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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

Diving Deeper: Universal Ads Partners Talk Platform's Potential

Comcast and **FreeWheel** unveiled the Universal Ads [platform](#) earlier this week, and the early adopters took to a **CES** panel Wednesday to discuss how it'll give programmers and distributors the ability to better compete against social media platforms and Big Tech.

The platform will begin rolling out during 1Q25 and allows advertisers of all sizes to purchase premium video directly from companies at scale. **Comcast Advertising** President *James Rooke* reiterated during the panel that the inventory sitting behind Universal Ads at launch will be all streaming inventory, but the plan is to solve for linear inventory as quickly as possible.

"That is a big priority for 2025. The reason for that is one of the big advantages of premium video as a category is there's incredible scale when you bring together the traditional linear inventory with the streaming inventory," Rooke said. "The challenge, as we all know, is that inventory operates differently—it's different tech stacks, different measurement, XYZ right now. The opportunity is to unlock that traditional linear inventory, make it behave similar to streaming, which we will do this year, and then bring that scale into the platform, which will further differentiate the solution."

NBCU Media Chairman, Global Advertising and Partnerships *Mark Marshall* said the overall goal is to develop an easy button that is similar to what some social media platforms offer where it is very simple for advertisers to log in and quickly

purchase ads. "We don't have that single solution for premium video in our world," Marshall said. "I saw it as a really good solution to help on fragmentation for our clients out there, and it also allows us to target... there's a great upside for us if we can get this correct."

Ryan Gould, **Warner Bros. Discovery** EVP, Sales - Streaming, Digital and Advanced Advertising, is most optimistic about introducing the opportunity to drive performance for small- and medium-sized businesses in brand-safe environments. To put it simply, it alleviates the barrier for entry for new clients and customers for WBD and the other launch partners.

"One of the biggest issues that plagues consumers today is repeat ads and if we can introduce more brands into the viewing experience, I think that we can alleviate some of that friction of seeing repetitive ads for consumers," Gould said.

Looking at the vertical that is SMBs, **Fox Corp.** President, Advertising Sales, Marketing and Brand Partnerships *Jeff Collins* said his team wasn't competing at a very granular scale for very long tail advertisers. That's part of why coming together for Universal Ads made sense for Collins and his team because Fox or any other major media company on its own wouldn't have the overall scale that could compete with the social media networks.

"With all of our streaming inventories growing rapidly, I think we finally have that scale," he said. "This moment in time is very interesting, and I think it's because the overall barrier to entry for creating video has come down so much for a lot of

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these SMBs that now they could actually get into the space fairly easily by using a lot of the same tools that they use to create social media content.”

All of the launch partners announced thus far use FreeWheel as their tech stack, and that’s part of why it will be so simple to hook them onto the Universal Ads platform at launch. For those interested in getting involved that don’t use FreeWheel, Comcast is working on a solution that will make it as easy as possible for them to join Universal Ads. Stay tuned,” Rooke said. “We’ve got to make an industry play here.”

DirecTV isn’t just relying on Universal Ads. It is also making wider investments across its advertising capabilities. It has enabled programmatic within its linear satellite inventory. It’s part of the company’s goal to “set TV free” and give programmatic buyers access to increased inventory, scale and previously untapped audiences across satellite and streaming. DirecTV Advertising is already in the market with partners such as **Publicis**, **Magnite** and **Basis Technologies**, and it plans to make the inventory more widely available this quarter.

It also launched a dedicated out-of-home network called DirecTV Remote, which aims to improve outcomes for advertisers and maximize reach potential for existing DirecTV subscribers and incremental audiences. DirecTV Advertising will activate video ads across its footprint in commercial establishments like hotels, planes and small businesses. The company claims it’s the first MVPD to offer dynamic ad insertion into in-flight TV programming.

“We’re going to reach consumers on the go wherever they are—in the air, in hotels, at small business locations,” DirecTV Chief Advertising Officer *Amy Leifer* said. “I’m pumped about having premium video show up in a bigger way in out-of-home and seeing where that takes us.”

NEW COX LEADERS

Now that the dust has settled from **Cox Communications’** voluntary buyouts, we’re getting a clearer picture of company leadership. As previously [reported](#), Head of Content Acquisition *Suzanne Fenwick* has exited, with *Mark Gathen* succeeding her as VP, Content Acquisitions. We can now report that Cox General Counsel *Joiava Philpott* was among those who also left the company at year-end. *Sonya Middleton* was promoted to the role of SVP, General Counsel. She previously served as VP, commercial operations for Cox. Recall that the operator has restructured to form two business units—one for commercial and one for residential services, resulting in a few tweaks along the way. For example, Cox Mobile SVP *Tony Krueck* now reports to Chief Residential Officer *Colleen Langner*. He was previously reporting to CMO *Mark Lawson*, who is now EVP, Chief Digital & Information Officer. Cox’s voluntary buyout program was expected to impact

about 5% of its workforce, with several LinkedIn goodbye notes popping up over the past few weeks. Among those who have recently left are Head of Product Management *Jai Ganesh* and SVP and region manager for Cox’s Central Region *Coleen Jennison*.

LA WILDFIRES

Multiple wildfires are continuing to spread throughout Los Angeles County in recent days. More than 1,000 homes, businesses and other properties have been burned so far, and at least two people have died. We’re keeping an eye out for updates and potential network damage, but networks have been on the ground providing reports of the wildfires. NAB has an ongoing [thread](#) on **X** that features local TV and radio broadcast coverage from Southern California. **Fox News** will have continuous breaking news coverage across its flagship linear network, **Fox Business** and **Fox Weather**, with correspondents *William La Jeunesse*, *Jonathan Hunt*, *Matt Finn* and *Max Gorden* are on the ground in California. **NewsNation** will also have special coverage with *Nancy Loo*, *Xavier Walton* and *Brian Entin* stationed in the hard-hit Pacific Palisades neighborhood. Additionally, NewsNation has been using the local **Nexstar** affiliate KTLA-TV for supplemental coverage. Providers are also strategizing to maintain network resilience. **T-Mobile** said it’s reinforced its network with generators should commercial power loss occur. The company’s emergency teams have 600 permanent and portable generators in the impacted areas, and almost 200 portable generators have already been deployed to maintain service.

AT&T’S NEW GUARANTEE

AT&T is taking a step toward compensating fiber or wireless customers who experience network outages. Dubbed the “AT&T Guarantee,” the initiative resembles **Charter’s** Spectrum Customer Commitment that was unveiled in September alongside the “Life Unlimited” [brand platform](#). AT&T fiber customers who experience 20 minutes or more of a covered outage and wireless customers who undergo 60 minutes or more will automatically receive a bill credit equaling a full day of service. The company said it’ll reach out to small business customers with alternative options whenever necessary. AT&T is also guaranteeing that customers will speak to a tech assistant within five minutes or schedule a callback time, with same- or next-day technician availability available as an option as well. If the company fails to do so, it says it’ll reach out to customers with other options.

FIBER FRENZY

All West Communications and the **Utah Broadband Center**

In The WILD

A Cablefax feature highlighting industry doings spotted in the real world.

The robots have invaded Las Vegas this week for CES. While the annual trade show has an abundance of automations, there's also technology and gadgetry aimed at making the video experience more immersive. Or at least attempt to. We're still trying to understand this Samsung screen that stretches like rubber. Maybe this is how to enjoy 3D video without those cumbersome glasses.



If you're looking to upgrade to a stretchy TV, you'll have to wait as it's just a concept model from Samsung. But as with many things at CES, it reminds us that the future can be mind-bending.

It can also be sticky. CNET editors showed off this wireless, battery-powered Displace TV that sticks to the wall and most surfaces with suction cups. Pre-orders are being taken now, with a 55-inch and 27-inch model expected to begin shipping in March. The larger screen retails for \$3,499, with the smaller set at \$2,499, though there is currently a \$1,000 off promo.



Of course, AI was everywhere at CES, from the panels to the exhibit floor. LG's AI-driven booth dubbed the technology "Affectionate Intelligence" and used it to provide personalized content and wellness insights based on sleep patterns. The booth also showcases its OLED T, the world's first transparent TV (you can raise a black screen to make it like a traditional TV). LG has also added an AI chatbot to TVs to help users resolve issues on their own.



What if losing the remote control is the biggest impediment to your home viewing experience? There's an app for that. WowMouse is showing off how to control devices with a flick of the wrist and other gestures using your smartwatch.

wrapped up their collaborative broadband project in Croydon, Utah. The project brings FTTP infrastructure to over 50 homes and businesses in the Morgan County area, coming with four miles of mainline fiber that help deliver up to 1 Gbps symmetrical internet speeds. – **Hiawatha Broadband Communications** is expanding its Flight Fiber network in Farmington, Minnesota, thanks to an \$8 million investment. The project will span the entire city of Farmington, which will include installing free WiFi in the city's parks and recreational areas. In total, 20 parks will have free WiFi access once the project concludes – **Comcast** began its expansion project across Coral Springs, Florida. Construction began late last year and will give residential customers access to up to 1 Gbps and businesses access to up to 100 Gbps.

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ESPN, BIG SKY EXTEND DEAL

ESPN is extending its media rights agreement with the **Big Sky Conference**, adding an additional five years and doubling its televised coverage for football. The new agreement will kick in with the 2025-26 academic year and go through 2029-30. A minimum of four regular-season Big Sky football games will be televised on a Friday or Saturday, and a minimum of two of those games will be put on ESPN or **ESPN2**. ESPN will continue to air at least one men's regular-season conference basketball game, three men's Big Sky Tournament games and one women's Big Sky Tournament contest. For men's hoops, at least one of the two televised semifinal games will be on ESPN or ESPN2 as will the championship bout. The women's championship will stay on **ESPNU**. Additionally, all home and conference tournament games for soccer, volleyball, softball and several other sports will stay on **ESPN+**.

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ROKU SIGNS ON PVF

After surpassing 90 million streaming households in the first week of 2025, **Roku** signed a multi-year deal to air **Professional Volleyball Federation** matches. It's Roku's third major broadcast agreement in 90 days, and it'll air 20 PVF matches during the 2025 campaign. The matches will be free via **The Roku Channel's** Roku Sports Channel, with clips and highlights being available in Roku's Sports Zone and Women's Sports Zone. PVF also has broadcast deals with **CBS Sports** and **Fox Sports**, which combined help increase the league's national TV coverage by 350% compared to its inaugural season. Approximately 45 matches will air nationally across the three. The PVF season begins Thursday.

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MOODY'S UPGRADES FRONTIER

Moody's is bumping up a few of its ratings for **Frontier**. The ratings firm is upgrading Frontier's corporate family rating to B2 from B3, probability of default rating to B2-PD from B3-PD, the rating on the senior secured first lien notes and bank credit facilities to B2 from B3 and the rating on the senior secured second lien notes to Caa1 from Caa2. Moody's noted

the upgrade “reflects the company’s improved operating performance, successful fiber footprint expansion, operating scale, and financial flexibility including the recent addition of a \$1.5 billion asset-backed delayed draw term loan due 2029 (unrated).” Frontier also ended 3Q24 with \$1.3 billion in cash and cash equivalents while having no debt maturities until 2027. “In addition, our opinion considers the competitive intensity in the telecommunications services industry. Across most of the company’s footprint, Frontier competes against well entrenched cable operators, wireless competitors, and to a lesser degree overbuilders who offer similar services to enterprise and consumers. The SGL-2 speculative grade liquidity rating reflects our expectations that Frontier will maintain good liquidity over the next 12 to 18 months,” Moody’s wrote.

CTS, MEDIAOCEAN COMMIT TO INTEGRATION

Comcast Technology Solutions is growing its partnership with the omnichannel advertising company **Mediaocean** in a move that’ll see bi-directional integration between their platforms. The integration will allow agencies and brands to manage creative traffic and distribution within CTS’ AdFusion platform, reducing redundant workflows and allowing more visibility into campaign metadata. The integration is expected to launch in 2Q25.

SHOWSEEKER INTEGRATES ADVISR

Ad tech company **ShowSeeker** announced it successfully integrated the sales operating platform **Advisr**. The partnership will create a streamlined pathway between ShowSeeker’s campaign and order management platform Pilot with Advisr’s pre-sales product, enabling Pilot to automatically generate a client profile when a new client is introduced to Advisr in addition to letting proposals be transferred to Pilot. Customers can then add other details to finalize the linear portion of the proposals.

RATINGS

NBC Sports wrapped up the 19th year of broadcasting “Sunday Night Football,” and it saw success on both linear and digital platforms. SNF topped all primetime TV series in the fall and is pacing to finish as the No. 1 TV show in prime in all key metrics for the 14th consecutive year. Total audience delivery for SNF came in at 21.6 million viewers, with digital platforms (**Peacock**, NBCSports.com, NBC Sports app and NFL digital properties) posting a full-season average minute audience of 2.2 million viewers—the first time it’s eclipsed the 2-million mark. A record 11 simulstreamed games finished above the 2 million AMA point, more than tripling the prior record set last season with three.

WICT NAMES 2025 GLOBAL BOARD

The **WICT Network** unveiled its 2025 Global Board of Directors, with **TV One** and **CLEO TV** President *Michelle Rice* stepping in as Chair. She fills in for communications consultant *Leigh Woisard*, who’ll now become Immediate Past Chair for this year. The rest of the Executive Committee includes **Paramount** EVP, Corporate Social Responsibility & ESG Strategy *Crystal Barnes* as Industry Relations Committee Chair; **Charter** EVP, Government Affairs *Catherine Bohigian* as Development Committee Chair; **Comcast** EVP, Administration *Karen Buchholz* as Strategic Planning Committee Chair; Charter SVP/Chief Diversity Officer *Rhonda Crichlow* as Governance Committee Chair; **Warner Bros. Discovery** SVP, People & Culture *Alaka Williams* as Chapter Development Committee Chair and The WICT Network President/CEO *Maria Brennan*. New directors-at-large include Comcast Cable SVP/Chief Diversity Officer *Loren Hudson* and **Astound Broadband** COO *Toni Murphy*.

AWARDS

The nominees are out for the 31st Annual **Screen Actors Guild** Awards, which is set to stream on **Netflix** on Feb. 23 at 8pm from LA. Speaking of Netflix, it led nominations by network for television programs with 12, primarily thanks to “The Diplomat” receiving a trio of nominations along with “Baby Reindeer” and “Bridgerton” getting two apiece. **FX** was close with 10 as “Shogun” and “The Bear” garnered five and four nominations, respectively. **HBO/Max** came in at eight noms, while **Apple TV+** (six) trailed not far behind.

PEOPLE

Evan Swartrauber, former policy adviser to **FCC** Chair-designate *Brendan Carr* and former FCC Chair *Ajit Pai*, is launching **CorePoint Strategies**, a public affairs firm focused on telecom and tech policy issues. – *Cosmina Schulman* is starting a new position as Chief Advertising Revenue Officer at **NESN**. She previously served as SVP of Broadcast & Digital Partnerships. – *Chris Shipman* has been appointed as the successor to **Antietam Broadband** President/GM *Tony Heaton*, who’s retiring after nearly 35 years with the company. Shipman will now oversee Antietam’s operations and strategic initiatives as it gets ready to expand into Carroll County, Maryland, this year. Shipman will also head up infrastructure development, community partnerships and customer service. – **Horizon Media**’s parent company Horizon Media Holdings named *Bob Lord* to the newly created role of President. He’ll help usher in the next phase of growth for the company and report to founder/CEO *Bill Koenigsberg*. Lord was previously IBM’s first Chief Digital Officer as well as President of **AOL** and Global CEO of **Razorfish**. – **Scripps** is promoting *Sherry Pitkofsky* from VP, Brand Strategy to SVP, Marketing as part of a restructuring under *Keisha Taylor Starr*, CMO/GM, Scripps Networks. Pitkofsky will now head up the full marketing team including creative. She joined Scripps in 2017 via the company’s acquisition of the Katz broadcast networks, also making stops at **NBCUniversal**, **AMC Networks** and **Conde Nast**.

Think about that for a minute...

Predictions

Commentary by Steve Effros

So here we are, at the start of 2025, and already I'm "shocked, shocked!" Well, no, not really. Many of us have been predicting for a long time (at least since Supreme Court Justice Gorsuch was confirmed in April of 2017) that the days of "net neutrality" being mandated by the FCC were numbered. Well, the numbers have finally run out. According to a decision from the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals just released, the FCC simply does not have the authority, under current statutes, to declare internet service providers common carriers (the famed "Title II" argument). This ping-pong battle has been going on for two decades. The Appeals Court just ended the game.

We knew this was coming. We knew the Supreme Court was going to severely limit, if not totally strike the "Chevron Doctrine" that gave administrative agencies significant power to define their own jurisdiction. That's what the Supreme's did last year. Ever since then it's just been a matter of time before the lower courts would start applying their newly authorized power to interpret statutes however they wanted, rather than defer to the agency interpretations.

But that leads to a new prediction; this is going to create havoc for some time to come! Not only in telecommunications law, but in all regulatory activities because the courts have now taken huge power away from the "expert agencies" and given it to themselves! Does that mean the "ping-pong" problem of different administrations changing the regulatory rules back and forth ends? Well, yes, but it also means the courts will start playing ping-pong!

For now, we will no longer have to worry about net neutrality rules coming out of the FCC, and so long as the current political powers that are in Washington stay in place it's highly unlikely there would be any significant Congressional move to rewrite the laws to reintroduce those rules. That's probably true even if a new administration or Congress were somewhat more "liberal." Net neutrality is not really that significant these days. There are a lot of bigger fish to fry, such as social networks. My prediction: the new powers the courts have taken will cut

both ways and folks on the "left" and the "right" will ultimately not be happy with the results. Will that eventually mean that Congress will become more functional? Don't hold your breath.

On to other predictions: the video distribution marketplace is going to continue to be a total mess. The prediction that "a la carte" or "streaming video" would result in the demise of "cable" or "linear" bundles was premature. Some of us warned a long time ago that the economics that resulted in overpriced cable packages forced by programmer (especially sports) leverage exists no matter what the delivery format. Now that the most popular streaming platform, YouTube TV, has hiked its prices to the point where they're higher than some cable packages, reality is starting to rear its ugly head. And that's without counting the delivery costs!

That reality is also hitting the programmers. Consolidation is starting for real. The Hulu+Live TV and Fubo combo is just going to be the first. Prediction: more to come, and Charter's efforts to realign the "cable" package to include streaming services, I suspect, is going to be a lot more successful than folks now think because the viewing public is just fed up with the mess we now have of not knowing which services you are currently using, or which program you want to watch is where, and even if you find out, you then have to go through hoops to get it back on your TV!

There's going to be lots to consider in the coming months as we navigate through a new administration and court authority over regulation. Prediction: It's not going to be pretty.



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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JUST RELEASED