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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

Take a Break: Opinions Split on RDOF Amnesty Period Proposal

If you give CAF II and RDOF winners an amnesty period to surrender census blocks that would then become eligible for BEAD funding, will it get America closer to closing the digital divide?

The idea was proposed to the **FCC** in a letter from 69 ISPs, school districts, unions and civil society organizations. Comments on the proposal were due this week, with mixed views on how successful the amnesty/repurposing approach would be.

NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association is of the mind that consequence-free amnesty would harm, rather than help, consumers and call into question the integrity of the USF programs overseen by the FCC. The organization also has concerns that should relief be made available and there are no consequences for leaving these areas behind, some ISPs could end up surrendering only the most expensive areas they committed to serve in the CAF Phase II and RDOF auctions. That would leave NTIA in the lurch when it comes to closing the digital divide with the pool of funding that’s currently available.

Then you have groups such as **The County Supervisors Association of Arizona**. While some RDOF awardees have begun engaging local governments in processes to deploy broadband, the state regulators warned that there is another group of grant awardees from which there has been a lack of engagement. It supports the suggested 30-day amnesty period as well as increased penalties after that period ends. Alternatively, it sup-

ports allowing RDOF award areas that have not demonstrated significant deployment activity to be eligible for BEAD funding.

“Given the longer deployment horizon for RDOF we may not know if these awardees will default until after the BEAD program is underway. Additionally, several of Arizona’s RDOF awardees will have to deploy broadband across huge portions of the state, which spans almost 114,000 square miles. Counties are concerned that even if providers deploy in some regions, potentially thousands of Arizona households will remain without broadband service,” the association told the FCC.

Texas Rural Funders, which includes more than 40 philanthropic organizations like the Texas Pioneer Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, also backs the amnesty period. It noted the state will receive \$3.3 billion from the BEAD program and counts more than four million rural residents. But the group has serious concerns about whether the state’s digital divide will be closed given some of the barriers to BEAD funding for rural locations.

“In Texas alone, nearly two dozen RDOF and CAF projects have pledged to connect more than 300,000 locations to broadband internet. If RDOF and CAF winners cannot or will not complete their projects, these rural Texas communities risk being left without broadband entirely,” the group said. “The result: rural Texas—the communities in our state that most need support to get connected—lose the best chance in a generation to get the service required to thrive in a digital

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economy and society.”

If a grace period is granted, The Texas Rural Funders want additional measures, including a requirement that ISPs that take advantage of it not seek a BEAD grant for the same areas they have relinquished. The group also believes there should be questions incorporated into BEAD sub grant applications asking ISPs if they have previously received funding to build broadband infrastructure (including but not limited to RDOF and CAF), and if those ISPs have met required milestones, completed their projects or defaulted.

NTCA said any ISP looking for relief should be required to identify in its petition not only a list of the census block groups and locations that it proposes to leave behind, but also the reserve price for those areas as well as the other areas it won in the CAF Phase II and RDOF auctions that it still intends to serve.

“This will enable the Commission and all stakeholders to ascertain more easily the extent to which the provider is seeking to cast aside only the most expensive-to-serve locations and ‘cream-skim’ its auction wins, and such information is especially critical for states and territories to evaluate the extent to which the request would complicate or even thwart their ongoing efforts to implement the BEAD program’s directive to connect all unserved locations,” NTCA said.

C-SPAN MEETS FOUNDER’S DAY FUNDRAISING GOAL

C-SPAN has officially surpassed its first Founders’ Day [fundraising goal](#). As of 4pm ET, the group raised \$47,521.30 from 214 gifts, beating its initial goal of \$45,000. The campaign will remain open until March 31, and C-SPAN will direct the gifts to enhancing its digital presence, enriching the resource that is the C-SPAN Video Library and more.

PEACOCK NABS INTERNATIONAL NFL GAME

The NFL is heading to Brazil for the first time ever this upcoming season, and Peacock will be the exclusive streamer of the primetime game. The teams are yet to be determined, but it’ll take place in São Paulo on Sept. 6. Peacock’s telecast will be made available on local NBC stations for the competing teams’ markets and on mobile devices via NFL+. It’ll be Peacock’s third exclusive NFL game, following the Bills vs Chargers regular-season game in December and the Dolphins vs Chiefs AFC Wild Card game in January.

HOUSE DEMS ASK NTIA TO REMEMBER AFFORDABILITY

House Commerce Democrats sent a letter to NTIA Administrator Alan Davidson asking him to continue prioritizing broadband affordability as he oversees the BEAD program. The group highlighted the critical procedures Congress placed in the program for NTIA to follow in determining whether low-cost plans are affordable for the areas and markets where they are proposed. “This is particularly important now as NTIA is currently reviewing state broadband plans. It would be a significant missed opportunity in the administration of BEAD if these affordability provisions are not exercised to their fullest to help middle-class and low-income Americans afford the cost of internet service, consistent with the statute,” the lawmakers said.

FCC RECHARTERS EQUITY AND DIVERSITY COUNCIL

FCC Chair Jessica Rosenworcel is keeping the Communications Equity and Diversity Council around, rechartering the advisory panel. The goal of the council is to provide recommendations to the Commission on how to accelerate broadband deployment in all communities by reducing and/or removing regulatory barriers to infrastructure and investment. Connected Nation VP, Digital Inclusion Heather Gate will serve as chair, and Brookings Senior Fellow Nicol Turner Lee and US Pan Asian American Chamber of Commerce Education Foundation Chairman/National President/CEO Susan Au Allen will serve as vice chairs. Other members include Charter VP, Policy and External Affairs Nicole Lazarre; National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters President James Winston; and Strong Women Alliance Founder/CEO Ellen Schned.

INTERFACE MAKEOVER FOR GEMINI

Folks who watch DirecTV with a Gemini device will be seeing a new look in the coming weeks. Starting today, DirecTV is rolling out a new tailored experience it’s calling “Your TV.” It displays users’ selected favorites and most-watched programming prominently at the center, aggregating sports and entertainment content together. Users can also choose to display live scores and stats from their favorite teams, and DirecTV is rolling out live playback to Gemini users as well. The new interface will be added to devices in phases via a software update to Gemini and Gemini Air users. Users of third-party devices, including Roku and Amazon Fire TV, are expected to get the new carousel later this year.

CTAM HELPS CANADA FIGHT PIRACY

To help continue the fight against content piracy, **CTAM** and **CTAM Canada** are expanding the StreamSafely website to Canada. The move follows a report that classified Canada as a piracy hotspot, revealing that pirate site visits in the country grew around 50% between 2018 and 2023. That same report classified Sweden, Hong Kong and Qatar as other hotspots. The StreamSafely website offers assistance in finding content as well as resources to inform about the dangers of content piracy.

WEEKLY RATINGS

It's the T-nets' time to shine in the weekly cable ratings as March Madness rolled around last week. **Fox News** made it 10 straight weeks as the primetime and total-day king with 1.91 million and 1.22 million viewers P2+, respectively, but in prime, **TBS** checked in at second with 1.78 million and **TNT** third with 1.49 million. **MSNBC** snuck in at 1.26 million, while **truTV** clocked in at fifth at 1.08 million. **ESPN**, which normally finds itself in the top five, did clock in at sixth in prime with 815,000 viewers. MSNBC was second to Fox News in total day with 816,000. TBS (642,000), TNT (587,000) and ESPN (473,000) followed behind. – **Telemundo** made it four straight weeks as the top Spanish-language broadcast network in the 7-11pm primetime window. The network recorded an average of 1.2 million total viewers, 383,000 A18-49 and 131,000 A18-34, according to **Nielsen**. Telemundo was also the most-watched Spanish-language broadcast net in weekday 7-11pm prime as well with 1.27 million total viewers, 424,000 A18-49 and 141,000 A18-34. That beat **Univision** by 13%, 25% and 27%, respectively.

ESPN BRINGING LA LIGA FAN EXPERIENCE TO DISNEYLAND

With soccer growing in the U.S., **ESPN** and Spain's top soccer division **La Liga** are bringing the league's fan-facing soccer platform "El Partidazo" to the Downtown Disney District in Anaheim, California, on April 21. The event will begin at 11am PT and be headlined by a viewing event for the El Clásico match between Barcelona and Real Madrid. A live production of "Fuera de Juego," "ESPNFC" and "Sportscenter" will surround the game, which will stream on **ESPN+** starting at noon PT. Soccer icons **Hugo Sanchez** and **Iker Casillas** will be on hand as will ESPN personalities **Hércules Gomez** and **Sebastian Salazar**.

NCAA WOMEN'S RATINGS

On the same weekend **TNT Sports** and **CBS Sports** saw record viewership for the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament, **ESPN** reported Tuesday a record-breaking first round for the women's tournament. The network had its most-viewed first round since 2018 as viewership increased 83% YOY, including a 241% spike for viewership on **ABC**. That was greatly helped by Holy Cross vs **Caitlin Clark** and Iowa, which reached 3.2 million viewers (the most-viewed first-round game on record).

ESPN also garnered 1.5 billion total minutes viewed across its platforms. Other games include Tennessee vs Green Bay grabbing 819,000 viewers and LSU vs Rice accumulating 762,000. Both of those were on ESPN.

DOING GOOD

AXS TV and **Charter/Spectrum** are bringing back "AXS TV Band Together For Music Education" for another year. The initiative—which began in 2022—will award 10 \$10,000 grants to music education programs in Spectrum service areas throughout the spring and fall. That'll bring the total amount awarded to \$150,000 across 15 music programs by the end of 2024. The first grant this year will go to Heart of LA–HOLA, which will be capped with a special ceremony this Friday. Other grant recipients include Harvey Rice Wraparound in Cleveland, Deep Springs Elementary School in Lexington, Kentucky, and Eagle Academy in Queens, NY.

PROGRAMMING

Following the success of "Quiet on Set: The Dark Side of Kids TV," **Investigation Discovery** greenlit a new, fifth episode for the series that'll dive deeper into the toxic culture of iconic children's TV shows in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The episode, titled "Breaking the Silence," will premiere April 7 at 8pm on ID. – **Prime Video** is searching for the greatest reality star of all time. "The GOAT," a series hosted by **Daniel Tosh**, will premiere with its first three episodes on May 9 on Prime Video and **Freevee** in the U.S., U.K., Germany and Austria. It'll pit 14 reality superstars from shows like "The Bachelorette," "Survivor" and "The Real Housewives" franchise. Contestants will live in "GOAT Manor" and compete in more than 20 challenges for \$200,000 and the title of "GOAT." – **MSG Networks** will have a panel discussion with star women athletes to commemorate Women's Empowerment Month. "Women of the W" will debut Wednesday at 10:30pm following the Knicks vs Raptors post-game coverage. It'll feature **Monica McNutt** as host alongside **Sue Bird**, **Ali Krieger** and **Madison Packer**. – **Max** handed a 15-episode, straight-to-series order for a new drama starring **Noah Wyle** called "The Pitt." The show will be a "realistic examination" of the challenges that healthcare workers in America face today through the lens of employees at a hospital in Pittsburgh.

PEOPLE

Anthem Sports & Entertainment is hiring **Greg Drebin** as Head of Content and Marketing for **AXS TV** and **HDNET MOVIES**. He'll work alongside AXS TV and HDNET MOVIES' new President **Andy Schuon** on growing audiences on traditional and digital platforms. Drebin and Schuon have spent time together at multiple stops including **MTV**, **CBS Radio** and **Universal's International Music Feed Network**, which they co-founded together. Drebin also had stints at **20th Century Fox** and **Warner Bros. Discovery International TV Branded Services**.