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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

Monumental Moment: D.C. RSN Wants to Go Beyond Live Sports

The RSN world has two sides to its coin. On one end, **Warner Bros. Discovery** is exiting the business and **Bally Sports** networks are hanging in the balance with parent company **Diamond Sports** trying to forge its way out of bankruptcy and continue operations. Then there are those trying to pump new life into the model. Witness the re-launch of **AT&T Sportsnet Southwest** as **Space City Home Network** this week and **NBC Sports Washington's** flip to **Monumental Sports Network** late last month.

"We really took it as an opportunity to take a step back and think about 'What does a next-gen local media distribution company look like?'" Monumental Sports & Entertainment President of Media & New Enterprises **Zach Leonsis** told **CFX**.

Monumental Sports Network officially went live on September 20. The rebrand comes just over a year after MSE acquired the remaining interest in the RSN from **Comcast NBCUniversal** for an undisclosed price after holding a 33% stake prior. It's the new go-to regional stop for the **NBA's** Wizards, **NHL's** Capitals and **WNBA's** Mystics, which are all owned by Monumental's parent company MSE and its founder/Chairman/CEO **Ted Leonsis**.

Local and regional networks are inching their way into the digital realm. It's a big part of why the RSN space is in a precarious position. Leonsis remains a believer in the value linear distribution brings, but the trends are evident. **MSG Networks** with **MSG+** and **NESN** with **NESN 360** are two examples of how

regional networks are trying to solve the puzzle, but despite the shift in viewer habits, live sports continue to check in among the highest-rated events on TV.

"When we bought our local network back, I think we really think about it as buying our local rights back. Right now, we distribute on linear, and linear is always going to be a very important component of our future. But we anticipate distributing our rights in multiple additional ways in the future," said Leonsis, who declined to discuss the status of contracts with MVPD partners. "I think we're aligned with our distribution partners in wanting to deliver video product that subscribers want to enjoy."

As for whether Monumental will join **MSG Networks** and **NESN** as RSNs with their own DTC product, there's no concrete plan yet—but something could be in the cards come 2024. "I don't have an update to share today, but clearly it's something we're considering," Leonsis said. "We anticipate announcing additional features and enhancements throughout the course of the calendar year."

No matter the means of distribution, content remains king. Leonsis wants the network to be more than the channel fans tune in to catch a live event. He wants fans to feel the excitement of the gradual buildup and anticipation throughout the day leading into tipoff or puck drop, while also offering content that entices viewers to stick around for postgame coverage.

However, there are only so many games that can be broadcast, placing more importance on non-live programming. It's

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**Source: Nielsen L+SD Program-based data; Ad-supported cable, excluding news and sports-NHI 4th Quarters 2013-2022; Networks that share feed are weight averaged to daypart based on duration for competitive rankings.

why the network turned to known figures such as former **ESPN** reporter *Rachel Nichols* to headline its programming slate. Nichols is the host of an interview series “Hometown with Rachel Nichols,” which will feature sports stars, celebrities, Monumental athletes and leaders and more. Other shows include “Caps Red Line,” “District Countdown” and “Beltway Football,” which serves as the network’s anchor for coverage of the **NFL’s** Commanders.

“I think that a lot of regional sports networks out there have become strictly placeholders for the live games, and when we started to examine what did our on-air product look like, compared to how we imagined a fan-centric experience looking like, I think we saw a lot of opportunity,” Leonsis said. “Prior to the acquisition, we already had one of the largest production groups in the NBA and the NHL ... So we took it as an opportunity to rationalize and combine those efforts in a more efficient way.”

What’s also to come in 2024 is the network’s new production plant and broadcast studio located next to Capital One Arena in D.C. The two-story facility will boast two studios and five control rooms to allow for flexibility in the event of games happening simultaneously. Monumental is investing in new IP-based technology as well, and it’s setting up the studio to be able to upgrade to 4K when distributors are ready to take that signal.

It’s been a strenuous rebrand process since last August. MSE had to rebuild the network’s digital and production infrastructures, come up with new programming strategies and hire additional personnel to help steer the ship and establish its own markings away from Comcast and NBC’s. It’s part of the rebranding fun, and it fuels the excitement ahead of the newly named network’s first season on air.

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DISH, IN SWITCHEROO, TO BECOME PART OF ECHOSTAR

DISH’s merger with **EchoStar** is moving forward in a manner that’s slightly different than was originally announced. **DISH** will now become a direct subsidiary of **EchoStar** with **EchoStar** being the surviving entity. “We haven’t figured out the specific objective that this structure was designed to achieve (it’s usually taxes), but we think the important point is that the **EchoStar** assets, cash, and cash flows will be aligned with the wireless business, not with **DBS**,” **New Street Research** said in a note. “This makes total sense based on where the assets are needed. It also makes a sale of **DBS** easier at some point.” In other news, the **FCC** verified that **DISH** has met the second of its commitments to the agency over the buildout of its 5G wireless network. **DISH** submitted a status

report in July verifying that it served more than 73% of the U.S. population, or more than 246 million individuals, with 5G wireless service. **DISH’s** next step forward is to verify through a drive test that it has deployed a 5G network using its spectrum where at least 70% of the U.S. population has access to average download speeds of 35 Mbps or higher. **DISH** has six months to complete the test and submit its report to the **FCC**.

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DIRECTV AIRS FRUSTRATIONS OVER CNN MAX

DirectTV isn’t a big fan of the recently-introduced **CNN Max**. The video provider has sent a letter to **Warner Bros. Discovery** argued there may be a violation in the pair’s contract because of **CNN Max’s** programming, according to a **NYT** [report](#). **CNN Max**, housed within the **Max** platform, touts original programming like “**CNN Newsroom with Jim Sciutto**,” but it has also been airing simulcasts of shows that are available on the **CNN** linear network. In a statement to **NYT**, **WBD** said it has maintained strong and meaningful relationships with its affiliate partners.

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DISCOVERY+ ANNOUNCES FIRST PRICE INCREASE

The ad-free monthly subscription plan for **discovery+**’s in the U.S. is increasing in price from \$6.99 to \$8.99. This is the first time the service has increased its pricing since its initial launch in January 2021, and **Warner Bros. Discovery** said the move will allow it to continue providing programming across the food, home, relationships, true crime and paranormal genres. The price will also rise in Canada to the \$8.99 CAD mark. The ad-lite tier will not change in the U.S., remaining at \$4.99/month, but Canadians will see their ad-lite plans changing from \$4.99 CAD to \$5.99 CAD. Existing subscribers will see the monthly rate increase on their next billing cycle on or after Nov. 2.

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NEXSTAR ASKS COURT TO DISMISS DIRECTV ANTITRUST SUIT

Nexstar is asking a federal court (again) to dismiss **DirectTV’s** lawsuit that accuses the broadcaster of violating federal antitrust law by engaging in an illegal conspiracy with **Mission Broadcasting** and **White Knight** to manipulate, raise and fix prices of retransmission consent fees. **DirectTV** filed the suit in March, five months after it lost **Mission** and **White Knight** stations in a retrans spat, but before it lost **Nexstar** stations

in July. The Nexstar blackout raged on until Sept. 16, when the two agreed to new terms that returned 176 Nexstar stations to DirecTV's lineup. The White Knight and Mission stations remain dark. Nexstar filed a motion to dismiss the case in June, rebutting allegations that it used sidecars to conspire and fix prices and claiming the suit was an attempt to gain a tactical advantage in its upcoming retrans negotiations. On Wednesday, Nexstar's counsel sent a letter to the court again asking for dismissal. "Although DirecTV has now entered into an [retransmission consent agreement] renewal with Nexstar, Nexstar's standing arguments remain unchanged," the letter said. "The subsequent [retrans] renewal between Nexstar and DirecTV has no bearing on the additional grounds for dismissal raised in defendants' memorandum, both for lack of standing and failure to state a claim."

AMC NETWORKS DESCENDING ON NEW YORK COMIC CON

AMC Networks is bringing its full slate of properties to New York Comic Con, set to take over the Javits Center from Oct. 12-15. Attendees will be the first to see the season finale of "The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon" on Oct. 12 at 4:15pm followed by a Q&A with *Scott Gimple*, Chief Content Officer of the Walking Dead Universe, Showrunner *David Zabel* and EP *Greg Nicotero*. At 7:30pm the same day, **HIDIVE** will host the world premiere of the English dub of "The Tunnel to Summer, the Exit of Goodbyes." **Shudder** takes over on Friday, Oct. 13 at 4:30pm with a panel celebrating the directors of the installments in the "V/H/S" franchise.

RATINGS

Fox News swept the weekly primetime and total-day ratings among cable networks thanks to the second Republican presidential primary debate, but the primetime leaderboard was a close call at the top. Fox News averaged 2.18 million viewers P2+, barely edging **ESPN's** average of 2.13 million. **MSNBC** found itself in third with 1.52 million and **HGTV** and **Hallmark Channel** completed the prime top five with 743,000 and 702,000, respectively. It was a three-way race for total day. Fox News led with 1.2 million, followed by MSNBC with 943,000 and ESPN with 808,000. **CNN** roamed behind with 477,000 and HGTV came in at 426,000. – The *Taylor Swift* effect is paying dividends for the **NFL's** ratings. Sunday night's contest that saw the Chiefs edge the Jets averaged approximately 27 million viewers on **NBC**, **Peacock**, NBC Sports digital platforms and NFL digital platforms, making it the most-watched Sunday show since this year's Super Bowl in February. The livestream on Peacock, NBC Sports digital platforms and NFL digital platforms had an average minute audience of 1.85 million viewers. That's up 42% from last year's Week 4 Sunday Night Football game and the largest streaming audience ever for a regular-season Sunday NFL game. – Ole Miss' dramatic 55-49

win over LSU led **ESPN's** college football Saturday with 3.7 million viewers. Alabama, which defeated Mississippi State 40-17, came in at 3.4 million. "College GameDay" kicked off the day with 1.68 million viewers and 2.2 million in the final hour.

FIBER FRENZY

WOW! is continuing its growth in the Sunshine State, announcing fiber expansion plans to Hernando County, Florida. The company expects to add 44,000 new homes, which would bring its total number of identified residences as part of its greenfield expansion to 389,000. Construction is expected to begin in the coming months. – **Ziplay Fiber's** service is a go in Tieton, Washington. More than 300 addresses throughout the area can now get in on speeds ranging from 100 Mbps to 10 Gbps.

PROGRAMMING

BET+ is once again showing up for the holidays, debuting 12 new films and specials during the most wonderful time of the year. The first two films, "A Wesley Christmas Wedding" and "Heart for the Holidays," arrive on Nov. 2. – **Apple TV+** is doubling down on its kids and family programming for the holiday season. Apple Original special "The Velveteen Rabbit," based on the children's book, launches Nov. 22 and holiday-themed episodes of "The Snoopy Show," "Frog and Toad" and "Shape Island" premiere Dec. 1. Apple TV+ plans to offer free windows for nonsubscribers to stream holiday specials from Peanuts Worldwide. "It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown" will be available Oct. 21-22, "A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving" will be on Nov. 18-19 and "A Charlie Brown Christmas" will be on Dec. 16-17. – The 2023 ICC Men's Cricket World Cup will stream live on **Sling TV** starting this Thursday. **Willow HD** will carry all the matches, and subscribers to Sling's Desi Binge Plus package can watch it all for just \$10 for their first month.

ON THE CIRCUIT

The **FTC** will host a [virtual roundtable](#) tomorrow at 3pm ET on AI and its potential impact on creative fields. Speakers include screenwriter ("Big Fish") and **WGA West** Negotiating Committee member *John August* and *Duncan Crabtree-Ireland*, the National Executive Director and Chief Negotiator at **SAG-AFTRA**. – **Sinclair** is bringing back its News Reporter and Producers Academies for college students who are interested in pursuing careers in journalism, and it's adding another track this time around: Weather Academy. Each will be a 90-minute session that'll run throughout November and show students the tools needed to succeed in each field. The Reporter Academy will take place November 1, Producer Academy on November 8 and the Weather Academy on November 15. All sessions are free for undergraduate and graduate students and will take place virtually beginning at noon.