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Cablevision Systems Corp. will offer its broadband customers HBO's coming streaming service, HBO Now, making it the first cable operator to strike such a deal, the companies said Monday. The deal comes a week after Time Warner Inc.'s HBO announced that Apple Inc. would be its exclusive digital partner for launching HBO Now next month. At the time, HBO officials underscored that the Apple deal wouldn't preclude it from launching with traditional distributors, which the cable channel has always maintained is a priority.

The deal announced Monday didn't include any details on pricing or packaging. The service will be available to Cablevision's nearly three million broadband customers in April in time for the fifth season of the popular HBO drama "Game of Thrones."

As the first cable channel to offer itself outside the pay-TV bundle, HBO must walk a delicate line: Going after a new market of what it estimates are 10 million households that have broadband but not pay-TV, without inducing existing pay-TV subscribers to drop their bundles. To try to prevent this cannibalization, HBO has priced its HBO Now service through Apple at \$14.99 a month—roughly on par with what it costs to add HBO to a traditional pay-TV subscription.

HBO has been trying to persuade cable operators that HBO Now can be used as a way to drive subscriptions to faster broadband speeds and other more-expensive broadband products for cable firms, according to people familiar with the matter.

Some pay-TV providers aren't buying the argument for now. Some "have been kind of negative about it," Time Warner Chief Executive Jeff Bewkes told investors at a conference last week. Cablevision, the fifth-biggest U.S. cable operator and a provider in the greater New York area, decided to jump in. Its chief, James Dolan, has been one of the most outspoken cable executives about the limits of the current pay-TV ecosystem, saying in a 2013 interview that "there could come a day" when his company stops offering television service and makes broadband its primary offering.

He said that the cable-television industry was in a "bubble" with its emphasis on big packages of channels and predicted that model would age "badly" as young people opted to watch online video rather than pay for traditional pay-TV. "We are well-positioned to support HBO Now and, as technology advances, Cablevision will continue to meet the

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evolving needs of our customers,” Kristin Dolan, the company’s chief operating officer and Mr. Dolan’s wife, said in a statement. “We couldn’t be more excited that our longtime partner has joined us for the launch of HBO Now,” said Tom Woodbury, HBO’s president of global distribution, in a statement. “We believe that HBO Now will have great appeal to Cablevision’s broadband customers.” – *Wall Street Journal*

Apple Inc.’s lofty plans to build an online television service are coming into sharper focus. The technology giant is in talks with programmers to offer a slimmed-down bundle of TV networks this fall, according to people familiar with the matter. The service would have about 25 channels, anchored by broadcasters such as ABC, CBS and Fox and would be available on Apple devices such as the Apple TV, they said.

For now, the talks don’t involve NBCUniversal, owner of the NBC broadcast network and cable channels like USA and Bravo, because of a falling-out between Apple and NBCUniversal parent company Comcast Corp., the people familiar with the matter said. Apple and Comcast were in talks as recently as last year about working together on a streaming television platform that would combine Apple’s expertise in user interfaces with Comcast’s strength in broadband delivery. Apple came to believe that Comcast was stringing it along while the cable giant focused on its own X1 Web-enabled set-top box, the people said. One media executive said it may be difficult for Apple to launch a service without NBCUniversal channels.

Meanwhile, Apple has been talking to Walt Disney Co., CBS Corp., and 21st Century Fox Inc., among other media companies. The idea is to offer consumers a “skinny” bundle with well-known channels like CBS, ESPN and FX, while leaving out the many smaller networks in the standard cable TV package. 21st Century Fox and News Corp, owner of The Wall Street Journal, were until mid-2013 part of the same company.

Some media executives said they believed Apple was aiming to price the service at about \$30 to \$40 a month. The company is aiming to announce its new service in June and launch it in September, according to people familiar with the matter. The service would work across all devices powered by Apple’s iOS operating system, including iPhones, iPads and Apple TV set-top boxes.

Apple has had on-and-off talks with media companies for years in the hopes of creating a subscription TV service that would be delivered over the Internet. Many of its proposals were considered radical and failed to bear fruit. The latest round of talks could run into roadblocks that would throw off the company’s timeline. But the company has some momentum. Last week, it signed up as the exclusive digital launch partner for HBO Now, the coming streaming service the Time Warner Inc. premium cable channel is launching in April. That deal was designed as a kind of appetizer for the main meal plans to be served later this year, according to a person familiar with the matter.

Apple’s TV service would enter the market at a moment of intensifying competition in Internet TV services. Several companies are looking for ways to target “cord cutters,” people who don’t want to pay the typical \$90 price for a cable TV package with hundreds of channels and who tend to enjoy online video. Sling TV, a streaming television package recently launched by Dish Network Corp., costs \$20 a month but doesn’t include broadcast networks on its lowest tier. Sony Corp. also is launching a bundle of streaming channels soon that is widely expected to cost more than the figure discussed for Apple’s service.

The Wall Street Journal reported a year ago that Apple was in talks with Comcast to team up on a streaming TV service that would use an Apple set-top box and get special treatment on Comcast’s cable pipes to bypass congestion on the Web. Apple had discussions since at least mid-2012 with Time Warner Cable, but those talks came to a standstill when the company became a takeover target for rival operators. Time Warner Cable struck a deal—still awaiting regulatory approval—in February 2014 to sell itself to

Comcast.

In the most recent talks, Apple is continuing to propose creating a live TV streaming service with a vast on-demand library that would be stored in the “cloud.” It may be hard for Apple to get rights to all the programming it is asking for, including full seasons of shows. Many media companies have deals to license such content to outlets like Netflix and Hulu. – *Wall Street Journal*



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