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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

Wrestlepalooza: ESPN Is New WWE Home, But Not For All Pay TV Subs

ESPN will air “Wrestlepalooza,” its first WWE premium live event [PLE], on Saturday. It’s the kickoff of a five-year deal with the wrestling company that was originally set to start in 2026. The timing of “Wrestlepalooza” is notable because Peacock technically still had a few months left on its own PLE deal with the WWE.

“Our relationship is with the WWE. We have no interaction, engagement, dialogue with the Peacock folks at all,” said ESPN VP, Programming & Acquisitions Matt Kenny when asked during a press conference Wednesday how ESPN managed to jump into the ring earlier than expected. “What was most important for us was the opportunity to have a launch event this fall... When it was presented to us that there was an opportunity to begin our five-year relationship early, obviously, we were excited about that as well.”

The debut of WWE on ESPN comes just weeks after the launch of the network’s new DTC streaming service, which gives customers access to ESPN’s linear channels, digital-only streams and VOD library, all packaged within a freshly updated app boasting a slew of new, interactive features. WWE spectacles are a centerpiece of ESPN’s streaming future, but this also marks the return of the company’s PLEs to traditional pay TV for the first time since WWE moved away from the pay-per-view model for mega-events such as “WrestleMania” or “Royal Rumble,” starting with the launch of the **WWE Network**

SVOD in 2014.

Wrestlepalooza, which will stream exclusively for ESPN Unlimited subscribers, won’t be simulcast on linear, but ESPN has said that select future PLEs will also air on its channels. Kenny said they’re working out with the WWE which ones will be simulcast: “As you can appreciate, given our portfolio of rights, we have a lot of commitments. Once we get a sense for what we could do, it’s working with the WWE on what that looks like. We will get into that with them.”

Kenny added that part of the deal includes “a minimum threshold” that ESPN has to hit in terms of broadcast numbers, so the net is focused on using its “megaphone” to get “as many people into the funnel as possible” as well as expand the viewership and expose new audiences to the WWE. “We want to get younger, we want to get more diverse. We want better gender diversity on our platforms. We believe WWE is a big part of that solution, as we move forward here in our new direct-to-consumer world.”

Driving ESPN’s WWE excitement is its own research that found that there’s a clear overlap between wrestling fans and those who love traditional sports. 84% of WWE fans are also **NFL** fans, while 73% of WWE fans are also **NBA** fans. 72% watch the **MLB** and 66% are also into college football. The network sees a clear opportunity to get wrestling fans through the door and to stay for the network’s robust sports programming.

But that door isn’t so easy to open just yet for certain pay



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TV subscribers. While cordless viewers can sign up for ESPN Unlimited for \$29.99/month, only select pay TV subs who already have ESPN channels as part of their packages will be able to authenticate with their provider credentials. Only **Charter Spectrum, Verizon Fios, DirecTV, Fubo** and **Hulu + Live TV** customers will be able to authenticate for Wrestlepalooza this weekend. This means that those not currently on that list, including **Comcast Xfinity** and **YouTube TV** subs, will be forced to pay for access to ESPN Unlimited separately to watch the PLE. (We spotted a three-day trial of ESPN for those signing up for a trial of Hulu + Live TV). *John Lasker*, SVP of DTC, confirmed during the call that ESPN isn't planning to offer limited access to PLEs for customers who can't yet authenticate, but he stressed that the network is in the process of cutting deals with MVPDs and vMVPDs. "We're not 100% there today, but over the next couple of months, the vast majority of folks that are subscribed to ESPN through an MVPD will have access to our ESPN unlimited plan and then therefore have access to all PLEs to come."

For the rest, all eyes are on Wrestlepalooza, which has been the focus of a week-long content blitz, including guest appearances from WWE superstars on the network's regular programming. This Friday, "SportsCenter" will air part of its 6pm show on-site in Indianapolis to promote the PLE, with a Wrestlepalooza Special airing first at 3pm on **ESPN2**. The network has also set pre- and post-shows for the event. And no, there isn't a "Baseball Tonight"-style talk show for WWE just yet, but it's fun to imagine ESPN pundits debating about wrestling matches. For now, Kenny "can't speak to anything specifically going forward."

Kenny highlighted that after Wrestlepalooza airs, it'll be available for users to watch on demand on the app, the first of what will eventually become a full library of WWE premium content. "We're excited to start populating, building, and curating a robust digital offering for WWE fans on our platforms," Kenny said.

CARR TELLS BROADCASTERS TO PUSH BACK AGAINST NETWORKS

FCC Chair *Brendan Carr* is telling broadcasters who license programming from **Disney** and **Comcast** to push back against them and say "we're not going to run Kimmel anymore until you straighten this out because we—we licensed broadcasters—are running the possibility of fines license revocations from the FCC if we continue to run content that ends up being a pattern of news distortion." He made the comments in an [interview on "The Benny Show" podcast](#) Wednesday. Conservative host *Benny Johnson*

played a clip from **ABC's** "Jimmy Kimmel Live" in which Kimmel said "the MAGA gang is desperately trying to characterize this kid who murdered *Charlie Kirk* as anything other than one of them." Johnson claimed the statement was news distortion and had Carr on as a guest. The FCC Chair said Kimmel's conduct "appears to be some of the sickest conduct possible," adding that he needed to be careful "because we could be called, ultimately, to be a judge on some of these claims that come up." Carr, who has said he wants to reinvigorate the public interest standard at the FCC, claimed legacy media's credibility is through the floor. Democrat Commissioner *Anna Gomez* quickly [responded](#): "An inexcusable act of political violence by one disturbed individual must never be exploited as justification for broader censorship or control. This Administration is increasingly using the weight of government power to suppress lawful expression, not because it glorifies violence or breaks the law, but because it challenges those in power or reflects views they oppose."

MSNBC-NBC NEWS SPLIT DATES SET

In a Wednesday editorial call reported on by the trades, **MSNBC** SVP, Newsgathering *Scott Matthews* outlined when the cable network will break away from **NBC News** as part of the **Versant** spinoff from **NBCUniversal**. NBC News staff that accepted roles at MSNBC will officially join the cable net on Oct. 6. At that time, MSNBC will no longer use NBC News correspondents or crews except for its D.C. operations. That is, until Oct. 20 when MSNBC's new D.C. bureau begins working independently of NBC News, bringing an end to the collaboration between the news organizations. MSNBC is also set to be renamed "MS Now" by the end of the year, and in the process losing the iconic peacock in its logo, to further underscore that it's no longer tied to the NBC brand.

CHARTER IS STILL COMMITTED

Charter is celebrating the one-year anniversary of making its public Customer Commitment, which includes an improved customer experience, product and service enhancements. **Spectrum** technicians increasingly are responding to residential installation and repair calls within two hours. Other initiatives under the commitment include price guarantees of up to three years, which Charter says has resulted in a 16% decrease in customer billing calls year-over-year, and its Seamless Entertainment packages providing linear and streaming options together. Don't forget its \$7 billion private investment to add 100,000+ miles of fiber and deliver symmetrical and multi-gigabit speeds to more than 1.7 million new locations

across the country by 2027. “Over the past 12 months, Spectrum and our 100% U.S.-based employees have advanced our customer-first philosophy, significantly evolving the overall customer experience with improvements across the company,” said *Cliff Hagan*, Spectrum’s EVP, Customer Operations.

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CABLE, BROADCAST GAIN GROUND IN AUGUST GAUGE

Back-to-school season and the start of football season helped cable and broadcast increase their share of TV watch-time in **Nielsen’s** The Gauge report for the first time since April. August saw cable and broadcast gain a full share point over last month, representing 22.5% and 19.1% of viewing time,

respectively, ending a three months-long decline for traditional TV. Cable viewing peaked in the last week of August, primarily among 18-49 year-olds, thanks to college football coverage kicking off on **ESPN**. Cable sports viewing was up 30% compared to July, and made up over 9% of all cable viewership. On the broadcast side, **Fox’s** first Big Noon Saturday game of the season on Aug. 30 drew the largest telecast audience of the month with over 16.6 million viewers. **ABC** owned the next three top telecasts, all college football. Meanwhile, time spent streaming declined by over 4% last month. Part of that decline is due to a decrease in younger audiences who are heading back to school. Time spent watching TV was down 2% overall in August vs July, but viewing among 6-17 year-olds was down 9%.



A Cablefax feature highlighting industry doings spotted in the real world.

CFX Editorial Director Amy Maclean joined industry all-stars Char Beales, Mark Snow and Wyatt Barnett for an oral history segment for the Customer Experience [CX] Archive of the Barco Library at the Syndeo Institute at the Cable Center. The [video of the conversation](#) just went live on Syndeo’s website. The wide-ranging discussion, moderated by Nicest Guy in Cable and former NCTA exec [Rob Stoddard](#), covered the impact of CTAM’s Cable Mover hotline, today’s commitments to more transparent pricing and much more.



Beales, who spent more than 21 years as President and CEO of industry marketing association CTAM, helped set the stage for the industry’s CX revolution in talking about the on-time guarantee, which was a revolutionary promise for the industry in the mid-1990s. “We put in place this pretty simple on-time guarantee that said, ‘If we give you a window between 12pm and 4pm we will actually come between 12pm and 4pm, and if we don’t, we’ll credit your account 20 bucks.’ Not surprisingly, that was not an easy sell in an industry of mavericks, but the political need was so great that the majority of the industry went along with the on-time guarantee,” she said. “I think it was really a pivotal point for the industry. It worked in rebuilding our relationships and our reputation. And I haven’t had the need to call my cable provider in the last

year, but the last time I had them out to my house, they’re still offering the on-time guarantee at Comcast.”

Snow, who serves as CTAM’s SVP and GM for Consumer Marketing and Insights, touched on how the industry has evolved from providing customer care to customer experience. “It’s nuanced. They’re very, very different things. So in customer care, it’s do I have enough people to answer the calls? Do I have enough people that have been trained well? Do I have the right training, the right information? Am I taking too long on the call? Are these people better served going online instead to answer their questions?” he said. “Customer experience is more about blueprinting the design of the service delivery itself, so you don’t even have to call.”

Barnett, NCTA’s VP for Technology Enablement, noted that regulatory issues are especially important to CX execs. “The customer care people really are at the pointy end of the industry. They’re the ones who are dealing with the customers,” he said, noting that today’s political culture is more pop-culture focused on the right and left. “A lot of that is things like the ‘click to cancel’ initiative which has kind of come in [through federal government action], faded away, then might be coming back again.”

How is the industry doing with CX these days? “I think we’re in a big state of change right now. We’re seeing it with all these price guarantees that are going out there. We’re seeing it with this promise of simpler and more transparency which is partly brought about by some of the regulatory pressures that they’re facing. I think we’re also in a state of uncertainty with AI,” Maclean said. “But there’s also one very big positive, to Mark’s point about how customer experience means so much more than the CSR on the end of the phone. There’s been huge, huge, huge work done on reliability of the network.”

Think about that for a minute...

In Defense of Decisionmakers

Commentary by Steve Effros

I was originally going to title this column “in defense of regulators,” but the more I thought about it, I realized that the same fundamental problem faced by regulators is confronting almost all decisionmakers, especially those who are responsible for long-range planning and commitments. But let's start with the regulators, then we'll get to the other examples.

This whole subject was triggered for me by a piece in another telecom blog which took issue with what the author cited as the risk of “...static analysis, which examines an economic state at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of conditions without considering how the economy reached that state or how it will change over time.” He was right, of course, about the risk. Things change. Decisions may be overtaken by events, or they may simply be wrong. But I doubt there was no consideration of the rest. It's far more complicated than that.

The example given was that Starlink has just announced it is drastically cutting prices in some rural states. A Starlink broadband dish which originally cost \$600 is now going to be sold, in those states only, for \$90. The standard residential plan (with limitations on use) drops from \$120 to \$85. No doubt about it, that's quite a change! The implied criticism of the regulators was that they made their decisions, like not including satellite broadband delivery in the BEAD program, solely on the basis of those original, “static” facts. The author cited quotes from folks like the former Chair of the FCC to back up his point.

But what, exactly, were they supposed to do differently? If you, as a regulator, are charged with deciding how to allocate money, for instance, to promote rural broadband and one of the applicants is offering a service with a \$600 equipment charge per rural household, should you just assume the price will eventually go down and ignore it? I would note that the anomalous result wound up with a bias toward fiber deployment which, in turn, resulted in almost absurd pricing for some rural fiber buildout proposals.

So this stuff is not easy. The regulators apparently decided

that fiber was a better long-term investment than short-term expensive satellite service which was not as comprehensive. Yes, the price suddenly dropped on the satellite side for only some locations and with conditions. Should the regulators have assumed that would be the case? Are they now charged with prognosticating the future of potential business decisions? Unfortunately, in some cases they apparently are, and that's not great either!

For instance, the business community is now being expected to guess what's going to happen with electric power availability. Billions are being spent on new power generation to service all the new AI server farms. It wasn't crazy to start focusing on solar and wind power as part of that process. Until, of course, the new administration came along with a total bias toward oil and cancelled permits for wind farms that were already almost completed resulting in billions of dollars of debt! Was that the failure of “static analysis?” In that case it would seem to be the opposite; they were anticipating the future, not the present. They were wrong. The “present” suddenly changed.

I raise this not because I have an “answer” to it. Rather, I think it's necessary for all of us to recognize how difficult these long-range decisions are to make, both from the regulatory and the business perspective. It's really easy to criticize. Not so easy to accurately gauge whether decisions that have to be made today are actually going to work out in the long run.

We only have the current facts to work with. Some humility would be in order. The current speed of change requires it.



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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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