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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

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The latest episode of CFX Download looks at Comcast and Charter's 2Q26 earnings, including the progress they've made in mobile and what's ahead in 3Q26. Tune in on YouTube, Apple and Spotify.

OPERATORS WARM UP TO ESPN UNLIMITED

About 150 of **NCTC**'s roughly 700 member companies have signed on to offer **ESPN** Unlimited to their traditional video subscribers—a modest but growing start as the direct-to-consumer product approaches its one-year anniversary, according to **Disney**'s top distribution executive.

"I think we're just in the early stages now of what we can build together, and the ways that we can more effectively combine that traditional pay TV experience with a streaming or more app-based experience," *Jimmy Zasowski*, president of platform distribution for Disney Entertainment and ESPN, told attendees at NCTC and **ACA Connects**' **Independent Show** Tuesday. "What we've seen so far, with distributors across the board, the more that their consumers understand the value that's available to them, connected to their pay TV service, the more that they're actually activating those."

Not a lot of details on how Disney is working to help spread the word that a pay TV subscription can give a subscriber access to all of this ESPN content, but Zasowski did indicate work is being done with distributors as well as with its own studios to get the message out. "It's a ton of work to get this up and running and actually get the entitlement process done for your customers. We spend a lot of time with our partners saying, 'But how do we make sure the marketing messages are landing and all of that?'" he said.

In addition to the 150 NCTC members offering ESPN Unlimited, there's "a number" currently in the queue, according to Zasowski. Just this week, **Google**'s **YouTube TV** joined the list of distributors whose customers can authenticate into the service. A prominent sign at the show, which is being held in a Walt Disney World resort, implored NCTC members to "give your pay TV subscribers more."

Years ago, when talk first started that ESPN was gearing up to launch a DTC streamer, operators already paying big bills to the programmer were a bit wary. But the ability for distributors to strike deals for authentication into the offering has eased concerns. "You're doing Unlimited the right way. I wish the other guys would do it the same way," NCTC CEO *Lou Borrelli* told Zasowski.

For Disney, the hope is it can continue to build on this partnership. "The consumption habits of today are going to be different tomorrow. So, I think we're going to have to iterate over the next three to five plus years as well, but my hope is those actually continue to move together really well and in a complementary way," Zasowski said.

Borrelli and Zasowski were joined on stage by NCTC EVP, Programming *Judy Meyka*, whose programming portfolio includes negotiating content deals for

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Explore what you can do with NCTC.

NCTC members. The conversation stayed largely collegial. Retrans was never mentioned. Neither was Disney's **Fubo** deal. But Borrelli did probe a bit on the NFL's 10% equity stake in ESPN. Disney's **NFL** deal has an estimated $3 billion value, according to an **SEC** filing. "You've got to admit it's a little weird," Borrelli said. "What happens when the **NBA** wants 5%? What happens when the **NHL** wants 3%? … What's the Chinese wall look like between the NFL as a partner owner and as your biggest expense?"

There are very clear lines, according to Zasowski. "We've been in the business and partners with the NFL for a long period of time. So, we've always had to kind of wade through that and have separation between the two. And even in this relationship, that continues on," he said. "I think in terms of the equity investment that they were making, a lot of this really revolved around the size and scope of the partnership. And because we were taking those assets on, I view their investment in ESPN as a vote of confidence in the direction that we're heading, and obviously their view not only on the way that we represent the league, but the way that we represent all sports across the board."

As for whether leagues want a piece of the pie, he said to wait and see, adding that it's fortunately not really his area. Zasowski described a collaborative approach to the rights acquisition process that has the programming, distribution and ad sales teams all weighing in. "The relationship that we expanded this year with the NFL, we saw a ton of value there, and we feel like that's going to continue to serve all of us collectively really well going forward," he said. "There's been other places where we looked at the rights and said, you know, this is something we either need to pass on or we can no longer hold on to because we all have to balance the total cost of the portfolio."

It was Meyka who steered the conversation toward ESPN's four-year streaming partnership with CW, which is set to launch Aug. 4 with a two-hour live "WWE NXT" event. The partnership gives ESPN Unlimited users access to 800+ hours of live **CW Sports** content. "It seems like that's maybe part of a strategy to try to be like this one-stop shop for everyone for all sports," Meyka mused.

Instead, Zasowski described CW as unique in that it has an extensive sports portfolio that's complementary to ESPN and it needed a partner to expand its digital footprint. "What we are focused on doing is trying to bring more sports content into the product, and especially sports content that's going to resonate well from a streaming perspective," he said. "I don't know that it's a template. I think we're going to be opportunistic if there's other things out there that we could find that could plug in as well."

With ESPN Unlimited nearing its one-year anniversary, the programmer will be looking to apply early learnings. Zasowski said he valued the organic conversations with distribution partners about how to strengthen the relationship and get the ESPN Unlimited message to consumers. "My hope is over the next year we can spend a lot of time in those discussions."

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NCTC MVNO LESSONS

NCTC continues to enhance its MVNO offering, announcing a new ready-to-go program for device subsidies, financing, trade-ins, upgrades and protection. The program, dubbed Complete Device Advantage, is powered by Prosurety and is available through NCTC's Mobile Solution on the **Telgoo5** platform. "By making devices more affordable and accessible, we're helping members offer the kind of experience customers expect from the largest wireless providers," said NCTC CEO *Lou Borrelli*. NCTC is continuing to build out its MVNO membership after its initial launch three years ago. It recently added Telgoo5 as a mobile platform provider with that option expected to be live in the market in September, according to Borrelli. This week's **Independent Show** was an opportunity for members to compare notes on mobile. One key takeaway: make sure your employees are your first customers. "Ground zero for driving the first set of customers for mobile is your existing customer base, which means your care team and your tech team," **Mediacom** EVP, Operations *Toni Murphy* said during a panel Tuesday. "Evangelizing that you have the product is going to take time. Awareness that you have the product is going to take a lot of time." Adding mobile also means a lot of training as it involves new processes, like number porting. "If the activation process is clunky, the agents will stop talking about it because they're worried about the customer experience and not being able to help them," she warned. A retail presence is also key. **Comcast** and **Charter** have led the way in offering mobile, with part of their initial capital spend focused on getting more stores opened. "It's also the image that you have in the marketplace. Customers want to touch the devices and a lot of customers, especially older, end up needing help to activate the services, especially with iPhones," said Mediacom SVP, Operations *Tapan Dandnaik*. Skepticism about the MVNO model has been a hurdle for smaller operators, but **Allo Communications** President, Leased Networks *Brad Moline* offered a reframe, likening it to WiFi 5, which had a lot of pain points at launch. The MVNO iteration is now like WiFi 7 where everything works. "The first few iterations were a little rough, but it's in really good shape now," he said.

HUGHES HEADED FOR BANKRUPTCY?

More turbulence in the **EchoStar** portfolio. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that satellite communications provider **Hughes Network Systems** is gearing up to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy "within days," citing people familiar with the matter. It's the second EchoStar subsidiary that's wrapped in bankruptcy dealings, with **Dish DBS** and **Dish Wireless** entering a prepackaged plan back in June. The move would let Hughes sidestep paying a $1.5 billion debt maturity payment due Saturday.

ACTORS GUILD FORMALLY OPPOSES PSKY-WBD

Add **SAG-AFTRA** to the list of those who opposed the $110 billion merger between **Paramount Skydance** and **Warner Bros. Discovery**, which is now on pause while two lawsuits go to trial in a U.S. District Court in California. While the actors union didn't join the states and the Writers Guild of America in suing to block the media industry-altering deal, its National Board adopted a resolution expressing its "serious and continuing concern regarding the impact" the combo would have on competition and industry jobs. The org also said it strongly supports the efforts by a coalition of 12 state attorneys general and the WGA "in pursuing litigation to scrutinize, and where warranted, limit this transaction." PSKY is meeting with the states and the WGA this week to discuss potential trial dates, with a plan to update the court on Aug. 7.

ACAC ELECTS NEW BOARD, HONORS THREE MEMBERS

Part of the **Independent Show** festivities include **ACA Connects** holding its annual member's meeting to elect new board members for three-year terms. On Tuesday, it elected **Allo Fiber** CEO *Shane West* to take over the seat previously held by **MCTV** President *Katherine Gessner*. Also joining the Class of 2026-29 is *Roger Seiken*, **WOW!** SVP and General Counsel. **Great Plains Communications** VP, Government and Regulatory Affairs *John Barrett*; **Mediacom** SVP, General Counsel and Secretary *Tom Larsen*; **Schurz** President/CEO *John Reardon*; **Armstrong Utilities** President *Jeff Ross*; and **Buckeye Broadband** President, GM & COO *Geoff Shook* were re-elected for new terms. ACAC also honored three of its members with its top awards: **Cable One** Associate General Counsel/Director, Government Affairs *Pat Caron* received the Lyn Simpson Grassroots Spirit Award; **GCI** won the PAC Leadership Award; and **IPpay** took home the Partnership Award. ACAC Chair *Patty Boyers* gave a rousing speech during the meeting over the decision to move from its annual Summit event next year to ACA Connects You–describing it as tripling the advocacy in Washington with surgical precision through three fly-ins vs. a one-time "shot in the dark."

HBO MAX'S MOBILE UPDATES

HBO Max is the latest streamer to launch an AI-powered vertical and scrollable clip feed for its mobile app. **Warner Bros. Discovery** is positioning HBO Max Shorts as a new way to help users discover content on the service. A Shorts icon on the bottom navigation menu allows customers to check out memorable scenes, trailers and bonus content from **HBO**'s content library, all personalized to each user's viewing preferences. Users can seamlessly jump into the full piece of content if they dig a clip as well. The feature is initially rolling out for iOS devices in the U.S., with plans to launch to additional devices and markets soon. The app also launched a conversational search function on Android devices. It's called "Ask HBO Max" and allows subs to search for content using natural language. A user can enter a prompt such as "in the mood for a comedy" and will be directed to relevant content.

WOW! GETS A NEW OWNER (AGAIN)

Remember when **DigitalBridge** and **Crestview Partners** purchased **WOW!** for $1.5 billion at the turn of the year? Well, that wasn't the end of it. In late December, just days before that deal became official and WOW! was taken private, Japan's **SoftBank Group** announced an agreement to buy DigitalBridge for approximately $4 billion. Although the initial WOW! transaction received all necessary regulatory approvals, DigitalBridge and SoftBank—through its **Duncan Holdco** subsidiary—still needed to request another transfer of control with the **FCC**. After applying in mid-February, the FCC's Wireline Competition Bureau approved the application this week, setting up SoftBank to become the first Japanese owner of a U.S.-based broadband company in quite some time. In 2000, Japanese operator **NTT** purchased Colorado-based **Verio** for more than $5 billion, shortly before the dot-com bubble popped. Verio currently operates as a web hosting provider.

BYRON ALLEN'S BUZZFEED CUTS

BuzzFeed plans to cut 35% of its current employees and contractors, just months after media mogul *Byron Allen* took ownership and became Chairman/CEO of the company. In total, approximately 180 jobs across the once-giant of internet media will be eliminated, with BuzzFeed writing in an **SEC** filing that "the reduction in workforce plan is intended to advance the Company's path towards profitability and positive cash flow generation by streamlining its organizational structure, optimizing operating expenses, and preserving cash." The company expects the move to save the company $29-32 million annually. Allen took over in May after acquiring a 51% stake for $120 million. His plan for the company is to launch an AI-powered free streaming platform to compete with **YouTube**.

PRIME VIDEO INKS NHL DEAL IN CANADA

Prime Video continues to skate in the sports world, adding a 12-year deal with **Rogers Communications** to be Canada's exclusive rightsholder for Wednesday night regular-season **NHL** games in English and French. The agreement kicks in with the upcoming 2026-27 season, and the **Amazon**-owned streamer will carry at least 26 games throughout the regular season. Prime Video will also nab the rights to select Stanley Cup Playoff series in Canada, including two first-round series and one second-round series per year.

FIBER FRENZY

More than 3,200 homes and businesses in Northwood, New Hampshire, will soon be connected to **Comcast** Xfinity services. Construction is underway, with the project expected to be completed by EOY.