

## QUOTABLE

“Unfortunately, I can’t give anyone a view into my heart and mind, but I can share this: I have regularly voted for candidates of both parties; I hold some views that would be called conservative and others that would be called liberal, just like most Americans; and when it comes to our news operations, I do not aspire to lead these companies to bend their newsrooms to my views. I believe that news should be based on facts and truth.” - PSKY CEO David Ellison on leading CBS News and CNN

## HALLMARK TURNS 25, STILL INDEPENDENT

**Hallmark** is to celebrations what cake is to birthdays—and now it’s the Hallmark Channel’s turn to celebrate. The brand turns 25 this week. That’s a special accomplishment for any media brand, but it’s especially rare for an independent programmer.

In today’s active M&A environment, it’s only natural to wonder if Hallmark Media—home to the flagship channel, **Hallmark Mystery**, **Hallmark Family** and SVOD **Hallmark+**—might be looking for a dance partner. Or a hunky Christmas tree salesman.

“Oh, I don’t think so. We are proudly independent, proudly privately owned by the Hall family. We are not in this business for short-term financial gains. We’re playing a longer game,” Hallmark Media President **Darren Abbott** told **CFX**. “We’re purpose-driven. The Hall family, the leadership team at Hallmark, we are committed to helping create a world where people feel more connected. We’re a brand that puts more joy and goodness in the world.”

Hallmark Channel cruises into its milestone anniversary with a president that’s only a few months into the job, but it’s a role Abbott’s been preparing for his entire career. He was tapped in March to lead Hallmark Media, replacing **John Matts** less than a year after he assumed the title. But he’s been part of Hallmark

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Cards for 30 years, mostly on the corporate and product/retail side.

When the flagship Hallmark Channel launched in 2001, it was treated like a separate subsidiary with virtually no overlap with the parent company. “It always seemed like we were missing an opportunity to really bring all of this together. And so, a few years ago, we really started to make a concerted effort towards bringing the businesses together. We have an initiative that we internally call One Hallmark,” said Abbott.

His knack for finding the connective tissue throughout Hallmark’s businesses earned him the role of Chief Brand Officer of Hallmark Media and Hallmark in 2024. Even as his Hallmark Media role grew, he’s continued to serve as the corporate Chief Brand Officer. He’s the visionary behind events such as the Hallmark Christmas Cruise and Hallmark Christmas Experience, with company leadership tasking him with finding more intersections of product, content and experiences.

One of his first orders of business as Chief Brand Officer at Hallmark Media was to bring back *Michelle Vicary* as head of programming last August. “Michelle helped define the very DNA of what a Hallmark movie is,” Abbott said. “When I reached out to her and we had a conversation, I said, ‘Michelle, I need you to come home. We’ve got work to do.’”

The new series her team is developing are overperforming, according to Abbott. May’s original movie “Kentucky Roses” created in partnership with Churchill Downs ranked as the #5 most-watched movie across entertainment cable. “When Call the Heart” Season 13, which wrapped in March, still ranks as the #1 most-watched program on entertainment cable YTD among total viewers and women 18+. Abbott believes the upcoming Countdown to Christmas slate is the strongest in the franchise’s history. And yes, there are three new rom-coms debuting in August under the “Hallmark Channel’s 25th Birthday” block—“Toast to Italy,” “Absolutely Devoted to You” and “Aussie at Heart.”

Part of Abbott’s job is building SVOD Hallmark+, which turns two in September. It’s near and dear to Abbott, and one of the earliest examples of him finding ways to link Hallmark’s many touchpoints. “It’s more than just a streaming service. We call it a membership program. It gives you access to free greeting cards, free e-cards, an ornament, a gift every year. It’s really about leaning into the full breadth of the Hallmark brand, and I’m really proud of the way the team continues to iterate and innovate the overall experience,” he said.

Compared to other niche streamers, such as **Acorn TV**, **CuriosityStream**, **PBS Masterpiece**, **Discovery+** and others, Hallmark+ has the second-largest YOY growth (+31%) compared to all services, following **MGM+**, according to Hallmark Research.

More exclusive content, an improved user experience and additional new retail benefits are coming soon to Hallmark+, Abbott teased. Earlier this year, it premiered “Hope Valley: 1874,” a prequel to “When Calls the Heart.” The show drove substantial acquisition and engagement growth

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on the streamer in 2Q. Last week it launched its second exclusive series, “Paris is Always a Good Idea” with *Lacy Chabert*. The streamer is available as an add-on for MVPD and vMVPDs, and it’s part of various bundles, including a Hallmark+ & **Starz** package for \$13.99 per month.

That doesn’t mean Hallmark isn’t willing to play with others, striking an expanded distribution agreement with **Netflix** that includes series “The Way Home” and select holiday-themed movies. “It allows us to reach people that may not have watched Hallmark content before, so we’re going to be very strategic and intentional about when we do something like that,” Abbott said. “When it makes sense with the right type of content, be it a series or something that we think might be relevant to a broader audience, we’re certainly open to entertaining it.”

What do the next 25 years of Hallmark Channel look like? Abbott hopes to keep us guessing. “I want our consumers and our audience to always say, ‘I’m so surprised by what Hallmark’s doing. I never know what they’re going to do next,’” he said. “I think a thriving, healthy brand is always going to deliver against a promise like that.”

## ELLISON ADDRESSES CNN WORRIES

With **Paramount Skydance** now preparing for a March 2027 trial against the cases seeking to block its \$110 billion merger with **Warner Bros. Discovery**, PSKY CEO *David Ellison* [penned](#) an essay in *The New York Times* to address worries about the future of **CNN** post-merger and his own politics. “The issue is whether I can be trusted as a steward of Warner’s CNN,” Ellison wrote. The exec believes the pushback the deal has faced is not really about market share but whether CNN will see a rightward shift akin to **CBS News** under his leadership. Noting that he has voted for candidates from both parties and holds both conservative and liberal views, Ellison said that he “does not aspire to lead these companies to bend their newsrooms to my views.” He also reiterated that CNN will continue to operate independently under Paramount and that “our journalists will continue to answer to the facts and to all the people they serve—not to any party or cause.” Ellison’s relationship with the *Trump* administration has been called into question for months by critics of the mega-merger, with a group of Senate Dems threatening to probe PSKY’s contacts with the White House concerning the deal. It has been reported in recent weeks that California AG *Rob Bonta*, who is leading the coalition of 12 states suing to halt the combo, is seeking for the companies to divest CNN before they merge, but Bonta rejected that claim, [saying](#), “Spinning off one channel from a media conglomerate is not a sufficient remedy to protect consumers and preserve competition in the film and television industry.”

## HEARST BUYS DISNEY’S A+E STAKE

Whispers of **Disney** departing from its joint ownership of **A+E Global Media** began heating up last week. On Tuesday, the move became official after **Hearst** struck a deal with Disney to acquire its 50% controlling stake for \$1.2 billion in cash. Subject to customary closing conditions, the deal is expected to close in September. Once that happens, A+E will become wholly owned by Hearst under its Entertainment portfolio. “We thank our Disney colleagues for decades of successful partnership,” said Hearst President/CEO *Steven Swartz*. “We look forward to supporting *Paul Bucciari* and A+E Global Media’s leadership team as they continue to make must-see programs and innovate around the great History, Lifetime and A&E brands.” We’ll get to hear Disney’s thoughts on the transaction when the House of Mouse reports fiscal 3Q26 earnings Wednesday morning (8:30am ET).

## GOMEZ RECEIVES UNIDOSUS COMMUNICATIONS AWARD

**FCC** Commissioner *Anna Gomez* received the Rubén Salazar Award for Communications from Hispanic civil rights group UnidosUS. At the organization’s annual conference this weekend, Gomez was recognized “for her leadership in protecting free speech and expanding broadband access.” In her remarks, she admitted defending the First Amendment wasn’t something she anticipated becoming a central part of her career in public service. “But that is exactly where we find ourselves today,” she said, pointing to her staunch

critiques of the Commission's dealings with the **Paramount-Skydance** merger—and the subsequent PSKY-**WBD** combo—as well as the early renewals of **Disney's ABC** stations and other DEI-related investigations. Although she's aware the continued criticism could result in her removal from the FCC's commissioner bench, "I have accepted that risk, and I would accept it again, because the alternative is far worse."

## T-MOBILE TACKLES UPFRONT DEVICE COSTS

This week, **T-Mobile** will introduce EIP Flex 36, a new installment plan that allows qualifying new and existing customers to skip the upfront costs of purchasing a new phone by financing the device, taxes and fees at checkout over 36 months for a limited time 0% APR. The uncarrier said it's removing the financial barrier as two-thirds of consumers say they worry about out-of-pocket costs when switching wireless providers, with average upfront costs coming in at approximately \$120/line. EIP Flex 36 is available with Essentials, Experience More and Experience Beyond mobile plans.

## ESPN REVEALS 'CREATOR NETWORK' CLASS AHEAD OF SUPER BOWL LXI

If you haven't heard yet, the next **Super Bowl** is being broadcast on **ESPN** for the first time ever. The network has been promoting the event since the moment the previous Super Bowl ended, and it's making sure to keep the momentum (and attention) going throughout the year. That's why it's working with five content creators under the ESPN Creator Network, a storytelling initiative that seeks to give fans a behind-the-scenes look and fresh perspective as the NFL season unfolds. Former NFL defensive lineman *Isaac Rochell*, along with *Chase Murman*, *Simone Scott*, *Diana Flores* and *Leah Cammarano*, were named to this year's Creator Network class. They'll produce original content and also be on hand at marquee events, including Super Bowl week in Los Angeles.

## FIBER FRENZY

**Wire 3** is expanding its footprint to South Carolina, with construction now underway in Anderson. Through a \$36 million investment, the Florida-based ISP plans to connect approximately 35,000 homes and businesses to its fiber network. First connects in the community are expected as early as this fall. Wire 3 is also planning to build in the South Carolina communities of Central, Clemson, Easley, Travelers Rest and Pendleton. – **Lightcurve** launched 8 Gig internet service in select communities in Tacoma, Washington, with the upgrades becoming more widely available over the coming years. Tacoma marks the latest milestone in the provider's 8 Gig expansion, with Centralia, Chehalis, Ellensburg, Kittitas and Selah already online. – **Astound Broadband** is offering 1 Gig internet service for \$30/month for a limited time in the Boston area as part of its Back-to-School campaign. Available now through Sept. 30 for new residential customers, the deal includes WiFi equipment at no additional cost, a free self-installation kit and a risk-free 30-day test drive of the service. -- Sparklight is expanding its network to Du Quoin, Illinois. The **Cable One**-owned provider will offer multi-gig speeds, low latency as well as a whole-home mesh WiFi solution from eero. Sparklight has invested more than \$5 million in Southwest Illinois over the past three years, having devoted nearly \$1 billion in footprint-wide network upgrades in that same time frame.

## CARRIAGE

AAPI lifestyle and entertainment channel **JoySauce** has joined **The Roku Channel**. Its programming includes a late-night talk show, anime, standup comedy, game shows and a movie library. JoySauce is also available on **Amazon Prime Video**, **Plex**, **YouTube** and on its own website and mobile app.

## PEOPLE

**Canela Media** is preparing to launch its AI-powered microdramas app **Zully** this fall. Leading advertising and sponsorship strategy for the free, ad-supported vertical video platform will be *Matt Montemayor*, who is moving up to EVP, Head of Sales. Montemayor brings over 20 years of experience, most recently serving as Canela's SVP, Sales. Previously, he held positions at **NBCUniversal**, **Pandora Media** and **Emmis Communications**.