

A Brief History of the Upfronts: Do They Still Matter?



As they do every year in mid-May, the major media companies are about to unveil their multi-platform strategies for the upcoming broadcast year, which includes their respective fall TV schedules. This marks the start of the “upfront” season, when advertisers will spend upward of \$20 billion buying commercial time on national television shows slated to air during the 2025-26 broadcast year.

It’s called “the upfront” because advertisers spend their money on programming well before the shows actually air and before they know which new series will succeed or flop. In return for getting advertisers to spend all this money upfront, buyers receive guarantees that if they don’t reach an agreed-upon number of people, they will get free commercials until they do. Commercial inventory is also typically less expensive during the upfront than it is to buy the ads throughout the year. Ordinarily, networks sell roughly 70% of their annual commercial load during the upfront.

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It's theoretically a win-win situation – (cancellation options notwithstanding) media companies get to show Wall Street and the press how much money they're taking in (not really, but it seems that way) and advertisers get some certainty on how many eyeballs they'll reach at a set cost (not really, but it seems that way).

As I do every year, I will be reporting on each company's presentation. Once I watch all the new series pilots, I will release a report (in June or July) evaluating their upcoming TV shows.

For the past several years, questions have arisen, particularly in the media press, about whether the upfronts (i.e., glitzy industry presentations and after-parties) are still relevant. Do they still matter? Five years ago, I would have (and did) loudly proclaim that they do. In 2025, however, whether the upfronts have the same significance they once did is questionable. They no doubt have more value to the presenting media companies, particularly the streamers who have recently joined the party, than to advertisers and media agencies.



Annual reminder of broadcast strength: Until around 2020, upfront presentations served as annual reminders to the ad industry and the press [that](#) the broadcast networks are watched by more viewers than any other video source and are still the best way to reach large chunks of viewers at one time. On this basis alone, the upfronts have been extremely valuable to the broadcast networks (as well as some of the larger ad-supported cable networks, which also had big upfront presentations and were able to claim their own unique benefits).



Designed for a different time: These expensive industry upfront presentations were designed for a time (1960s – 1980s) when the broadcast networks controlled 90 percent or more of the TV viewing landscape and considered one another as their only real competition. Upfront events were elaborate, star-filled ways to thank advertisers for all the money they were about to spend on the Big Three broadcast networks.



Maintaining relevance through early 2000s: The upfronts were still relevant during the late 1980s when a fourth network (Fox) crashed the party, and through the 1990s when ad-supported cable expanded and two new “emerging networks” (WB and UPN) burst on the scene. In fact, they were more relevant than ever because there were real and significant differences between the various networks, with each being able to claim advantages in different areas.



In the 2000s, ad-supported cable was broadcast’s main competition, with several cable networks starting to air their own distinctive original scripted programming (most notably, AMC, FX, MTV, TNT, and USA). Throughout the mid-1990s- 2000s, some cable networks – A&E, MTV, Turner, and a few others – spent a lot on upfront presentations to rival the broadcast networks.



When networks had unique selling propositions (USPs):

In the 1970s, an NBC executive famously derided ABC’s programming (which included *Charlie’s Angels*, *Three’s Company*, and *Wonder Woman*) as “jiggle TV” (also “T&A TV”), which ironically became a strong USP in the minds of viewers, undoubtedly improving the then struggling network’s ratings.



Over the years, every broadcast network has had its own unique selling proposition to tout during upfront presentations. CBS was the “Tiffany Network” and “America’s Most Watched Network,” NBC had “Must See TV.” Fox had edgier programming than the Big Three networks – at one time, there was something called the “Fox viewer.” Fox in the 1990s, and then WB/CW in the 2000s, had significantly younger median ages than the other broadcast networks – another strong USP. UPN was also younger than the Big Four networks and was unmatched in reaching African-American viewers. The overarching broadcast USP was that they had significantly higher reach than cable (you got more bang for your buck).



On the ad-supported cable front, AMC became known for having critically acclaimed original series, FX, for having the edgiest original dramas on television. TNT knew drama; TBS proclaimed, “we’re comedy,” and USA welcomed characters. All had distinctive programming that fit in with their individual brands. You could tell which network a show was on – the branding was so effective, that when a network tried a show that had a different feel, it typically flopped.

There were many other, more general USPs: everybody wanted their MTV and knew “the music revolution will be televised”; ESPN was the “worldwide leader in sports”; CNN was the “most trusted name in news”; Nickelodeon was “The kids network,” but Cartoon Network was the best place to reach boys; And, of course, when premium ad-free HBO started airing original scripted series, it had the classic, “It’s not TV, it’s HBO.”

In late 2019 and 2020, it became more of a streaming world (or streaming-war world) when Disney+, Apple TV+, HBO Max (now Max), and Peacock, joined Netflix, Prime Video, Hulu, and CBS All Access (now Paramount+) – each spending huge amounts of money on original scripted content. Broadcast and ad-supported cable became lumped together under the linear TV label (by the media and advertising industries, if not the viewing public).



Are there still any unique selling propositions? Today, the big five media conglomerates have their own streaming platforms to go with their stables of broadcast and cable networks (and other media properties). The upfront sales pitch is no longer “Broadcast is bigger and better, and the only place to reach your customers all in one place” or “Our cable network has the most engaged audiences and is the only one that can effectively compete with the broadcast networks.”

In essence, they are all telling us that they – **Disney** (ABC, ESPN, FX, Hulu, Disney+...), **Paramount Global** (CBS, MTV, VH1, Nickelodeon, Comedy Central, BET, Showtime, Paramount+...), **Warner Bros. Discovery** (TNT, TBS, Discovery, CNN, HBO, Max...), **Comcast/NBCU** (NBC, USA, Syfy, Bravo, MSNBC, CNBC, Peacock...), and **Fox** (Fox Entertainment, Fox News, Fox Business, Fox Weather, Tubi...) – are basically self-contained, massive communication hubs. Unrivaled, unmatched, unparalleled, and unified companies, armed with multiple networks, platforms, and genres, that can reach everyone, everywhere, all at once – although each still claims to have the best on-screen product.



When everyone's selling point is that they are scaled-up, omnipresent goliaths, legitimate USPs for the individual pieces of these giant pies can easily get lost in the shuffle. When the broadcast networks had upfront presentations focusing on just one network, CBS's claim of being "America's most watched network" or NBC being the leader among adults 18-49 might be the one key point advertisers took away from these events. Probably not the case today. When everyone claims they are the most watched and everyone claims they're #1 at something, it's not really a unique selling proposition. No one company stands out among the others when they are all saying essentially the same thing.



Do the upfronts still generate buzz? Upfronts used to serve as a launching pad, generating pre-season buzz for new fall TV series. Not too long ago there was a fair amount of anticipation among the general public during this period. After the upfront schedule announcements, pundits like me would proliferate on syndicated entertainment TV shows, as well as in print magazines, and newspapers, throughout the summer, talking about the new fall TV series and predicting hits and misses. Around 2009 (or thereabouts), online chatter would ensue for the most buzz-worthy shows.



In 2009, Fox's hit series, *Glee*, may have been the first online-generated hit. It had debuted to modest ratings the previous May (following that season's *American Idol* finale). But clips from the show and its great musical number went viral over the summer, and when the series premiered that fall, it was a hit.



But most viewers today (at least those under 60) don't think in terms of TV seasons anymore. Unless it's an extension of a popular franchise, new broadcast or ad-supported cable shows simply don't generate as much pre-season buzz as they did just a few years ago. Pre-2018, there was little else happening in the television arena, and the upcoming fall season was one of the only big TV-related entertainment news items. Original scripted streaming series were limited to Netflix and little else. Now, with so many high-profile streaming shows, and with lots of new product premiering year-round, the primetime fall TV season is no longer the only game in town.



But let's not forget these media companies still make the most money from selling advertising in their linear network programming. It's no coincidence that virtually every major streaming platform (except Netflix) has been losing tons of money each year as they have been laser-focused on adding new subscribers and spending billions of dollars annually on original scripted content.

As profitability became more essential for survival (and stock prices), virtually all are promising to reduce spending on original programming. At the same time they have all increased subscription prices and implemented advertising tiers. So, certainly to these media companies, the upfronts are still important selling tools.



Unveiling the fall TV schedules, long the centerpieces of upfront presentations, have slipped into the background. Expanding to include virtually every property a media company owns, at the same time they are cutting the length of the presentations (after years of complaints that they were too long), makes it difficult to spend too much time talking about the new broadcast primetime schedule.



Following are some common themes from last year's upfronts. All statements regarding how many people they reach, the scope and scale of their operation, whether they are #1 at something, or how much better they are than their competitors, are the individual claims of each company (whether or not I put comments in quotes). I have not vetted their assertions. It will be interesting to see how (or whether) their claims vary this year.

For the third consecutive year, Paramount Global (owner of CBS, Paramount+, and several cable networks) is bypassing its traditional upfront presentation at Carnegie Hall in favor of more intimate gatherings with agencies and advertisers. I thoroughly enjoyed CBS's presentations and after-parties over the years, and it does seem like the end of an era.

We are iconic, unified, everywhere, and can reach everyone

We have the greatest reach, scale, scope, and impact. We are armed with multiple networks, platforms, and genres that combine into a unified force that can impact anyone and everyone. We have the largest, most engaged audience across our many platforms. We have the best technology and tools to bring all our platforms together for advertisers.

"Unified" was one of the big words of the last few upfront weeks, as was "one" and "unrivaled" (or "unmatched" or "unparalleled"). "Depth and breadth" was one of the more common phrases, as was "bringing it all together," and "best or powerful, or most unique, or most complete, portfolio of brands."

It's always interesting to see how many of these types of words and phrases they all seem to discover at the same time. I wonder if AI will add to the list this year.



Half the world's population connects with Disney every day. "We have built a reach machine of billions of commercial impressions at scale, all delivering the business outcomes and metrics that matter to advertisers." "We harness the power of the Disney ecosystem to provide an unparalleled experience across all platforms." According to Nielsen, Disney is the #1 media company in minutes viewed across its entire portfolio of brands. "Disney has had the highest viewership every month for the past six months – higher than YouTube, Netflix, everyone."



"NBCU is everywhere you look." "We have the unrivaled reach of broadcast." "Telemundo is the #1 Spanish-language network." "We have the beloved talent, brands, and Intellectual properties of the iconic entertainment companies, and we have the reach and scale of the social media platforms." "While we continue to evolve, our vision remains crystal clear. We are going to harness the power and expertise that comes with being an iconic media company, and use it to drive experimentation and growth." "No one can do what we do and how we do it." "While the others have been spinning, we spent the last year investing."



"The Fox portfolio (which includes, Fox broadcast network, Fox Sports 1, Fox Sports 2, Fox Deportes, Fox News, Fox Business, Fox Weather) is designed to drive maximum impact for your brand." "While other media companies have hurt themselves by investing so much in streaming platforms and trying to get bigger, Fox has focused on growing each of its verticals."



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“Warner Bros. Discovery is second to none in the marketplace when it comes to our iconic content offerings and IP, with the unique ability to move culture and influence consumer behavior around travel, shopping, dining, and more of life’s important moments.” “We’re out to unlock the full power of this media company, creating an unparalleled opportunity.” With more than 3,000 hours of original content created annually, WBD networks “make more hours of cable television than any other portfolio”. “We draw the biggest collective audience in cable, and provide an unparalleled way to reach consumers in a trusted environment.” Warner Bros. Discovery content is seen by 85% of all adults in the U.S. on a monthly basis. WBD reaches 88% of all Black viewers, 75% of all Hispanic viewers, 90% of all affluent and educated viewers, and 87% of all business decision makers.



“Prime Video offers hit movies, great series, award-winning Amazon Originals, and the best in live sports in a single destination, available in one application across thousands of devices.” “No other streaming service can reach the number of customers with premium entertainment that we can. And our audience is not just a number on a page. We know them. And we want to help you get to know them too. They’re highly engaged viewers who are passionate about the deep and broad selection of programming we deliver, including live sports, series, and film.” “Prime Video is reaching viewers that aren’t being reached by other streaming services and linear TV.” “Only Amazon has the ability to dive into IP and spark new obsessions across books, podcasts, music, fashion, and games. No other studio offers creators so many ways to engage with an audience. And this has made Amazon MGM Studios the home for talent.”

NETFLIX

The Netflix Effect “starts with wonderful stories that become unmissable moments for millions of fans. But then it spreads across Netflix, where our trailers get billions of views, and across our social media channels, where we have a billion very active

followers. Netflix's objective isn't just to press play, but to "press play and stay." "Our audiences are highly engaged... they are choosing to spend their time watching Netflix. That's important because engagement is the key to success in streaming. When people watch our shows and movies, they get more value from Netflix, they stick around longer, and they are more likely to recommend us to their friends."



"For billions of viewers who come to engage with all the content they love, for millions of creators who innovate to attract new audiences, and for brands who connect to move their business forward, there is only one YouTube." "A big part of why viewers consistently choose YouTube is creators." "YouTube creators are reimagining classic TV genres, and inventing new ones." "Along the way, creators are redefining what we think of as TV. In fact, in the last three years, the number of creators that have received the majority of their watchtime on the big screen increased by 400%." "People are never far from their phones, so formats like QR codes drive engagement. Interactivity on TV screens has more than doubled in the past year. The new, more branded QR code will allow viewers to engage with brands right away while making the big screen a more holistic branded experience." "The magic of YouTube isn't just about our scale, or our captivating content, or viral hits. It's that we bring everything together in a way you won't find anywhere else. There's only one place where you can find a truly unique connection to fans. There's only one place you can reach every audience you care about. There's only one YouTube."

We have the best content; it's all about storytelling

"Storytelling," "connections," "imagination," "passion," "visionaries," "engaged viewers," "cultural touchpoints," and "beloved franchises," joined the word salad of upfront week. Diversity has also been a key word, as all media companies pledged to tell more diverse stories and give a voice to

under-represented groups. In light of the Trump administrations anti-DEI stance, it will be interesting to see how they discuss their diversity efforts this upfront (or whether they mention them at all).



"It's always challenging bringing great stories to life – giving visual form to characters and places that have only existed in the imagination (a quote from Walt Disney). But it's the kind of challenge we enjoy." "It all starts with a story...when those stories ignite the imagination and become connections." "This is where great storytellers and groundbreaking visionaries come together. And when it happens, it's like magic." "Stories bring the world together, and no one tells stories like Disney." "We have endless stories to tell...that connect with each new generation." Disney has long-standing relationships with talent and understands audiences – "Other companies may talk about their users, but we talk about our guests." "Disney is unlike any other media company because of the emotional connection people have built with us for over 100 years."



NBCU is the "home for incredible storytelling." "No matter if it's a second season or a second decade, NBC never stops imagining how to make stories better." NBCU has "content for the broadest audience." "We have the unique ability to bring stories forward, and by doing that, giving voice to visionary artists with something to say." "NBCU has a universe of content people want to return to over and over – comedy and cultural touchpoints, and the adventure they crave." "There's a difference between reach and connection." "Connection is what we seek out as humans. Not only from our relationships, but also from our favorite sports teams, shows, and movies. This is what we all strive for our brands, to have your product show up in moments of consumer connection."



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“The strength of WBD’s unparalleled portfolio of brands...unleashes the power of rich story-driven connections between brands and audiences.” “Our recent theatrical releases have benefited from brilliant cross-company collaboration, amplifying our amazing storytelling, celebrating our creators and creating true cultural moments.” “We are the most powerful creators of unscripted content across platforms and places.” The value of great content never changes.” “Diverse audiences will always show up for great content.



“Cultural passion and pride run deeply in our veins, and our content ecosystem ensures that no matter the genre or the screen, we are the destination for Hispanics.” “The biggest differentiator is our live programming. We have more live programming than any other network, and it’s all original. We’re bringing families together for the biggest culture-defining entertainment.

We have the best technology, which unifies our portfolio

Most of the major media companies now have the tools and technology to better target ad campaigns across their portfolio of brands, throughout their linear and streaming platforms.



“Our technology is making it easier and easier to put your ad in front of the right people at the right time across the Disney universe, regardless of screen.” Disney’s *Magic Words* is “an advertising product that ties mood to messaging. Technology analyzes scenes across Disney’s vast library and then serves advertising around that specific emotion or cultural touchpoint.”



“We should focus on strategic audience targeting, not adults 18-49 or 25-54. People in these groups are not all the same. Not all impressions are created equal.” NBCU’s *One Platform* total audience tool automates planning measurement across its linear and streaming assets.



Fox noted its ad innovations, such as Tubi’s technology for serving ads across Fox’s various assets, and a partnership with Amazon for consumer data and shoppable ad formats.



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WBD’s *Olli* is a unified, cross-portfolio audience planning and measurement tool – part of the company’s *One WBD* strategy for serving ads across linear and streaming. “By fusing data, audience intelligence, and ad tech solutions, *Olli* allows for seamless campaign planning, activation, and measurement across WBD’s entire portfolio of premium content and brands.”

These new ad formats include, Shoppable Content (allowing viewers to browse featured products during commercial breaks), advanced Contextual Targeting, Interactive Video, Click-to-Contact (viewers can actively engage with a brand and choose to receive more information), and Viewer’s Choice (viewers can select ads that best match their interests and be emailed additional product info).



TelevisaUnivision has a suite of sophisticated capabilities, from its massive creator’s practice through Asi Studios, to its Household Graph, which covers nearly 100% of Spanish-speaking households in the U.S. and has been activated by more than 250 brands in the past year.

TelevisaUnivision's leadership position as the home of Latin music was emphasized with the launch of *Sistema Uforia*, a new "always-on capability for brands to plug into the company's 500+ music touchpoints spanning its music portfolio."



Amazon's revenue growth in advertising is centered around Prime Video, and its strategy is to "integrate Prime Video's vast reach with advanced ad technology." "To connect the dots between the robust universe of premium content and audiences, *Amazon Ads* has the scale, insights, and ad tech to deliver results for brands."

"It doesn't matter whether you sell on Amazon or not. With our clean rooms and other leading ad tech, we can help all advertisers connect awareness and brand objectives directly to sale outcomes and category growth."



By the end of 2025, Netflix will launch a new ad technology platform. "Bringing our ad tech in-house will allow us to power the ads plan with the same level of excellence that's made Netflix the leader in streaming technology today."



"We want to ensure that your brand can show up at the right moments on the big screen to connect with engaged viewers. Google AI-powered video campaigns are now being optimized for the living room. Video Reach Campaigns Non Skips, powered by Google AI, will now deliver on your reach and awareness goals more effectively, using your existing, non-skippable assets. Google AI has been at the core of our ad solutions for years, and as we make advances, our ability to help brands drive ROI just keeps getting better."

Everything is streaming, and we have the best content library

It's been 12 years since the first streaming hit, Netflix's *House of Cards* debuted, eight years since CBS All Access (now Paramount+) joined Netflix, Prime Video, and Hulu, producing original streaming content, and four years since HBO Max (now Max), Disney+, and Peacock joined the mix. So streaming is no longer a new thing. It's also been roughly two years since every streaming platform implemented an advertising tier (including Netflix, which at one time said that would never happen).

As streaming services tried to compete with Netflix, and adding subscribers took priority over profit, everyone spent gobs of money on new content, creating a Platinum age of programming for viewers (at least those who could afford multiple streaming subscriptions). But as Netflix flourished and everyone else lost money, profit again became a priority – which led to reduced content spending (for everyone except apparently Netflix, Prime Video, and Tubi), more advertising tiers, increased subscriber fees, and finally streaming bundles (shades of cable).



“Disney is built for the future and anchored in streaming.” “We have the best streaming technology in the business, globally.” “Disney’s global streaming has iconic characters, beloved franchises, culture-piercing originals, blockbuster films, live sports, live events, news, and an unrivaled library of hits.”



Disney+ Marvel series, *Agatha All Along* (spin-off from the highly successful *WandaVision*), *Ironheart*, and the highly anticipated *Daredevil: Born Again*, were highlighted, as was the new series in *Star Wars* universe, *The Acolyte*. *Ellen Pompeo* came out to talk about her show, *Grey’s Anatomy*, being the #1 show globally on Disney+,

and that “streaming libraries allow fans to discover and rediscover the most beloved films and franchises.” “And Disney is home to the strongest catalogue on TV.” We saw clips from Hulu’s new political thriller, *Paradise* and from season 3 of *The Bear*. “Hulu has some of the best limited series on television.”

The Peacock logo, featuring the word "peacock" in a lowercase, sans-serif font, followed by a vertical bar with five colored dots (yellow, orange, red, blue, green).

Peacock picked up virtually all its new shows for a second season. NBCU highlighted several new star-laden series on Peacock, including *Fight Night: The Million Dollar Heist* (with Kevin Hart, Terrence Howard, and Taraji P. Henson), horror thriller, *Teacup* (with Kathy Baker), comedy, *Laid* (with Stephanie Hsu), *Day of the Jackal* remake (with Eddie Redmayne), *Those About to Die* (with Anthony Hopkins), and limited series, *Long Bright River* (with Amanda Seyfried).

“Streaming has an unacceptable lack of transparency. Advertisers have a right to know where every single unit ran.”

The Max logo, featuring the word "max" in a lowercase, bold, sans-serif font, with the "a" having a circular cutout.

Warner Bros. Discovery talked about the one year anniversary of combining HBO Max and Discovery+ into the **Max** streaming service. “It’s the early days of Max as we are only now approaching our first anniversary. Since the launch, we continue to attract audiences in a variety of unique ways.” “As we grow, we remain focused on providing more and more reasons to make Max the one to watch. Subscribers are now looking to us for live news on CNN Max, and we’re also offering can’t-miss live sports with B/R sports on Max. This blends seamlessly with HBO, Max Originals, Magnolia, and a powerful mix of shows from Discovery, TLC, HGTV, ID, Food Network, TCM, Adult Swim, and others.”

The Tubi logo, featuring the word "tubi" in a lowercase, bold, sans-serif font.

Fox’s Tubi is increasing its spending on original content, and is expert at reaching Gen Z viewers. According to Nielsen, Tubi now accounts for 1.7% of all TV viewing, with about 80 million active monthly users – making it “the

most-watched free TV and movie streaming service in the U.S.” Tubi enjoyed 15% audience growth in 2023 and a 35% increase in adult 18-49. “More than 60% of Tubi users are either cord-cutters or cord-nevers. One hundred percent of Tubi’s viewership is ad-supported and 90% is on-demand.”

Fox touted a new Tubi initiative called *Stubios*, a “fan-fueled studio for aspiring creatives,” where social creators can make Tubi films and series, and at the same time, post behind-the-scenes content. *Stubios* is intended to “bring new voices and their fans into Hollywood.” Issa Rae will serve as mentor to *Stubios* creators.



TelevisaUnivision’s ViX is the “largest global Spanish-language streaming service (with 50 million monthly active users).” ViX’s new ad-supported premium tier is now available, and includes “contextual and interactive capabilities, as well as commerce and social.” Subscribers have access to more than 17,000 hours of premium original series, movies, and live sports with limited ad load, in addition to the 70,000+ hours available through the free ad-supported tier.




Prime Video has 200 million global customers, and is the largest global ad-supported streaming service. Amazon reaches 115 million people in the U.S. monthly. The company has also developed free advertiser-supported TV channels (FAST); it licenses new shows and movies – in addition to Amazon’s own content. Prime Video’s extensive library includes content from third-party services like Max, Paramount+, and Crunchyroll.

“With hit shows and movies ranging from *The Idea of You*, *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, *Reacher*, *Fallout*, *The Lorde of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, and more, Prime Video has established itself as a premier entertainment destination.”

“Amazon will continue to invest in premium programming. Along with the original series and films from Amazon MGM Studios that audiences love, Prime Video offers sought-after licensed series and movies across every genre, more than 500 free ad-supported channels, live events like the Academy of Country Music Awards, and, of course, the ever-expanding offering of live sports.”

NETFLIX Netflix’s ad tier has surpassed 40 million monthly active users (compared to 5 million a year ago). More than 40% of new sign-ups in the ads countries come from the ads plan. Over 70% of Netflix’s ad-supported members watch for more than 10 hours per month (15 percentage points higher than their closest competitor, according to Nielsen) – more than half watch for more than 20 hours per month. Netflix’s ad-supported members have a higher household income and are younger than linear TV audiences, with a median age of 37. According to EDO Inc., Netflix members are around twice as likely to respond to an ad on Netflix compared to other streaming services and linear TV.

Some of the most popular streaming shows are returning on Netflix, including season 8 of *Elite*, season 6 of *Cobra Kai*, season 4 of *Emily in Paris* and *The Umbrella Academy*, season 3 of *Sweet Tooth* and *Vikings Valhalla*, and season 2 of *Squid Game* and *The Diplomat*. Netflix will likely have as much new content as all the other major streamers combined, and will lead the way in non-English-language series. In addition to Nielsen, measurement partners include, Affinity Solutions, DoubleVerify, EDO Inc., Integral Ad Science, iSpotTV, Kantar, Lucid, NCSolutions, and TVision.

 **YouTube** “For more than a year, YouTube has been the #1 most watched streaming platform on TV, according to Nielsen. And this week, Nielsen shared that YouTube continues its incredible momentum as not only the top streamer, but the second most watched media distributor overall on TV.”

It's the programming, stupid

Last year, everyone seemed to realize that when they all have roughly the same massive scale and reach, the main thing that distinguishes one media company from another is the actual product they put on their many platforms and screens. With no more pandemic-related production delays, and the writers' and actors' strikes a thing of the past, network talent was out in force, as were trailers of new series. Missing for the past few years were night-by-night run downs of each broadcast network schedule and the strategy behind them – which used to be the centerpiece of each presentation. As the length of the upfront presentations has been generally cut to two hours or less, while more properties and company divisions need to be highlighted, there's just not enough time for such detail.

Some things to look for this upfront

Will the hard sell get harder? With President Trump implementing tariffs just as the upfront is getting underway may cause media companies to sell harder, but also make selling harder. The upfronts are essentially a futures market, and heightened uncertainty could result in advertisers reducing upfront, or advance spending. This makes selling themselves during these presentations more important than ever – particularly since there are no real “must buys” anymore.

Talent will be out in force. With no more production delays (induced by the pandemic or strikes), and the hard sell perhaps being more important than ever, expect every company to bring out as many stars in their universe that will fit on the stage to help their efforts (and then, of course, mingle at the after-parties).



Alternative currencies: Despite months of non-stop discussions about “alternative currencies” leading up to last year’s upfronts, the actual media company presentations barely mentioned it. I think it’s become clear that Nielsen will remain the foundational marketplace currency (particularly in light of Paramount Global recently renewing its multi-year deal with Nielsen) with the vast majority of guarantees based on its Big Data-plus panel measurement.

This, of course, doesn’t mean ComScore and newer companies, such as VideoAmp and iSpot won’t be heavily used as supplements to Nielsen in understanding more enhanced and nuanced audiences and viewer behavior beyond the standard age/sex audience demographics. But for now at least, it seems Nielsen continues to be locked in.

Diversity re-defined? For the past few upfronts. Media companies have been promising increased commitments to diversity both in front of and behind the camera, providing voices to traditionally underserved communities. How will the current administration’s anti-DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) stance impact how everyone discusses diversity this year? I would expect words and phrases like “inclusive,” “multicultural,” or “cultural touchpoints” to dominate.

Will streamers finally sell the advantages of their commercials? When I see ads when I’m streaming something, I am typically exposed to the message – much more so than when I’m watching primetime linear TV, much of which I watch on DVR. There are, of course, no fast-forwarding and virtually no channel switching when watching TV on a streaming platform. There’s also significantly less clutter, which in and of itself increases attentiveness and recall. My own research has indicated that live commercial viewing has roughly three times the brand-message recall as DVR delayed viewing.

In a recent issue of *The Sternberg Report*, I point out that media conglomeration has limited good audience research, because things that benefit one division of a company often hurt some other division. So media companies that own TV networks, and streaming platforms, are not likely to touch this topic. But I'm really surprised that Netflix and Amazon Prime Video (and Apple TV+) don't heavily lean into this. It should be the centerpiece of their presentations.