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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

Riding the Wave: Scripps Bets on Women's Sports, Rebrands ION

The energy currently surrounding women's sports is palpable, and **Scripps** is leaning right into that hype for its 2024 upfront.

It starts with the rebrand of Scripps' flagship over-the-air network **ION**, which it now dubs as a general entertainment, sports and live events network. Scripps will roll out a year-long marketing campaign meant to drive awareness about ION's new look and programming. That rebrand will also extend to **ION Mystery** and the FAST channel **ION Plus**.

Anchoring that rebrand is Scripps' commitment to women's sports. ION has had weekly **WNBA** doubleheaders on Friday nights for a year now, which according to **Nielsen** helped contribute to a 24% total audience growth for the league in 2023. However, ION also added the **NWSL** to its portfolio ahead of the league's 2024 campaign, and the network is putting it on prominent display with Saturday night doubleheaders. ION will have 50 nationally broadcast NWSL matches on top of 25 hours of live studio shows.

"[The advertising community has] made public statements and declarations about the need to support women's sports, that it's good for business for them, and we're seeing that with the inbound interest," **Brian Norris**, Scripps' Chief Revenue Officer, told **CFX**. "When we go out into the marketplace and present our offering, it is very much a leaned-in conversation where agency partners and brands are leaning into supporting this ... We believe that this is a movement, and it's sustainable."

Part of that success has come from the multicultural audience segment in particular. Scripps' entertainment portfolio delivers a 46% multicultural audience—a 31% advantage over the cable entertainment competitive set—and its Friday night **WNBA** spotlights averaged a 49% African American audience delivery.

Speaking of the **WNBA**, Scripps is part of the **Caitlin Clark** hype as the soon-to-be former Iowa Hawkeye gets ready for the professional ranks. Clark is the presumptive top pick—belonging to the Indiana Fever—in next week's **WNBA Draft** on **ESPN**, but ION touted the fact it'll air eight Fever games throughout the 14-week season, more than any other broadcaster. **Norris** said one person comes to mind when comparing the hype surrounding Clark: **LeBron James**.

"I have never seen anything like this, and I've been in this business for a while," **Norris** said. "What we've stood on is that there's this incredibly loyal fan base for the **WNBA**. We think that **Caitlin Clark** is going to do great things for the **WNBA** on ION, but we also know that the fans that love the **WNBA** will continue to watch and support the **WNBA**."

Beyond sports, ION—which is a top-five broadcast TV network—will continue to run drama shows like "Bull," which recently joined the network's lineup, and "Magnum P.I.," which arrives on ION in September. That's all in addition to the Scripps National Spelling Bee, which had its highest-rated event in over a decade in 2023 and is preparing to celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2025.

Scripps isn't leaving its other OTA networks behind. **Bounce**,



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its network dedicated to African American audiences, has been the fastest-growing African-American-targeted network over the past year while also being the only one to record YOY growth among A18-49 and A25-54. Bounce will introduce a new original comedy series “Mind Your Business” with back-to-back episodes on June 1 at 8pm. Another series, “Johnson,” will return for its fourth season this summer come Aug. 3 at 8pm. Also happening throughout 2024 is Bounce’s HBCU Yearbook initiative. The network will spotlight various HBCUs across the country, highlighting their legacies and historical importance while also showcasing what those schools boast today.

“It’s not just that we reach the African American community, it’s how we reach them,” Norris said. “We invest in content initiatives that have real powerful resonance.”

News is another facet of the Scripps portfolio making a charge. After achieving wide distribution on FAST platforms, Scripps News has grown in availability on linear TV as well. Up next is beginning to receive **Nielsen** ratings, which is scheduled to become available to **Scripps News** this spring.

Seeking to provide “context, not commentary,” Scripps is touting to advertisers that Scripps News received a perfect 10 score from NewsGuard in March, meaning it’s of the lowest risk for viewers and advertisers to be exposed to misinformation or intentionally biased content. **NewsNation** also received a 10, while **CNN** (8.8), **MSNBC** (7) and **Fox News** (5.5) trailed behind.

TWO YEARS OF WBD

It has been two years since **Discovery** and **WarnerMedia** closed their merger to come together as **Warner Bros. Discovery**, but the combined company has not had the easiest time of it. **MoffettNathanson**, in a note to clients, called the period choppy due to pressures on the linear business, a huge debt balance and a streaming business that continues to require massive investment. The good news is that it has now successfully moved past the Reverse Morris Trust period that restricted it from pursuing significant M&A or significant reorganization. **MoffettNathanson** believes that even though WBD has been able to improve profits in its DTC and Studio divisions, much of how it moves forward will be driven by the stress on the linear networks. “We expect the company to remain aggressive in monetizing its existing portfolio of assets but management might still need to explore selling off some of its portfolio (e.g. **CNN**, video games) to help accelerate its debt repayment and highlight the value that isn’t being reflected in the company’s current valuation,” it said. There could also be activists or others interested in M&A that could give WBD management offers they simply can’t refuse.

“The challenge to any outside action will be who is willing to take on the \$40+ billion of debt?” **MoffettNathanson** said.

AMC NETWORKS BEGINS UPFRONT REVEALS WITH AVOD NEWS

AMC Networks has its upfront event planned for Wednesday evening, but it is building the buzz with some early announcements. The programmer plans to launch ad-supported versions of all of its targeted streaming services by the end of the 2024-25 upfront. That includes **Shudder**, **Acorn TV**, **HIDIVE**, **ALLBLK**, **Sundance Now** and **IFC Films Unlimited**, and comes one year after the launch of the ad-supported version of **AMC+**. **AMC+** subscribers currently receive ad-supported versions of **Shudder**, **Sundance Now** and **IFC Films Unlimited**, but subscribers accessing those subscriptions outside of a bundle have not previously had access to an ad-supported option. **AMC Networks** is also expanding insights and data targeting platform **Audience+**, and more than 70% of the company’s linear distribution is now addressable. It’s also kicking off “The Joy of Horror,” a year-long horror opportunity for advertisers to create campaigns with content from **Shudder** and special programming events like **FearFest** and **Halfway to Halloween**. **AMC Networks** revealed its 2024-25 development slate for its in-house branded entertainment studio **Content room**, and originals currently in development include “The Walking Dogs,” which gives fans an inside look at stars from “The Walking Dead” universe and their dogs, and social-first lifestyle series “Vibe Check with Reginae.”

MARCH MADNESS RATINGS

The numbers are in for this weekend’s **NCAA Women’s Basketball Tournament Final Four** and **Championship** games, and it was another record-breaker for **ESPN**. **South Carolina’s** national championship had 18.7 million viewers on **ABC** and **ESPN**, peaking at an eye-popping 24 million viewers. That average viewership was up 89% YOY and up 285% from the 2022 National Championship game. It also became the most-watched men’s or women’s basketball game, college or pro, since 2019. The semifinal contests achieved a 138% YOY improvement after averaging 10.8 million viewers. **Iowa’s** dramatic win over **UConn** came in at 14.2 million, which is good for **ESPN’s** highest audience for any basketball game on record and the most-viewed college event ever on **ESPN+**. **Iowa vs UConn** peaked at 17 million viewers. **South Carolina’s** victory against **NC State** scored 7.1 million viewers, the third-best women’s national semifinal audience on record.

WASHINGTON STATE LAWMAKERS JOIN ON DATA PRIVACY BILL

A bipartisan national data privacy bill is on the scene. **House Commerce Chair Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA)** and **Senate Commerce Chair Maria Cantwell (D-WA)** have revealed the American Privacy Rights Act. The draft legislation would create a national standard when it comes to data privacy protections and replace the existing patchwork of state legislation. The bill minimizes the data companies can collect, keep and use about people of all ages and individuals will be allowed to opt out of targeted advertising. Other aspects of the bill include ensuring individuals know when their data has been transferred to foreign adversaries and the authorization of the **FTC**, states and consumers to enforce against violations.

HARMONIC ANNOUNCES CEO TRANSITION, VIDEO BIZ UPDATE

Harmonic President/CEO Patrick Harshman has announced plans to retire, effective June 11. **Nimrod Ben-Natan**, currently SVP/General Manager of Harmonic's broadband business, will serve as Harshman's successor. Ben-Natan first joined Harmonic in 1996 as a software engineer tasked with the design and development of the company's first-generation video transmission platform. Ben-Natan, Harshman and Harmonic's board will work together to ensure a smooth transition. Additionally, Harmonic updated shareholders on its evaluation of potential strategic alternatives for its video business. But at this time, the board has decided that current market conditions do not support its value creation objectives for the video business. Instead, it will now focus on streamlining operations, optimizing cost structure and finding scalable market opportunities. Harmonic plans to host an investor day in mid-June to dive deeper into that long-term strategy and plans for its broadband and video business units. Expect an exact date for that to be revealed during the company's 1Q24 earnings call.

DISH MEDIA UNVEILS PERFORMXP

DISH Media launched a new solution Monday designed for performance advertisers. Dubbed PerformXP, the offering is a cross-platform, impression-based solution that allows those advertisers to execute digital media buys across STB and CTV inventory via one insertion order. It also offers real-time reporting across all inventory to allow buyers to more effectively measure their campaigns.

CINEVERSE WORKING WITH GRACENOTE ON DISCOVERY

Cineverse is teaming up with **Gracernote**, a **Nielsen** company, to help improve content search and discovery. The deal will

see metadata from films and television series into Cineverse's AI-powered conversational entertainment search platform set to launch this spring. The company has called it cineSearch, and it incorporates a chatbot named Ava that will recommend programming to viewers.

RATINGS

Hallmark Channel's "The Way Home" finished its second season as the most-watched original series on entertainment cable among W18+. It was also the most-watched program overall, including repeats, on entertainment cable with households, total viewers and P18+. In total, the second season reached 5.7 million unduplicated total viewers. – **Warner Bros. Discovery** delivered five nights of more than 50% share of primetime cable viewing among A18-49 across ad-supported cable during 1Q24. Ratings drivers included **TNT Sports'** coverage of the 2024 **NCAA Men's** Tournament in March as well as **ID's** "Quiet on Set," **Food Network's** "Tournament of Champions" and more. **WBD's** U.S. networks accounted for viewing by nearly a third of adults who watched cable during prime, and attracted more than 142 million total viewers on average each month.

AWARDS

It was **Hulu, ABC** and **Disney+**'s time to shine as this year's **NAMIC** Vision Awards nominees were unveiled. Those three led the way as NAMIC gets ready to honor programming that reflects the diversity of global viewership next month. **Hulu** appeared in several categories including Best Performance–Drama for "Mia Isaac: Black Cake," Comedy for "UnPrisoned" and Lifestyle for "Searching for Soul Food." **ABC** earned nominations for shows such as "Grey's Anatomy," "Abbott Elementary" and "The Wonder Years," while **Disney+'s** "The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder: Juneteenth" and "American Born Chinese: What Guy Are You" also made the cut. Others earning nominations include **Starz, Prime Video, Apple TV+, BET** and **Peacock**.

PROGRAMMING

Australian crime drama "Scrublands" premieres May 2 on **Sundance Now** and **AMC+**. – The new season of **USA Network's** "Race to Survive" hits the screen on May 20 at 11pm. This edition will see nine teams of contestants compete for \$500,000 in New Zealand. – "Golf Central Live From The Masters" will provide more than 50 hours of studio coverage of the 2024 Masters this week across **Golf Channel** and **Peacock**. It all started Monday at 2pm ET, and nearly 20 hosts, analysts and reporters will contribute to the programming. – **Food Network's** "Summer Baking Championship" returns May 13 at 8pm. This season's bakers will compete for a grand prize of \$25,000.