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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

5 Questions: Weir On the Art of Paramount's Hitmaking

Paramount Global's made plenty of headlines over its pending **Skydance** merger as well as a "60 Minutes" interview with Kamala Harris that's drawn a Trump lawsuit and an **FCC** probe. So you might not have noticed the steady stream of hits it's delivering. **Paramount+**'s "1923's" S2 finale delivered 14 million global viewers in its first seven days, joining "Landman" and "Tulsa King" as the top three global series of all time for the streamer. "MobLand" nabbed 8.8 million viewers in the first seven days after its March 30 debut. In December, espionage thriller "The Agency" became the most-streamed new series in Showtime history with 5.1 million global cross-platform viewers. All of this helped make Paramount+ the No. 2 SVOD for original series hours watched in 4Q24 behind only **Netflix**. To shed some light on the winning strategy, we chatted with Laurel Weir, EVP/Head of Programming and Strategic Insights & Research for Showtime/MTV Entertainment Studios, under Chris McCarthy, President/CEO for Showtime/MTV Entertainment Studios and Paramount Media Networks. An edited version of the conversation follows.

The ratings and viewership wins for Paramount have been piling up. What's the secret sauce?

What I love about what we do is we have an insights-driven approach. We've been able to really curate and nurture "Yellowstone" and turn it into the juggernaut that it has become. And when **Paramount+** launched back in November 2021, we

were able to say what are the shows that we can make for Paramount+ that are going to sort of feed that audience. We started with Yellowstone prequel "1883" and "Mayor of Kingstown." We were just starting, so we knew we were never going to win on the volume game. Instead we said, how do we just make the biggest hits? What's the recipe? And it's a movie-like series—getting folks behind the camera that come from the theatrical world, but then also A-list talent. We think about the poster and what the marketing looks like. It's funny. I think about key art. Back in the day, we made key art for magazine and then it went away because you weren't doing magazines anymore. Now it's back because of that thumbnail on streaming services.

The Taylor Sheridan universe, high-stakes dramas were what we were coming out of the gate with. If you fast forward to 2024, we wanted to get a place where we would just do fewer, bigger, better hits. Post-strike, our goal was really to start launching things once a month that have some cohesion, that increase subscribers, decrease churn and get subs to stay longer with Paramount+. We are the studio, so we're making the shows to bring that forth. And sure enough, it worked. To be the No. 2 SVOD, according to Nielsen, for 4Q is just tremendous. And to do that on hours watched with such a low volume versus a Netflix is just incredible.

How do you leverage linear and streaming?

When we started this journey, there was a concern that streaming is cannibalization. But we've found that it's not or, it's just more. With all the content, viewers are watching more content than ever before so why not to keep them in our ecosystem?

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We've done, I think, a tremendous job leveraging linear through **Paramount Network** and **Yellowstone**. A lot of times when **Yellowstone** airs in November and December, we'll sneak the first episode of "Landman" after **Yellowstone** and have a promotion pushing those viewers to watch more and then we'll have another episode waiting for them on **Paramount+**. We do a ton of stunting, like **Yellowstone** marathons. Over Easter weekend, we had "The Godfather," a **Paramount Picture**, airing on **Paramount Network**, and we did a sneak of "MobLand." We also had some really fun interstitials about how you're with your family, but how about spending time with this family.

Leveraging streaming and linear seems even more important as we see some MVPDs like Charter inking distribution deals that include access to streaming services, right?

Totally. It's unlocking a lot more. What feeds it even more is smart TVs and wanting to watch things through the TV glass. Smart TVs just really open the aperture for it to all be in one place. It's taking the friction away. If you're watching linear, you're probably now watching it in the same space that you are watching streaming. It gives us an even bigger opportunity of really feeding our own ecosystem.

Given the importance of Taylor Sheridan for Paramount, how do you handle the fact Yellowstone streams on Peacock instead of Paramount+?

What it's done is create more viewers of the franchise. When we knew we couldn't put **Yellowstone** on **Paramount+**, **Chris McCarthy** came up with the brilliant solution to create the prequels, you know, **1883** and **"1923."** For me, I'd say, yes, we'd love to have **Yellowstone** on **Paramount+**. But my glass is half full because it's just continuing to feed the franchise. The more you watch it, no matter where it is, it's just creating more fans of the franchise, which are then tuning into these other shows. And you know, we're planning to have another spinoff of **Yellowstone** later this year that we'll hopefully be announcing soon. We also have in development **"1944"** which will be the next iteration.

Beyond Paramount, what sort of trends are you seeing overall in the content universe?

We've noticed a clear trend in the content landscape—while there's a multitude of reboots, prequels, sequels and spinoffs—fans tend to hold the original IP in high regard. Building on that affinity to make a franchise bigger and better requires meeting viewers where they are today in culture, ensuring the storytelling can evolve and move forward in a way that feels new and fresh—while at the same time welcoming new viewers. As **Chris McCarthy** has said, it's a higher bar than creating new series; you're competing with a built-in fanbase whose expectations you must meet and exceed to avoid damaging the original, all while finding an opening to expand the world and bring in new audiences for sustained franchise growth and cultural impact.

USCELLULAR POSTS DOWN 1Q25, READY FOR T-MOBILE DEAL

The clock continues to tick for **UScellular** before it gets bought by **T-Mobile**. The company still expects the transaction to close around mid-2025, but as it prepares to cross that bridge, **UScellular** extended its near-term bank maturities and amended its revolvers to ensure financial flexibility and liquidity going forward. That's on top of the separation, integration and transition work being done across **UScellular** and its current parent company **TDS**. Additionally, **UScellular** expects to be able to declare a special dividend to shareholders to distribute net proceeds received from the initial transaction closed after deducting certain items. The **T-Mobile** deal continues to be a good move in **UScellular's** eyes considering recent trends. President/CEO **LT Therivel** said during the company's 1Q25 earnings call it's going up against carriers offering device promotions, multiyear price locks and aggressive pricing while cable wireless competitors offer free planned pricing for set periods at a time. Despite **UScellular** doing more with promos, it still led to losing handset customers and pressure on service revenues. "In response to that, we're cutting costs in order to sustain our cash flows. And our size and lack of scale makes it difficult to sustain this balance of high promotional expense and reduced investments," **Therivel** said. "That's why we continue to believe the transaction with **T-Mobile** is in the best interest of our business and our customers." **UScellular** is positive about the long-term potential of its tower business considering the expected capacity needs of the wireless industry in the next few years. Another area it's looking forward to seeing utilized is spectrum. **UScellular's** spectrum transactions with **Verizon** and **AT&T** are contingent upon the **T-Mobile** deal being finalized, and they'll contribute "substantial proceeds" across the coming quarters. Postpaid retail connections were 3.95 million at the end of 1Q25, down from 4.05 million at the end of 1Q24. Handsets saw a net loss of 39,000 and connected devices fell by 1,000. Prepaid's connections total was 431,000—down YOY by 5,000—while net losses were 17,000. Total operative revenues were \$891 million for the quarter, down YOY from \$950 million.

FTC, DOJ WANT LIST OF ANTI-COMPETITIVE REGULATIONS

Nearly a month after President **Trump** signed the Executive Order titled "Reducing Anti-Competitive Regulatory Barriers," the **FTC** and the **Department of Justice's** Antitrust Division penned a joint letter asking the leaders of federal agencies to compile a list of anticompetitive regulations. The letter asked agency heads to identify rules within their authority that create or facilitate the creation of monopolies, create unnecessary barriers to entry for new market participants, limit competition,

create or facilitate licensure or accreditation requirements that unduly limit competition, limit the ability to compete for agency procurements or anticompetitive restraints on the free market. It cited several areas including healthcare, energy, technology and transportation as ones susceptible to anticompetitive federal regulations. Per Trump's EO, all agency leaders are to provide a list of qualifying regulations to the FTC and DOJ by June 18.

ALTICE USA MOBILE CHANGE-UP

Altice USA has a new leader guiding its mobile business. *John Lombardi*, the previous SVP, General Manager – Mobile Business, announced on **LinkedIn** he was no longer with the company. *Light Reading* reports **Optimum** EVP/Chief Product and Technology Officer **Luciano Ramos** now has Altice USA's mobile operations under his purview. Ramos joined the company in 2023 after stints at **Rogers**, **Liberty Global** and **Liberty Latin America**.

STREAMING SATISFACTION GAINING

A poll conducted by the **Preserve Viewer Choice Coalition** found that 73% of viewers indicated that streaming services improve their overall entertainment experience, a trend that holds true for large portions of every age group. The Coalition was formed in 2023 to push back against large affiliate broadcast station groups that want online video providers and streaming platforms to be subject to the same **FCC** rules as cable and satellite operators. Positive sentiments for areas such as on-demand, live streaming and viewing video content via social media or internet saw YOY improvements of 2%, 6% and 6%, respectively, and viewers are more likely than they were a year ago to say streaming gives them more access to content (71% vs 66% in 2024). Younger demos recorded a +43 percentage-point margin toward on-demand video services like **Netflix**, **Disney+** and **Prime Video**, also posting a +31-point margin for live platforms such as **YouTube TV**, **Fubo** and **Roku**. Approximately 86% of Americans stream local news on devices rather than on TVs (47%). When it comes to regulation, 25% of viewers would support regulating streaming like cable, while 56% opposed it.

BC SUPREMES GIVE LIONSGATE-STARZ SPLIT GREEN LIGHT

The Supreme Court of British Columbia gave a thumbs up for the full separation of **Lions Gate Entertainment Corp.**'s Studio and **Starz** businesses into two independent, publicly traded companies. The split is expected to become official Tuesday. The new Lionsgate will begin trading on the NYSE under the ticker symbol "LION" on Wednesday.

DERBY DONE AND DUSTED

It was Sovereignty who took home the 151st running of the Kentucky Derby. **NBC Sports'** 25th year broadcasting the event recorded an average of 17.7 million viewers across **NBC** and

Peacock, the largest audience since the 1989 Derby which had 18.5 million viewers watching Sunday Silence's win. Viewership on Saturday peaked at 21.8 million viewers from 7-7:15pm, which is when the race took place. Led by Peacock, streaming posted an average minute audience of 959,000 viewers, up 34% from last year's 714,000 and nearly triple 2023's 371,000. NBC Sports used Derby coverage to make a couple of **NBA**-related announcements ahead of its return as a league media partner. The iconic "Roundball Rock" theme song that accompanied NBC's NBA coverage from 1990-2002 will come back once the 11-year deal gets underway in October. In the studio, 10-time All-Star and Hall of Famer *Carmelo Anthony* will be an analyst.

TARIFFS ON MOVIES?

Hollywood got quite the jolt Sunday when President *Trump* announced he was directing the **Department of Commerce** and the U.S. Trade Representative to implement a 100% tariff on all movies produced outside of the U.S. In a social media post, Trump claimed the U.S. movie industry is "DYING a very fast death" and that other countries were enticing filmmakers and studios away from the U.S. "This is a concerted effort by other Nations and, therefore, a National Security threat. It is, in addition to everything else, messaging and propaganda," he wrote on **Truth Social**. Not many details are known as to how the tariffs would be enacted or if it's just for movies shown in theaters versus streaming exclusives. However, Canada and the U.K. are popular destinations for studios and companies to film in. On Monday, Trump told White House reporters he will meet with folks in the film industry to determine if the tariffs would be beneficial.

FUSE DEBUTS AD SOLUTIONS SUITE

Fuse Media unveiled a new comprehensive advertising platform to give brands custom solutions to amplify exposure. The platform, called Amplitude, leans on ad tech, premium content, talent partnerships and authentic storytelling aspects to offer brands the ability to utilize curated content strategies, cultural campaigns, performance insights and interactive ad experiences. Amplitude comes with real-time audience sizing through **FreeWheel's** Audience Manager, democratized access to premium video and programmatic automation via private marketplace, programmatic guaranteed, agency deals and first-look deals. Fuse Media's FAST, linear and SVOD offer a combined audience of 52 million unique viewers reaching more than 85% of multicultural U.S. households.

NEWSMAX'S GROWTH MILESTONE

After a 1Q25 that saw **Newsmax's** cable channel increase its total audience by 50% YOY, the network crossed the 20 million follower milestone on social media platforms. That includes more than five million followers on **Facebook**, 4.1 million on **Truth Social**, 3.4 million on **X** and 2.4 million on **YouTube**. On Facebook, Newsmax recorded 27.4 million social interactions in 1Q25, up 123% YOY.