next Games, we will be able to build a portfolio of world class games—with no ads and no in-app purchases—that will delight our members around the world," Netflix VP Games *Mike Verdu* said in a blog post.

VEXUS EXPANSION CONTINUES

Vexus Fiber is bringing its network to Alexandria and Pineville, LA, with plans to begin construction later this year. Vexus will connect nearly 25,000 homes and businesses to its network and estimates it'll complete in about 36 months.

RATINGS

Hallmark Channel's first ever "Loveuary" programming event had viewers making heart eyes at their TV screens. The event's three original premieres averaged 2.5 million total viewers and 254,000 W25-54. It lifted Hallmark Channel to become the most-watched entertainment cable network in Weekend Prime

throughout February among households and W18+.

VERIZON CONTINUES GREEN INVESTMENT

Verizon issued a fourth green bond offering of \$1 billion, with the net proceeds allocated toward renewable energy investments to speed up the transition to greener electrical grids in the U.S. This brings the total of green bond offerings to \$4 billion since 2019.

AMC NETWORKS LAUNCHES PUBLISHING ARM

AMC Networks launched **AMC Networks Publishing**, a book publishing arm that'll collaborate with rising talent in the development, production and selling of books, comics and more. AMC Networks Publishing will release several projects in 2022, including "Miss Fisher's First Mysteries" and "Shudder's Creepshow: From Script to Scream," both based on AMC Networks' shows "Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries" and "Creepshow," respectively.

PROGRAMMING

Ahead of **A+E Networks'** upfront, the network shared its upcoming slate of content and the expansion of its multiplatform projects to include new genres. **Home.Made Nation**, a new lifestyle genre, will feature home improvement, food and innovation content. A+E Networks is also launching **4UV** this fall, which will feature content made by unheard voices. – "Holy Heist," a story about the robbery of a Brink's bank truck, will begin streaming on **discovery+** on Tuesday. – **ESPN** unveiled plans for the MegaCast during Duke men's basketball head coach *Mike Krzyzewski's* final home game against archrival North Carolina on Saturday at 6pm. The day begins with "College GameDay" live from Cameron Indoor Stadium at 10am, followed on-site coverage all day leading up to tip off. The main telecast will be on ESPN in 4K on **DirectTV, Comcast, YouTube TV** and **Verizon FiOS**, with postgame coverage available on ESPN and **ACC Network**.

PEOPLE

T-Mobile's top ranks are getting a major shakeup. *Mike Katz* tweeted Tuesday that he's been promoted to CMO and *Callie Field* will step up to lead the T-Mobile Business group in his stead. *Jon Freier* also took to social to announce the provider's Consumer Customer Care team will now live within his Consumer group. *Dow Draper*, the company's EVP, Emerging Products, will leave the company in April. – **FCC** Wireline Competition Bureau Chief *Kris Monteith* is retiring, and *Trent Harkrader* will lead the agency after her departure. He's had a hand in the Commission's broadband policy initiatives since 2011, most recently serving as an advisor to FCC Chair *Jessica Rosenworcel* on the implementation of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. Additionally, *Brian Moulton* is joining the agency as Director of the Office of Legislative Affairs. He last served as Senior Counsel to Sen. *Tammy Baldwin* (D-WI) specializing in telecom, education and judiciary issues. – **NBCUniversal's** Advertising and Partnerships division appointed *Neil Ripley* to VP, Communications. Ripley previously worked at **Comscore** as head of corporate communications. – **Nexstar** promoted *Bina Roy* from Senior Affiliate Sales Director to VP & GM of its multicast networks, where she'll be responsible for business development and affiliate partnerships for over 15 networks. She'll also oversee the efforts to maximize Nexstar's broadcast spectrum across the U.S.

Think about that for a minute...

Meta Veg O Matic

Commentary by Steve Effros

Remember the Veg O Matic? It slices, it dices, it does just about anything you might want, and it's only... oh, I'm sure you remember the old ads. It was the quintessential do anything, be anything kitchen device and Ron Popeil sold it to millions of folks through late night television ads.

Well, we have a new Ron Popeil. His name is Mark Zuckerberg, and he's changed the name of his company from Facebook to Meta just so he can sell you this great new idea of the internet being the foundation of an entirely new ecosphere where we can all "live" and participate with each other in the "metaverse." It's going to be immersive, you're going to spend a lot of time, there, and he's going to make a lot of money while you have your VR/AR goggles on avoiding the real world and inhabiting his.

Many folks could never get the Veg O Matic to really do all those things they showed us on the television ads. Same thing with the "set it and forget it" roaster, or the slicer/dicer which turned out to be more dangerous for fingers than for most fruits and vegetables.

I'd like to suggest that the "metaverse" falls into the same category. It befuddles me that while everyone is agog at the idea of the metaverse, and focusing on how all the competing companies like Facebook and Google and Apple will have to come together to allow folks inhabiting the metaverse to cross the "borders" from one platform to another to assure a smooth, universal experience, no one is mentioning that technically this whole thing is not likely to work! At least not with the infrastructure we have in place.

You see, there are some pretty fundamental technical issues that haven't been worked out in all this, and for some reason there's very little mention of that. The issue is one of how you blend "unicasting" and "multicasting" on broadband and how much bandwidth all that demands and... Well, let's just take an example or two.

The current experience with Zoom may give you a good sense

of the problem. There have been many efforts to try to play a concert on Zoom. You know, get everyone on the same music page from their homes and they play their instruments all together. Well, if you've ever tried it, or watched it being tried, you know it doesn't work. You see, all those players are in different locations with different connection capabilities and different distances to servers which then have to interconnect to put the "symphony" together. A simple understanding of physics should tell you that the sounds will not all arrive at the same time. They won't blend.

Another example we have all experienced is the television "interview" over the internet. The host asks a question, then there is that awkward pause while we wait for the guest to hear the question we have already heard and then respond to it. While it works... the "interview" takes place, it is anything but a normal conversation. You can bet a lot of folks have tried to "fix" that, but it's not something that is likely to be fixed! Physics says those delays will always be there unless someone records the interaction and then edits it to take out the inevitable pauses and pastes it back together. That's what's been done on some Zoom "concerts," and it's really neat, but it takes a lot of work and time to get it right. This isn't a "new environment," it's an old workaround of a technical problem that has no simple solution.

Why isn't this being mentioned? Maybe AI will eventually fix it all, but don't hold your breath for that, either.



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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