

Cablefax Daily™

WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

New & Improved: WBD Details Major Fixes Integrated into New Max Service

The grand reveal of **Warner Bros. Discovery's** combined streaming service wasn't surrounded by a lot of pomp and circumstance, but focused more on how what's to come will be a huge step forward from what **HBO Max** was.

The new service, dubbed **Max** and given a "The One to Watch" tagline, will be introduced to the world on May 23. During a press event Wednesday, WBD President/CEO of Global Streaming and Games **JB Perrette** said the team behind the new service identified four key areas of improvement from primarily HBO Max, but also **discovery+**. The largest focus is driving more engagement as three-quarters of the viewership on HBO Max comes from the app's home screen. Additionally, four times as much content drives the majority of viewership on **discovery+**.

"With Max, we've leveraged all we learn to improve circulation and content discovery and enable users to enjoy much more of our amazing array of stories," Perrette said. Among those new features are a simpler, more transparent user interface and a content navigation menu that prioritizes brands like HBO as well as new content. A shortcut has been added to make it easier to save content to watch later, and for the first time, the service will have more personalized components that better recommend content based on what users have previously watched.

"We've significantly increased our investment and focus on machine learning while still integrating an editorial voice to deliver a human plus machine approach that as more and more

usage happens in the service, it will help us get better and better at servicing the right content that's best for you," Perrette went on. "And nothing says doing the basics better like finally having personalized recommendations as to what to watch next."

Other initiatives center on the reduction of involuntary churn in the U.S. HBO Max's toolset was incredibly limited when it came to informing customers of an expired card or other billing complications. Now, customers will be alerted through failed payment notifications, including in-app messages on connected TVs. That's the platform where the vast majority of HBO Max's usage can be sourced to. To address those that have chosen to leave HBO Max behind due to technical difficulties, Max's design team revamped the app's core architecture to make app start times, video start times and general navigation responses 20-30% faster.

Warner Bros. Discovery's hope is that the switch from HBO Max to Max is as seamless as possible. The app will automatically update to the Max app for a large portion of users, but another segment will be manually prompted to make the upgrade upon their first time opening HBO Max on or after that date. All HBO Max subscribers' usernames and passwords will be transitioned along with their profiles, watch histories and billing information.

Pricing for Max will largely fall in line with what HBO Max users are used to. The ad-lite tier will hit at \$9.99/month while the ad-free plan will stay at \$15.99/month. A new ultimate plan will also be available at \$19.99/month that will offer 4K HDR with Dolby Atmos, four concurrent streams and 100

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downloads. Existing monthly subscribers will continue to have access to their current plan features for at least six months, at which point they'll be able to move to the ultimate tier.

"We're on a mission to be the one to watch, and as we've seen today in Max, we've got the goods and we're going to keep producing and keep telling stories to delight audiences around the world so that they believe and they tell all their friends," WBD CEO *David Zaslav* told the crowd. "So buckle your seatbelts and get ready for May 23. It's going to be a fun ride."

MAX PROGRAMMING LINEUP ACTIVATED

Max will hit the scene with a huge library of content, but the programming pipeline has also been filled with heavy hitters from **Warner Bros. Discovery's** vault. Max has ordered an original "Harry Potter" scripted television series that will be produced over the next decade, according to **HBO** and **HBO Max** Content Chair/CEO *Casey Bloys*. Another "Game of Thrones" prequel is also on the way with "A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms: The Hedge Knight" receiving a series order. It will focus on Ser Duncan the Tall and his much smaller squire, Egg. WBD is calling on "Big Bang Theory" EP *Chuck Lorre* to develop a new comedy series derived from the hit sitcom, and another drama series is in the works based on the films in "The Conjuring" franchise. **Magnolia Network** fans haven't been forgotten—"Fixer Upper: The Hotel" will see *Chip and Joanna Gaines* take on their biggest project yet.

NTIA LOOKING FOR AI ANSWERS

NTIA launched a request for comment Wednesday aimed at gathering information for the *Biden* Administration on AI-related risks and opportunities. It's seeking input on policies that would give the public, government entities and businesses reassurance that AI systems are working as designed and in a trustworthy fashion. Among the questions being asked in the RFC are what kinds of data access would be necessary to conduct audits and assessments, and what different approaches may need to be taken in various industry sectors. The White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy previously released the Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights, a guide for the design and deployment of AI and automated systems, including those that use machine learning. The National Institute of Standards and Technology's AI Risk Management Framework is also a voluntary tool available for use by organizations to manage and minimize risks posed by AI systems.

The WHO and the WHY

CFX's spotlight on recent new hires & promotions



JOE

Earley

PRESIDENT, DIRECT-TO-CONSUMER
DISNEY ENTERTAINMENT

3 THINGS TO KNOW

- Joe became the new head of DTC at Disney Entertainment after leading Hulu as President since Jan. 2022. He began his new role last week but will continue with his duties at Hulu until his successor is chosen. Joe will report to co-chairmen Alan Bergman and Dana Walden.
- Joe will lead streaming efforts across Disney+ and Hulu, working with the company's content teams to expand programming and drive engagement. He's been involved with Disney+ from its very beginning as he oversaw marketing and operations in the buildup to its launch in Nov. 2019. Two years later, he became responsible for its content curation as well.
- He spent 20 years at Fox Broadcasting. Joe joined the company in 1994 as a Sr. Publicist and eventually rose to President, Marketing & Communications, before becoming COO in Aug. 2012. Joe was upped to COO of Fox Television Group in 2014 and held that position until he was named President of the production company The Jackal Group in 2016.

FOX NEWS SANCTIONED IN DOMINION CASE

Day two of pre-trials hearings in **Dominion's** lawsuit against **Fox News** continued Wednesday, with the judge overseeing the case declaring he would [sanction](#) the news network and would likely launch a probe into apparent failures to disclose information. One issue of concern was whether Fox had been forthcoming about whether *Rupert Murdoch* serves as a corporate officer for Fox News. "Rupert Murdoch has been listed as executive chairman of FOX News in our **SEC** filings for several years and this filing was referenced by Dominion's own attorney during his deposition," Fox News said in an emailed statement. Judge *Eric Davis* declined Dominion's request to deconsolidate the case against Fox News and its parent **Fox Corp.**

SPORTS SPENDING KEEPS CLIMBING

The money in U.S. TV and streaming sports media rights continues to rise, and it might not stop anytime soon. **S&P Global's** annual Sports Report revealed total payments will likely amount to \$25.57 billion in 2023 across broadcast, cable, RSNs and streaming services. For perspective, that number was an esti-

mated \$14.64 billion in 2015, and S&P expects it to grow to over \$30 billion in 2025 as more deals are made. The increase is also helped by the rise of players entering the media rights game as seen with **Apple** obtaining the rights for **MLS** and **Prime Video** being the home to **NFL's** Thursday Night Football.

PEACOCK BREAKS INTO VR SPACE

Peacock made the jump into the VR realm as it launched on **Meta's** Quest 2 and Quest Pro headsets. Users in the U.S. and select territories can access over 90,000 hours of programs including the MLB and NFL games **Peacock** carries. For those who are 18 or older without a paid subscription, they can get in on a limited-time deal and get **Peacock Premium** with ads for free for three months. Customers who register a new qualifying device through April 11, 2024, are also eligible for a year of **Peacock Premium** with ads at no cost.

CARRIAGE

Sinclair and **YouTube TV** penned a distribution deal for the vMVPD to carry **Tennis Channel**, **T2**, **CHARGE!** and **TBD**. All four will be rolled out on the platform June 1. The agreement also includes the carriage renewal for the sci-fi network **Comet** and extends the existing carriage of **Sinclair's CBS** and **MyNetworkTV** affiliate broadcast stations. – **AspireTV Life**, a FAST channel owned by **UP Entertainment** dedicated to travel, design, fashion and cooking, has landed on **Pluto TV**. Users can now watch programs like “Butter & Brown,” “Chaos to Calm” and “HBCU 101.” – OTT news streaming service **Haystack News** added select **CNN** shows to its TV and mobile offerings. “*Anderson Cooper 360*,” “*The Lead with Jake Tapper*” and “*The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer*” headline new programs on **Haystack**, which has over 15 million viewers.

PARAMOUNT+ READY TO DRIVE

Paramount+ and **Formula 1** agreed to an official promotional partnership for the 2023-24 campaign. It's the first of its kind for F1 and will have the streaming service's popular series, movies and characters featured at Fan Zone and other events. **Paramount+** will also have branding on the race tracks and physical signage alongside the course.

FIBER FRENZY

Last year was a big one for the **Utah Telecommunication Open Infrastructure Agency** (UTOPIA). The organization built over 4,387 miles of fiberoptic infrastructure in Utah, Idaho and Montana in 2022, all while managing supply chain and labor struggles. UTOPIA finished fiber buildouts in 14 cities as well, adding more than 20,000 1-Gig customers and nearly 400 10-Gig customers.

AWARDS

The nominations for the 44th Annual Sports Emmy Awards are out, with **ESPN** leading the way with 59 total. That includes nominations for studio shows like “College GameDay,” “Monday Night Countdown,” “SportsCenter” and “Pardon the Interruption,” and the sports giant earned nine nominations for its overall **NFL** programming and six from **ESPN Deportes**. **NBC Sports** was the network with the second-most nominations at 38, followed by **Fox Sports** (33), **CBS Sports** (29) and **Turner Sports** (26). The awards ceremony will take place May 22 in New York City.

AT THE COMMISSION

The **FCC** committed more than \$2.5 million to the Emergency Connectivity Fund through a new funding round. The commitment will support applications from all three windows and benefit approximately 15 schools, one library and one consortium. The Commission has approved more than \$6.6 billion in funding to date.

BREEZELINE LAUNCHES APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

Breezeline is teaming up with Broward College in Miami to introduce an apprenticeship program designed to help young talent in the early stages of their careers. The program will have personalized and hands-on training in both educational and practical areas. Once participants complete the program, they'll have the chance to obtain two industry-related certifications. Additionally, **Breezeline** created a paid internship program that'll have seven college and graduate-level students gain experience with the provider. Running from June-August, it'll provide support across **Breezeline's** HR, legal, data and analytics, engineering, products and marketing departments

PROGRAMMING

The first 2024 Republican presidential primary debate will be televised from Milwaukee on **Fox News** come August. Republican National Committee chairwoman **Ronna McDaniel** revealed the news while on “*Fox & Friends*,” noting that the RNC is also partnering with the video platform **Rumble** to live stream the debate. – “*Headliners with Rachel Nichols*” will premiere April 13 on **Showtime's** streaming and on-demand platforms. The debut episode will feature **NBA** star **Joel Embiid** as he sits with **Nichols** for an in-depth interview. Episodes will release on Thursdays through the **NBA Playoffs**.

PEOPLE

AMC Networks upped **Kim Granito** from EVP, Integrated Marketing and **AMCN** Content Room to Head of Marketing. Current President of Marketing **Len Fogge** is retiring next month. **Granito** will report to CEO **Kristin Dolan** and be based in New York.

Think about that for a minute...

Of AI and Donkeys

Commentary by Steve Effros

Long-time readers of this column know that circumstances in the telecommunications policy sphere periodically spur me to quote one of my grandmother's favorite sayings: "Even a donkey doesn't trip over the same stone twice!"

This was said to me every time I did something stupid for the second, third or more times. It becomes relevant in our business all too frequently when we simply don't learn from past mistakes. We may be heading down that road again, and I just thought I'd point it out and suggest we strongly consider (pardon me) the road not taken!

The issue, at its most basic, is whether the tech industry should work with the government or fight any suggestion that AI should be regulated, saying guidelines should be left to the companies themselves. By "tech industry" I'm referring broadly to all the companies delving (sometimes head-first) into the exploding creation and use of "artificial intelligence."

Now I understand that "AI" has been incorporated and used by companies doing all sorts of things for many years. Merge the available data with the ability to categorize it and manipulate it and you've got the beginnings of "AI." But as we all should be aware by now, since last November "AI" has become the buzzword (buzz acronym?) for all the new programs that can generate "answers," or art or whatever from simple verbal commands. We're also pretty convinced that this capability, which is improving at breakneck speed, will only improve, and we have no idea where that leads.

The "breakneck speed" part of this is something I've written about before, and it's what has taken the "experts" so aback. They never thought things would move this fast. The result has been recommendations from some of them that we "pause" the development of AI and "Large Language Models" for six months. A moratorium while we look at what "guardrails" should be put around this new beast before it gets totally out of control. But I'm sure intuitively most of you are like me in thinking that such a "pause" is highly unlikely to work. You can't stop folks from

thinking, and even if you limit availability of the largest LLMs for now, all that will do is induce others, maybe in other countries, from creating new ones. Nope, I don't think a voluntary pause in development will work. There are other experts who agree, and argue it would only hobble those who comply.

But with all the hullabaloo about this it's inevitable that the politicians and policy folks are already debating what type of rules should be written and how they could be enforced. The EU has already written some of those rules and China just came out with theirs. The US is behind in all this and that does not help.

As usual, the biggest companies involved in AI have differing views on how to move forward. Some push for industry to retain control, others say that won't work and the government has to, and should be involved.

Well, we've been here before. I was in the middle of that fight between cable companies wanting to cooperate with the FCC and Congress in developing federal rules for cable and those who simply wanted to fight them off as long as possible. I lost that fight, wanting to work with the government to craft the rules. The "fighters" won the internal battle and then lost. That's part of how we got multi-billion dollar "retransmission consent fees" imposed on us and our customers.

We're approaching another point where we either "trip over that same stone" or do something smarter this time. AI companies are meeting in California this week to discuss which road to take. Let's hope we ultimately can refer to them as donkeys, not asses.



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.)

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