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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

Exclusive: Maria Brennan to Exit WICT Network in 2026

Maria Brennan is preparing to step down as president/CEO of **The WICT Network** after 16+ years leading the women in media, entertainment and technology organization, ***CFX*** has learned. She's informed the board of her plans, but won't actually leave until the end of April.

That extended exit ramp will have her preside over the upcoming WICT Network Leadership Conference (Oct. 19-21, NYC) as well as its Rising Leaders program next year. Brennan also has agreed to work with The WICT Network board on the search for a successor. It's a job that's sure to draw a lot of interest, both from within the industry and beyond. Brennan joined the organization in 2009 after serving as President of **American Women in Radio and Television** and is its longest-serving executive leader. She succeeded *Benita Fitzgerald Mosley*, who spent eight years heading WICT before accepting a role with USA Track and Field.

"The industry is evolving. Never is there a great time or a bad time to call the end of a 16-year career. I think for me, it's just a function of making room for the next generation and a new legacy of leadership," Brennan told CFX.

Under Brennan's guidance, The WICT Network expanded internationally, launching a U.K. chapter in 2014 and later adding WICT Europe and WICT Latin America. Plans are underway for additional chapters based in Paris and Madrid. Other milestones during Brennan's tenure include hitting a record membership of more than 10,000, the debut of its Senior Executive Summit in partnership with the Stanford Graduate School of Business for post-Betsy Magness grads and a rebrand from WICT (Women in Cable Telecommunications) to the acronym-free WICT Network with the tagline "Empowering Women in Media, Entertainment and Technology," which encapsulates the organization's move beyond its traditional cable industry roots.

She also fine-tuned the biennial WICT Network PAR Initiative that measures the status of women in media, entertainment and tech based on pay equity, advancement opportunities and resources for work/life integration. "When I came on board, there was talk about eliminating PAR and I really worked closely with our board of directors, and they worked closely with the industry CEOs to keep that alive because data is everything in our industry," Brennan recalled. The most recent PAR study found representation of women in the industry remained level in 2023 at 38% compared to 38% in 2021. The percentage of women across position levels was the same or lower, with the industry achieving lower voluntary turnover for women compared to the national average

To commemorate her tenure, WICT Network plans to launch a legacy endowment for lifelong learning in her name, with Brennan pledging to match the first $5,000 in contributions. More to come on that.

Brennan refrained from speculating on what direction her successor may take with the organization. "That's for her to answer. I know for certain that the proliferation of AI and the growth of our technology companies is certainly an opportunity out there for new leadership. We'll certainly continue to build on that foundation while the leadership does its work to create a successful search," she said. "It's very important to give the new chain of command… the autonomy to create what that future looks like. And she'll be inheriting truly the strongest, most powerful board of directors in any industry, so she'll have a tremendous amount of backup and institutional knowledge through them and through me."

News of Brennan's departure comes amid an overhaul of the industry's decades-long Diversity Week initiative, which will debut next month under its new moniker—"Leadership Development Week." The annual gathering in NYC will continue to include the WICT Leadership Conference, **NAMIC** Annual Conference and a reimagined **Kaitz** fundraising event. Brennan said her exit plans are not related to any of the changes. "To our industry's credit, the WICT Network has not seen a dip in support or a lack of understanding that demographic matters in terms of a business imperative," she said. "We're big supporters of inclusion, so anything that will make a group feel like they're not excluded is going to be important to us. It's all about personal timing. I've loved every minute of it, but now it's time."

Does that mean this is retirement? "I've agreed to take on a couple of interesting projects and appointments, but nothing nearly full time. And I assure you, in all of my new endeavors, it'll be impossible, or near impossible, to match the reward and the importance of running The WICT Network," Brennan said. "It's been the honor of my life. We have the best leaders, the greatest staff, chapters, the members, the best in the world."

C-SPAN FINALLY GETS YOUTUBE, HULU + LIVE TV CARRIAGE

Once politicians from both sides of the aisle began lobbying for **C-SPAN** to get carriage on vMVPDs, it seemed more a matter of when than if the public affairs net would finally succeed. Well, the nonprofit created by the cable industry was able to declare victory Wednesday when it announced that C-SPAN, **C-SPAN2** and **C-SPAN3** will join the channel lineups of **YouTube TV** and **Hulu + Live TV** this fall. This comes after Senators *Chuck Grassley* (R-IA) and *Amy Klobuchar* (D-MN) introduced a resolution in June calling on streaming services to carry the programmer. Any time would've been good for the net, but this timing is particularly perfect, as C-SPAN is currently presenting "America 250," an 18-month programming initiative spotlighting our nation's history and landmarks, leading up to next year's semiquincentennial celebration. As part of the new partnership, YouTube has also signed on to sponsor America 250 coverage. "For nearly half a century, C-SPAN has partnered with cable and satellite providers who recognize the value of our important public service. We now look forward to working closely with YouTube to bring C-SPAN's unfiltered coverage of the democratic process to millions more Americans," said C-SPAN CEO *Sam Feist*. This is also a major win for Feist, who joined C-SPAN in May 2024 after a long career at **CNN**. Among his programming moves since taking the job at C-SPAN are the new weekly shows "CeaseFire" and "America's Book Club" and he's likely to keep busy on the distribution front too, with other vMVPDs like **Fubo** and **Sling TV** yet to welcome C-SPAN into their lineups.

TNT SPORTS DTC APP PLANNED POST-WBD SPLIT

The DTC chaos will continue until morale improves. Speaking on a Wednesday investor conference call reported on by *The Wrap*, **Discovery Global**'s incoming CEO/current WBD CFO *Gunnar Wiedenfels* announced that the spinoff company is planning to launch a new, standalone **TNT Sports** DTC streaming service after the Warner Bros. Discovery split, with live sports content moving off of **HBO Max**. Discovery Global will make TNT Sports available as a bundle option "internally with **discovery+**, or not-so internally anymore with **HBO Max**," Wiedenfels explained, adding that "we are also open to other partners in the industry." He also confirmed plans to relaunch discovery+, teased expanding CNN's digital offerings and revealed that Discovery Global will have the option to sell its 20% stake in Warner Bros. ahead of the split in 2026.

NEXSTAR 'PUSHING ON AN OPEN DOOR' WITH M&A

Nexstar hasn't exactly been subtle with its intention to capitalize on an administration and **FCC** that are more welcoming of deregulation. It's the anticipated changes to the national ownership cap that give the broadcast giant the belief that it's on the precipice of accelerated growth, but as both Chairman/CEO *Perry Sook* and EVP/CFO *Lee Ann Gliha* said at an investor conference Wednesday, "Time is of the essence" as the 2026 midterm elections draw closer. Sook, however, believes there's a sense of urgency among regulators to make meaningful changes before "people get distracted," even predicting imminent movement from the FCC that would relax the current 39% national audience cap. "I think that you will see NPRMs coming out of the FCC perhaps as soon as this month, dealing with, first, the national ownership cap, and then subsequently the local ownership rules. And I think both of those NPRMs should be in the public domain, certainly before the end of the year," Sook predicted at the Citi 2025 Global TMT Conference. His tone eventually turned sarcastic: "There is no one that I have spoken to in D.C. that can justify the current regulations with a straight face. 'Yes, these World War II-era regulations serve the public interest, and nothing has changed.'" While Sook and Nexstar's campaign to get ownership rules adjusted has been ongoing, it's a more pressing issue considering current M&A activity. Nexstar's proposed deal to buy TEGNA would have it reach 80% of U.S. TV households. Currently, the company's expected timeline for the deal to close is 2H26—right alongside the midterm festivities.

NEWSMAX SUES FOX, FOX NEWS

Cable news networks normally battle for ratings, but two are headed for a clash in the courtroom. **Newsmax** said it's launching an antitrust lawsuit against **Fox Corp.** and **Fox News**, accusing the pair of an exclusionary scheme to bolster and maintain its dominance in the U.S. right-leaning pay TV news market. "This lawsuit is about restoring fairness to the market and ensuring that

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Americans have real choice in the news they watch," Newsmax CEO *Chris Ruddy* said. The lawsuit, filed in a Florida federal court, alleges that Fox uses anticompetitive practices to hinder competitors. According to Newsmax's complaint, "Fox imposes explicit or tacit 'no-carry' provisions on distributors, conditioning access to its commercially critical content on distributors' concession not to carry other right-leaning news channels like Newsmax and others." Newsmax claims Fox "imposes financial penalties" on distributors if they carry Newsmax or others by requiring vMVPDs to carry Fox's smaller channels such as **Fox Business** and **Fox Sports 2**. Plus, the drag-down provisions come attached with barriers that prevent Newsmax from being added to more widely distributed pay TV tiers. Newsmax cited **Sling TV** and **Fubo** as examples where those carriage provisions impacted its own negotiations, with its renewal with Fubo being as recent as June. A Fox News spokesperson kept it brief when CFX reached out for comment: "Newsmax cannot sue their way out of their own competitive failures in the marketplace to chase headlines simply because they can't attract viewers." Newsmax thinks Fox should be required to pay 3x the amount of damages it claims was sustained along with a permanent injunction barring Fox's "exclusionary agreements."

THE BROADBAND STRIKE FORCE

Cable operators and the broadband industry at large have been looking to combat attacks on infrastructure, and Wednesday saw another step in their defense. A coalition of senior execs launched **STRIKE**, an initiative that seeks to address the increase in criminal attacks on broadband infrastructure. Co-led by **SCTE** and **NCTA**, the group looks to complement the existing actions NCTA is taking, such as advocating for the Stopping the Theft and Destruction of Broadband Act and encouraging the **Department of Homeland Security** and **FBI** to treat infrastructure attacks as domestic terrorism. STRIKE will also look to continue highlighting broadband damage as a high-level national security threat, in addition to facilitating intelligence sharing, increasing policy advocacy and establishing a clear line of communication with government stakeholders. STRIKE's Executive Forum includes execs from companies like **Comcast**, **Charter**, **Altice USA**, **Cox**, **GCI**, **Mediacom**, **Rogers**, **Cable One** and more. **Comcast** EVP/Chief Network Officer *Elad Nafshi* will serve as chair, while Charter's EVP, Field Operations *Tom Monaghan* will be the vice chair.

NFL REDZONE ADDING ADS

Even **NFL RedZone** isn't immune to adding commercials. Host *Scott Hanson* was on **ESPN**'s "The Pat McAfee Show" and confirmed his "Seven hours of commercial-free football starts now" catchphrase was being tweaked. That's because RedZone will no longer be commercial-free. Last year, RedZone experimented with L-wrap ads, but it's being turned up a notch. "The business folks handle the business. I have no say over different elements that could or could not be in the show," Hanson said. Hanson, who's dabbled in Olympics coverage as the host of **Peacock's** "Gold Zone," added they've had meetings to ensure they won't sacrifice football for "the business side of things." And as for his catchphrase, it'll now be, "Seven hours of RedZone football starts now."

CARR TAKES AIM AT BUS HOTSPOTS

FCC Chairman *Brendan Carr* is calling for votes to reverse two recent agency decisions: a 2023 move to fund WiFi on school buses and a 2024 decision to support hotspots for students or library patrons outside of schools and libraries. Both initiatives, championed by former Chairwoman *Jessica Rosenworcel*, aimed to close the "homework gap" for students without broadband. Carr argues the expansions of the E-Rate program exceed the FCC's authority, which Congress only temporarily extended through COVID-19 emergency legislation. "The FCC also failed to demonstrate that these funding decisions would advance legitimate classroom or library purposes. I dissented from both decisions at the time, and I am now pleased to circulate these two items, which will end the FCC's illegal funding [of] unsupervised screen time for young kids." *Anna Gomez*, the three-member Commission's lone Democrat, is a sure no-vote on both measures, saying "we must all fight back against this level of cruelty and indifference by this Administration."

BEAD DAY

With tomorrow the deadline for states to submit their updated final proposals to **NTIA** for the BEAD program, the clock starts for the executive branch agency to address the plans. NTIA has a 90 day-window to accept, reject or modify the plans. Fiber still is the primary winner in the plans that have been submitted, so it's wait-and-see on whether NTIA will seek more funding for satellite broadband. A **New Street Research** analysis of 25 state plans shows fiber winning funding for about 68% of locations, with satellite getting approximately 18%, fixed wireless at 12% and hybrid fiber-coax at 2%. Another big question is whether states will be allowed to keep appropriated money for non-deployment broadband projects. New Street estimates that 44% of the $41.6 billion BEAD budget is for deployment.

NY1 GOES FREE ON TUESDAYS

Spectrum News NY1 is expanding access to its political coverage ahead of the November elections, allowing non-subs to stream live content for free on Spectrum News App, NY1 website and **YouTube** every Tuesday between now and Election Day. This might be especially welcome news for **Optimum** subs who lost access to the **Charter**-owned net at the end of June. "Providing free access to Spectrum News NY1 during an election year is crucial for empowering our community with the information they need to make informed decisions," *Sam Singal,* GVP, News and Content, Spectrum News, said in a statement. NY1 is also streaming nightly political program "Inside City Hall" live every weekday. The net will also host three general election debates, with the Oct 22 mayoral debate to be simulcast on **C-SPAN**.

Think about that for a minute...

Don’t Call Me!

Commentary by Steve Effros

As Albert Einstein reportedly said, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different result.” Einstein didn’t coin the phrase, but the idea still stands. It’s akin to that other chestnut, attributed to George Santayana: “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” So I guess it shouldn’t come as much of a surprise that it looks like we’re yet again going down the rabbit hole of needlessly confusing the television viewing public.

Yes, folks, all of us in the “cable/broadband/streaming video” business are once again going to be relied on by our friends and family to explain what’s going on, and what they should do now that ESPN has announced its grand plan for selling its video services directly to consumers. To say the new offerings, plans, bundles, pricing and content are confusing would be an understatement.

Of course, this is not new. Remember the multi-year HBO streaming service journey from originally being called HBO Now, then to HBO Max, then it morphed to MAX, then back to HBO Max? When the long successful “HBO” brand was subsumed by the newer “Max” branding, the company reportedly had to pay around $1.8 million just for the “max.com” domain name. These are neither simple nor cheap rebranding efforts, and in almost all cases, subscribers are the ones who have the hardest time figuring out what’s going on and what they should do.

So they call on their “expert” friends. Full disclosure: I’m occasionally considered an “expert” when it comes to telecommunications policy and law, but I’m absolutely not an expert about sports viewing! Don’t call me! However, knowing that it was unavoidable, I figured I’d better do some research on the new $30 per month “ESPN Unlimited” offering. I went to the ESPN website for an explanation. My head still hurts.

We are now faced with an “Unlimited” plan, which is sort of self-explanatory and includes all of the various ESPN television products including all the college sports “channels” they include along with “ESPN+.” But what is the “+”? That always confused me, because if you subscribed in the past to “ESPN+” that didn’t mean you were getting everything on “ESPN!” You had to get that separately from your cable or DBS provider (or now from your streaming aggregator like YouTube TV). Oh, and now “ESPN+” subscribers have been given a new service name of “ESPN Select,” but ESPN+ will still exist and be able to be bought by itself under the “Select” brand or as part of the “Unlimited” bundle.

And, of course, there’s more! You can get a “bundle” of “Unlimited” along with “Hulu and Disney+” ad-supported for a combined price (but only for one year), which is the same as the price for “Unlimited” alone if you are a new or “eligible” returning customer (don’t ask) over the age of 18, and sign on before Jan. 5. The price goes back to the “then current” bundle price which currently is $36.

I think all that means is there’s a “deal” for the first year of “Unlimited” to get ad-supported Hulu and Disney+ for “free” for a year if you “act soon!” Not sure, though. If you really want to understand all this, you can go to the ESPN website, but take some aspirin with you!

As noted, this isn’t the first time a programmer has chosen to “rebrand” and introduce new services all at the same time and make it an incredibly complicated jigsaw puzzle for customers. Does it really always have to be that way? I hope not. I can tell you that at the moment, the AI engines can’t figure it out either. Don’t call me!

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.)