

Cablefax Daily™

WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

5Qs: NTIA's Grace Abuhamad on BEAD, Digital Equity and More

NTIA was given a Herculean task when Congress passed the IIJA and gave it oversight of the BEAD program. Since then, it has grown exponentially, begun distributing millions in grant funds through other programs and gathered input on the future of AI. We spoke to **NTIA** Chief of Staff Grace Abuhamad on all this and more. What follows are edited excerpts from that conversation.

Your first stint at NTIA was in 2016 as a policy staffer. What can you say about how the agency is now and the team that has been assembled to set it up for success?

Back then, NTIA was a small, roughly 200-person agency. We still did a lot of important work, but we were a much smaller organization. I came back to an agency that was completely transformed and in the midst of a huge transformation. In fact, it feels like working at a startup and building a startup within government in some ways. No matter how you slice the numbers, we've at least doubled, and it's really exciting to think that it's a much bigger organization. The other piece that we've had to build up on that's different from when I worked here last time is we went through a pandemic, and we had a lot of workforce that, even though we were the telecom and information agency, we hadn't really be set up for teleworking as a government. We've set that up for our staff now, but in addition to that, we've also deliberately hired people who are based in every state and territory across the U.S., which means that for the first time in NTIA's history, we have fully remote employees.

Turning to the BEAD program, we now have about 15 states that are awaiting Volume II approval. Are you optimistic we'll have more news of additional approvals soon?

NTIA has always been building a better, connected world, and even as a smaller agency, we have been there to solve challenges whenever they exist or that popped up in the communications or connectivity space. The BEAD program is basically in response to a connectivity challenge. We know we have to work really hard to move these proposals as quickly as we can. The faster that these states get money, the better. But we have to do that in a way that's responsible too because we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to spend that money. We've split the volumes and parts to allow for these checks and balances along the way, and we expect states to really step up to the task, and they have been. But we will, along the way, hold them and ourselves accountable to this mission that's been given to us by Congress. So I think overall, yes, you will see more progress soon. But we're trying to move as quickly as possible and as responsibly as possible along the way.

The Build America, Buy America waiver has finally been released. How did you all think about striking that balance between encouraging the use of American products and giving flexibility to concerned providers?

The President has always said we have to build things in this country. It's part of building a strong economy and building our own resilience in the economy. Part of this too is we're managing increasingly some risks not just in the supply chain through-

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out the pandemic, but risks in our supply chain or questions around our economic security and national security. So the Build America, Buy America program overall, it meets multiple goals. There's a lot of work we're doing to make sure this can happen in the United States, but we need to build these networks out quickly. So we're trying to do two things at the same time in the sense that we're trying to make sure that we move quickly on our infrastructure plan and, at the same time, onshore, and those things aren't necessarily always going to happen exactly at the same time. So our goal here is over 90%, but the whole point of the waiver is that we recognize that the timelines might not always match up to meet the goals that we're trying to meet. And so for companies that want to participate in this program, they should still be able to participate, and if they make a good enough case, that's something that can be considered.

The Digital Equity Act plans that states and territories have also been working on don't get as much attention. Maine was the first to gain approval. How should we think about the Digital Equity plans in relation to BEAD?

There's a bad joke that we have around here—BEAD without equity is BAD. I have to give credit to [Former Advisor to Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo] Kevin Gallagher, who I think was the first to start using it on a regular basis. The digital equity program is, relative to the BEAD program, a much smaller program, but the BEAD program incorporates many of the goals of the digital equity program, so they go hand-in-hand. These are programs that you have to think about holistically as they work together. So there's going to be for every state a digital equity proposal, and we have seen that come through from every state. They're interested, they're engaged. Hopefully, you'll see that movement that we see on the BEAD proposals onto the digital equity proposals. The competitive program is where we want to fill gaps that are not state-specific, so that we can have groups apply for funds to fill those gaps across the country. So a skill-building program that addresses a certain group across the country or over three states could be eligible for some digital equity funds, and you'll see more of that in the coming months. The state [Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program] is going to launch soon, but what we're hoping is that all the work that has gone into the BEAD program will feed into those digital equity programs as well.

Last year, NTIA opened the AI accountability policy request for comment. Now you're building on that with the comment period for AI models with widely available model weights. Can you talk about how the agency is looking at the technology and next steps forward?

We need to build a movement for what accountability policy looks like in the AI space... The report we're working on on AI accountability is basically setting up what that looks like. Then,

the [AI executive order] work is slightly different, but it's along the same vein. As a government, we need to think of the biggest risks to our nation's security. So the executive order focuses a little bit more on national security risks, economic security risk and potential risks of AI systems that could be pretty massive. Within the executive order, there's a task that's assigned to NTIA specifically to think about what are the risks and benefits of having open access model weights to large systems. There's a real question about whether and how much openness we would require to try to require with those companies, and if that's a safe thing to do. Really, our task is to evaluate do the risks outweigh the benefits, or the other way around and what to do from that.

AT&T UNDER INVESTIGATION BY NY ATTORNEY GENERAL

NY Attorney General *Letitia James* is stepping up to begin investigating AT&T's network outage last week that impacted customers nationwide. The NY Office of the Attorney General will be investigating the causes of the outage as well as AT&T's response, and is encouraging all affected New Yorkers to submit complaints with the office [online](#).

GOOD SIGN FOR DC AREA MLB FANS

Comcast and MASN continue to negotiate a new carriage deal, with fans not poised to lose the Orioles and Nats' RSN tonight. Comcast's upcoming programming expirations website has moved MASN to March from February. That doesn't mean a deal will get done, but it's a positive sign. INSP has been on Comcast's upcoming expirations page for a while now and has been moved to new months a few times. Comcast has been placing RSNs in less widely distributed tiers.

MEDIA RIGHTS NEGOTIATIONS FOR NEW-LOOK PAC-12 ONGOING

As the Pac-12 Conference welcomes a new commissioner amid uncertainty within the conference and college athletics overall, its two remaining schools—Oregon State and Washington State—have questions that are yet to be answered. One of them is where fans will be able to watch games when the 2024-25 football season rolls around. *Teresa Gould*, who will take over commissioner duties from *George Kliavkoff*, confirmed on a Zoom call with press that those conversations with media partners are ongoing and that an announcement could come in the near future. "We're working hard to try to consider the options that are on the table to televise all the home games at Oregon State and Washington State," Gould

In The WILD

A Cablefax feature highlighting marketing and media efforts spotted in the real world.

Cablefax is spotlighting marketing and media efforts we find in the real world in our new feature, In The Wild. We're also celebrating the best of PR and marketing once again with The FAXIES, our annual awards program honoring the most creative, engaging or interactive campaigns from the last year. We've extended the deadline to March 22, but the best time to [enter](#) is now!



TBS celebrated the launch of Sarah Silverman-hosted "Stupid Pet Tricks" this month with a five-city tour that featured talented pets showing off their skills, giveaways and plenty of photo ops. Tails started wagging in Tampa, Florida, with animals strutting their stuff on the pink carpet.

The free events, which also stopped in Dallas, Austin, Longmont, Colorado, and Brevard, N.C., also gave attendees the chance to audition for the show. Each week, TBS selects one trick to feature on-air in an episode, which is a spinoff of the famous "The Late Show with David Letterman" segment of the same name.

TBS kept the #MyStupidPetTrick buzz going with media mailers featuring a super soft branded sweatshirt, a Stupid Pet Tricks branded "Hooman Blend" of Scooter's coffee and pet agility set. Polo, Cablefax's Goldendoodle of record, took a turn on the agility course. We're not sure he had any tricks, but he has the stupid part covered (see photo).



said. "We know that there are passionate fanbases for both programs all over the country that really want to make sure that they're able to tune in and watch all of those home games. We're hopeful that we'll have an announcement in the near future, but we've been really encouraged about the interest for those media rights." The conference is keeping the Pac-12 moniker despite having two full members going into the 2024-25 athletic calendar. For now, it'll have temporary partnerships with other leagues until the Pac-12 irons out its long-term plans. Additionally, no word on a possible revival of the **Pac-12 Network**, which is [undergoing periodic layoffs](#) through June 28.

MONUMENTAL USING SYNAMEDIA

D.C. RSN **Monumental Sports Network** is turning to **Synamedia**'s video network solutions to distribute its sports and studio programming. Monumental will use Synamedia's PowerVu technology for primary distribution needs. PowerVu was built to support high-efficiency video coding and ultra HD delivery over satellite and IP terrestrial content distribution networks. That allows Monumental and all Synamedia customers to transition to IP delivery in addition to having a built foundation for network expansions.

RATINGS

Hallmark Channel was feeling the love during its "Loveuary" programming event that wrapped up this past weekend, reaching 19 million unduplicated total viewers. The month-long stunt had four original movie premieres. On an L+SD basis, Loveuary lifted Hallmark to be the most-watched entertainment cable network in weekend primetime among W18+ throughout the event. Hallmark also came second among households, total viewers and P18+ in the same period. Hallmark was the No. 2 most-watched entertainment cable network in total day and weekend total day among households, total viewers and W18+.

FIBER FRENZY

Eligible **Google Fiber** customers in Nashville can now get 5 and 8 Gig speeds, which go for \$125/month and \$150/month, respectively. Customers with those plans also get a GFiber WiFi 6 Router and up to two Mesh Extenders for enhanced WiFi coverage. Those products come with unlimited data and professional installation. – **TDS** wrapped up the construction of its fiber network in Blanchardville, Wisconsin. About 500 new addresses can get the company's speed offerings of up to 8 Gigs in addition to TV and phone service. Commercial businesses in the area can get dedicated 10 Gig connections as well. – **Antietam Broadband** is bringing its Flight Fiber FTTH product to Carroll County, Maryland, later this year.

PROGRAMMER'S PAGE

'Queens' Breaking Natural History Norms

National Geographic's slate this spring has been all about pushing boundaries. The technology utilized to give viewers a front-row seat to the activities of the smallest bugs in "A Real Bug's Life" in January was just the start, and now it is pushing the norms of natural history productions with "Queens" (premieres Monday at 8pm ET on the network, available next day on Hulu and Disney+). The docuseries, narrated by Angela Bassett, is the first natural history series to be led by an all-female creative team and focuses on matriarchs. National Geographic SVP Development and Production Janet Han Vissering told **CFX** that the genre has largely been influenced by a male perspective on both sides of the camera. It may seem like a small change, but the impact of putting female creatives in the driver's seat and allowing them to focus on female subjects can't be underestimated. "This has begun to reveal the multitude of stories right in front of us that are just waiting to be uncovered by a different perspective," she said. Once the team agreed to break from tradition, it opened the door for experimentation. "Queens showed us how the utilization of local filmmakers allows us to delve deeper into the heart of communities and ecosystems, uncovering stories that might otherwise remain untold," Han Vissering said. "This is a groundbreaking shift in how natural history programming has previously been made, and we look forward to continuing to shift the system by forging creative partnerships with local communities across the globe on future projects." The move empowered local voices and gave back to the communities in the environments where National Geographic filmed. Whether you are watching for National Geographic's trademark visuals or for your own curiosity, there's no doubt this project just means more. "Projects like Queens represent a seismic shift in the industry and send a powerful message that everyone, regardless of gender, deserves a seat at the table and a voice in shaping the narratives that define our understanding of the natural world," Han Vissering said. — Sara Winegardner

REVIEWS

"Sort Of," streaming, **Max**. Since TV critics and viewers hear all the time, "You've never seen anything like this on television before," it can't be true. While there are a lot of great TV productions offered, it's unlikely that many are ground-breaking. Still, watching even a few minutes of "Sort Of," a now-canceled 3-season series, is evidence that the multi-channel universe is fulfilling its potential for delivering at least some multicultural programming. First, the series' lead is Sabi (series co-creator Bilal Baig), a gender-fluid millennial. Sabi is not only a member of a large Pakistani family, they also tend bar at an LGBTQ saloon and the de facto head of a friend's household, overseeing young children. As such, "Sort Of" breaks a lot of barriers. Moreover, the series is an enjoyable watch because of its characters' imperfections. While characters in HBO's "Girls" struggled mightily to find themselves, Sabi is more like Fleabag, the lead character played by Phoebe Waller-Bridge (also its creator) in Amazon Prime's "Fleabag." Both Sabi and Fleabag know who they are and admit they're far from perfect. Yet the knowledge of their fallibility imbues both characters with tremendous generosity and acceptance of others. Moreover, Sort Of avoids Hollywood-style conclusions, preferring truer-to-life endings. During this moment of polarization and struggle, Sort Of provides a refreshing break for some viewers. — Seth Arenstein

BASIC CABLE

P2+ PRIME RANKINGS*

(02/19/24-02/25/24)

MON-SUN	MC US AA%	MC US AA (000)
FNC	0.655	2064
MSNBC	0.410	1291
ESPN	0.338	1066
HGTV	0.238	749
HIST	0.233	734
TBSC	0.196	619
INSP	0.196	619
CNN	0.196	617
FOOD	0.185	584
USA	0.178	562
HALL	0.170	537
DISC	0.163	514
TLC	0.148	466
LIFE	0.141	444
TVLAND	0.135	426
ID	0.134	422
TNT	0.127	399
HMM	0.123	388
REELZ	0.121	381
GSN	0.119	374
BRAVO	0.117	368
OXY	0.104	328
A&E	0.103	325
FX	0.098	309
FS1	0.093	295
SYFY	0.092	291
BET	0.091	288
COM	0.087	273
NWSMX	0.084	266
WETV	0.084	264
TRAVEL	0.083	260
ADSM	0.081	255
AMC	0.079	250
NAN	0.078	245
FETV	0.069	217

*P2+ L+SD rankers are based on national Nielsen numbers, not coverage.



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