MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2025 VOLUME 36 | NO.170

Cablefax Daily™

WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

Strategic Swerve: EchoStar Outlines Life With Less Spectrum

EchoStar CEO *Hamid Akhavan* didn't beat around the bush during Monday's investor presentation—the company probably wouldn't have held it if it hadn't already been scheduled. That's because of how drastically EchoStar has changed in the past two months due to **AT&T**'s $23 billion deal to acquire spectrum assets, as well as **SpaceX**'s announcement last week that it would shell out $19 billion for licenses, including EchoStar's AWS-4 spectrum.

The gist of the meeting, held in Paris in light of the kickoff of industry event World Space Business Week, was that EchoStar's hand was forced by the **FCC** questioning its spectrum holdings. "We actually had no way forward but to make the most of what we have, which we believe would have been far more value-enhancing long term, but in the short-term, we had to liquidate some of our spectrum to meet the needs of the nation and the FCC," Akhavan said. Now EchoStar is pivoting from being an infrastructure-heavy firm to an "asset-light growth company."

Approximately 30 million consumers can be reached by its range of services today, including 5.3 million **DISH** households. Does the business pivot mean revisiting the possibility of a **DirecTV**-DISH merger? "Last year, we tried that, it didn't work out. There was a lot of challenges by the bondholders. I think they should not have resisted that, but at the end of the day, we're looking at every business unit with the lens of what we can do to maximize the value of that platform is the focus going forward," Akhavan said. "It has always been there, but now we have more flexibility, freedom and resources to structure those investments differently. So, we're going to take a look at it with a different lens. It's too early for me to give you any indication of what we're going to do, but I can tell you that we love our children and all these investment companies now and in the future will be handcrafted and closely developed under the lens of *Charlie [Ergen]* and myself."

Most of the meeting was focused on the **Boost** and **Hughes** businesses, though Akhavan did praise DISH and **Sling TV**'s customer satisfaction scores. "We took this as an indication that if a DTV merger doesn't happen, there is a real question about what happens with the DBS debt maturing in 2028 and 2029," **New Street Research** said.

When the AT&T spectrum transaction was announced, EchoStar said it would become the first (and only) hybrid MNO, but it wasn't really clear what that meant since they made up the term. Akhavan offered more color, saying that Boost Mobile's core network is cloud-based and very modern, allowing it to be quick in terms of innovation. "We are going to keep all of that, none of that is going to be lost. The only thing that we are essentially giving up is our own radios, antennas in the marketplace," he said. "We will connect to AT&T radios, but we keep all of that infrastructure that made us a very agile, fast and unique carrier… We believe in the age of AI, there is going to be a huge need for new products and new services to be offered."

Boost will also keep its mobile-core and IT systems in connecting with SpaceX for cell-to-ground connectivity through their spectrum transaction. "We think that SpaceX is the undisputed leader in the marketplace in terms of connectivity for internet today using **Starlink**. What we deliver to them in terms of a spectrum will enable them to also become very effective, and potentially repeat that in a direct-to-cell environment as we had planned on ourselves," Akhavan said.

In a Q&A, EchoStar Chairman *Charlie Ergen* was asked if it was the FCC pressure that resulted in the spectrum sell-off or if it's related to remarks he made in 2022 about not wanting to compete with the "richest guy in the world, who's got a different set of economics." Ergen, a professional blackjack player, said there was only one logical path forward given the hand dealt by the FCC. And while he doesn't believe the FCC had the legal authority to revoke EchoStar's spectrum, he suggested the process would take so long that EchoStar would win the battle, but lose the war. He also offered high praise to SpaceX, saying EchoStar was going to try and interface with them at some point, but it became natural "once they were willing to pay a market price for the spectrum."

While he didn't completely rule out the company serving as an investor in others (a la **Advance**), he said at its core, EchoStar is a builder. "I would say this is about the fourth pivot for me personally as a company. And every time we pivoted, it was always a little scary at first," Ergen said, referring to the move from analog scrambling to digital encryption, which the company capitalized on. "This pivot is the same thing for us. It's not personally exactly where we wanted to go, but we're also excited about how do we see if we're good enough to pivot it to something that we have never had before—which is having a lot of cash and what do you do in a world that's changing really rapidly."

PARAMOUNT-WBD MERGER RUMBLINGS ARE TALK OF TOWN

Paramount Skydance was the talk of the media world once again last week after it was reported that the newly-merged company was preparing a bid to buy **Warner Bros. Discovery**. This has sparked plenty of discussion, including on our own ***CFX Download*** podcast, about what a merger between these two media giants would even look like, and particularly what would be the result of bringing all of WBD and Paramount's streaming assets under one roof. Would a streaming combo of **HBO Max, Discovery+, TNT Sports, Paramount+** and **Pluto TV** be able to take on Netflix? In a research note released by Bernstein, the firm questioned whether this potential new entity would pull the plug on licensing content to Netflix as the next phase of the streaming wars. Bernstein said this is unlikely, arguing that the "recovery" of both businesses "still depends on Netflix not only as a licensee of content, but also as an effective marketing platform (e.g., licensing older seasons to Netflix ahead of new season launches on their own services), and a likely a bundle partner in the future–we expect every permutation to be available." But Bernstein also won't rule out "the possibility of the new entity reducing, or even pulling back entirely, taking some near-term pain for longer-term growth." It also predicted that, while Netflix wouldn't see much of an impact on the TV side if PSKY and WBD were to pull their shows from the streamer, as 90% of TV hits on Netflix are originals, the impact on the movie side "may be more meaningful." Bernstein looked at Netflix's weekly Global Top 10 YTD and found that roughly 70% of hit movies on the platform were licensed. About 30% of those came from PSKY and WBD. "That said, the effect on overall engagement would be less than proportional, since movie titles drive significantly less engagement than TV series," the firm said, concluding that "Netflix has options and sufficient time to mitigate the effect" if PSKY and WBD were to remove content from its library. In a separate note reacting to the merger rumors, **LightShed Research** looked at who might challenge PSKY in a bidding war for WBD. Although it sees a combo between **Comcast**'s **NBCUniversal** and WBD as compelling, LightShed argued that "it is hard to fathom" Comcast competing with a Paramount bid backed by the *Ellisons*. LightShed also doubted the current administration would approve a transaction between Comcast and WBD as President *Trump* isn't a fan of **NBC News** or **Comcast Chairman**/CEO *Brian Roberts*. **Disney** isn't an option either, LightShed said, as the Mouse House "would face intense antitrust scrutiny" with "no *Murdoch* assist this time," and Netflix, **Amazon** and **Apple** likely wouldn't want to deal with linear TV assets or the MVPD and vMVPD "entanglements" that come with them. LightShed said Apple, Netflix and Amazon "appear quite focused on using the strength of their balance sheets to invest in content and license sports rights without making a major acquisition." The firm suggested that the WBD board could instead elect to reject the Paramount bid to focus on splitting into two companies in order to "unlock a bidding war that seems unlikely to materialize today."

EMMYS POKE CABLE, STREAMING

Sunday's **77th Emmy Awards** opened with a skit poking fun at the current TV ecosystem, including a few jabs at cable programming. Host *Nate Bargatze* joked about **The History Chan-**

Cablefax Daily (ISSN 1069-6644) is published daily by Access Intelligence, LLC | www.cablefax.com | 301.354.2101 | Editorial Director: Amy Maclean, 301.354.1760, amaclean@accessintel.com | SVP Media Group: Dave Colford, 631.786.9796, dcolford@accessintel.com | Sr Editor: John Saavedra, 908.477.1758, jsaavedra@accessintel.com | Editor: Noah Ziegler, 301.354.1704, nziegler@accessintel.com | Account Executive: Harry Singh, 917.832.0064, hsingh@accessintel.com | Marketing Manager: Lauren Toolen, ltoolen@accessintel.com | Sr Production Mgr: Joann Fato, jfato@accessintel.com | Kerry Smith, Divisional President, Marketing & Media Group, ksmith@accessintel.com | Group Subs/Subscription Questions, Client Services: 301.354.2101, clientservices@accessintel.com | Annual subscription price: $1,999.00/year | Access Intelligence, LLC, 9211 Corporate Blvd., 4th Floor, Rockville, MD 20850

nel's alien conspiracy programming and about there being "no learning on The Learning Channel," adding that the network was made up of "hoarders, people who eat couch cushions [and] Dr. Pimple Popper." But streaming received its licks too, with Bargatze roasting true crime series and ad-supported subscriptions. The show drew more than 7.42 million viewers across **CBS** and **Paramount+**, making it the most-watched Emmys since 2021, the last time the awards show aired on the network. It was also the #1 entertainment program of the night and up 8% from the 2024 show, which aired on **ABC**. Live streaming on Paramount+ was up 76% vs the 2021 CBS-hosted event. The night also delivered big wins for **HBO** and **HBO Max**, with nine wins for "The Penguin" and five wins for "The Pitt," which took home Outstanding Drama Series. All in all, HBO earned 30 awards, tying with **Netflix** for the most awards per platform. On the comedy side, **Apple's** "The Studio" dominated with 13 wins, including Outstanding Comedy Series. Apple won 22 categories in all, including eight for "Severance."

PRIMO TNF NUMBERS FOR PRIME

Prime Video's "Thursday Night Football" opener between the Commanders and Packers was the most-watched regular season TNF on Prime game ever. It scored an average audience of 17.76 million viewers. The game eclipsed last year's season opener by 19% YOY and the full-season TNF average of 13.2 million by 35%. The game also drew the largest P18-34 and P18-49 audiences across all of the season opening **NFL** games on linear, and earned the largest audiences within those younger demos for any program since Super Bowl LIX. Commanders vs Packers averaged a median age of 46.9, eight years younger than the NFL average on linear networks during Week 1, which was 55.

DIRECTV'S NEW SPANISH-LANGUAGE AD CAMPAIGN

DirecTV launched a new ad campaign in collaboration with **TelevisaUnivision** to promote its Spanish-language products, including the 60+ channel MiEspañol Genre Pack, its ViX Premium with Ads bundle and Óptimo Más legacy package. Featuring Puerto Rican host and telenovela star *Adamari Lopez*, the new spot, which includes a musical number with key messaging, highlights DirectTV's flexible packages that don't require annual contracts and price points starting at $29.99/month.

KILMEADE APOLOGIZES FOR 'CALLOUS REMARK'

Fox News' "Fox & Friends" co-host *Brian Kilmeade* apologized for comments he made last Wednesday regarding giving "involuntary lethal injection" to the homeless. The comment was made in a Fox & Friends segment discussing the murder of *Iryna Zarutska*, who was fatally stabbed in Charlotte, North Carolina, in August by a suspect who was reportedly living in a homeless shelter and struggled with mental illness. A clip of Kilmeade's comments went viral over the weekend, with 24 million views as of deadline Monday, and sparked outrage on social media. Kilmeade addressed his comments live on air Sunday on "Fox & Friends," apologizing for "that extremely callous remark. I am obviously aware that not all mentally ill, homeless people act as the perpetrator did in North Carolina and that so many homeless people deserve our empathy and compassion."

FIBER FRENZY

C Spire is in the process of expanding and improving its fiber network in Terry, Mississippi. Construction is underway, with over 500 residents set to get connected to C Spire Fiber in the next two to four months. – **TDS Telecommunications** completed its fiber network project in Altoona, Wisconsin. Nearly 4,500 Altoona homes and businesses now have access to download and upload speeds of up to 8 Gigs for households and 10 Gigs for commercial customers.

RATINGS

The **WNBA** achieved another milestone amid its years-long surge. **ESPN** said it had its most-watched WNBA regular season across the network and **ABC**, according to the **Nielsen Big Data + Panel**. The two averaged 1.3 million viewers and aired eight of the top-10 most-watched WNBA games this season, led by the 2.7 million tuning in for the Sky-Fever bout back in May on ABC—the most in the league's history. "WNBA Countdown" posted 549,000 viewers across 17 episodes (up 7% from last season). ESPN will air the entire 2025 WNBA Playoffs beginning Sunday at 1pm with the Valkyries-Lynx.

PEOPLE

Katina Arnold is now the SVP, Disney Advertising Communications, overseeing all strategic comms for **Disney Ad Sales** and working cross-functionally across sales, product, data and research to lead corporate messaging, media relations, thought leadership and executive communications initiatives. Arnold is taking on the new role after most recently serving as **ESPN** VP, Corporate Communications. She will report to **Naomi Bulochnikov**, EVP, Communications, **Disney Entertainment Television & DTC**. – **VideoAmp** appointed *Jon Steinlauf*, former Chief U.S. Advertising Sales Officer at **Warner Bros. Discovery**, to its board. Steinlauf will also be inducted into the Broadcasting & Cable Hall of Fame later this month, honoring his contributions to the industry, which include long tenures at WBD, **Discovery** and **Scripps**. – *Marie Beaudette* joined **CNN** as VP, Business and Media. She will oversee the strategy and content for the network's business and media coverage. Beaudette was previously the Business, Finance and Economics Coverage Chief at *The Wall Street Journal*.