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People are streaming more movies and shows on internet-connected TV sets. But keeping track of who is watching what and where—and how many times they see the same ads—is becoming a bigger frustration for advertisers seeking to move money into the medium.

Connected-TV advertising is growing, although it remains a fraction of the roughly $70 billion that gets spent on traditional TV advertising in the U.S. every year. Ad spending on streaming TV will total almost $8 billion in the U.S. this year, up from nearly $6.4 billion in 2019, according to data from research firm eMarketer. "In not too many years, it will be the primary way viewers receive their premium video," said David Campanelli, chief investment officer at media buyer Horizon Media Inc.

A bulk of streaming today occurs in ad-free services such as Netflix Inc., but ad-supported offerings from providers including Amazon.com Inc., Roku Inc. and TV network programmers are increasingly drawing viewers. The medium faces a raft of advertising challenges, including a fragmented media-buying landscape that can lead to viewers getting hit repeatedly with the same ad. Marketers buy ads in streaming TV from a galaxy of providers, including app owners like TV networks, vendors that connect ad buyers with sellers, and device makers with their own operating systems such as Roku, Amazon and Vizio Inc.

The wealth of options brings limitations: Roku, Amazon and Walt Disney Co. 's Hulu, for example, each sell ads and have their own audience data, but it is hard for advertisers to track or target viewers from app to app, or from one operating system to the next. Ad inventory bought from multiple sellers can often show up in the same app. "There is a massive fragmentation of media in connected TV—and it's multidimensional fragmentation," said Tal Chalozin, chief technology officer of ad tech firm Innovid Inc.

That complicates marketer priorities like limiting how much a viewer sees the same ad. It has been a continuing problem for marketers in connected TV, where a smaller pool of advertisers than those that buy traditional TV results in viewers sometimes seeing the same ad many times even in a single program. "Connected TV usage has gone up significantly—and everyone is dumping money into it—but you can see how it's breaking at the seams," said one ad buyer who plans to spend $15 million this year on streaming TV advertising for marketer clients, more than double what he spent last year. "You get the same ad over and over—it's worse than ever."

Amazon said it offers frequency controls to its advertisers. But that doesn't apply to advertisers who buy through other sellers to run on apps on Amazon's Fire TV. Roku said it has made efforts to improve targeting and reach and frequency controls within its ad-buying tools. It also sends a device ID to measurement partners such as Innovid. But Innovid helps advertisers serve ads and measure performance, not buy ads in the first place.

Some ad executives said the problem will improve as more people stream TV and more advertisers follow. Traditional TV also suffers ad repetition if viewers watch long enough, they noted. Others said more advertisers won't fix fragmentation. "No one is holistically doing frequency management," said Brad Stockton, vice president of video innovation at Dentsu Inc.-owned Dentsu Aegis Network, which is doubling its upfront commitments to connected TV this year. "Everyone's solve is to give them every single one of your ad dollars."

Over the past few years, General Motors Co. has been increasing its media spend on connected TVs, executives from the company said. One limitation from spending more has been a lack of transparency on when and where ads run within streaming platforms and apps, said David Spencer, assistant manager of audience buying strategy for GM. Platform and app owners have been better about sharing such information over the past 18 months, but the issue hasn't been completely resolved, he said. "The better that gets, the more willing we will be to invest larger dollars," Mr. Spencer said.

One solution could be a universally agreed-upon identifier for connected TV audiences—akin to the tracking cookies that have historically powered online advertising. A universal ID could be a piece of data that represents a connected TV user or household that can allow advertisers to track viewing behavior across multiple devices, platforms and apps. At the moment, device makers use data on their signed-in users to form audience segments for advertisers, while many ad tech vendors use data proxies including IP addresses.

A universal ID could help marketers more precisely reach intended audiences across apps and platforms, said Mr. Chalozin, the Innovid executive. "No consistent identity equals: I'm going to need to spend significantly more and can't be as efficient," he said. Some are looking at new approaches. A Trade Desk project called Unified ID 2.0, which aims to harness encrypted email addresses from publishers that have login information, eventually could extend to connected-TV app makers, said the ad tech company, which offers access to ad inventory on many TV apps.

But any universal ID will require buy-in from the companies that own the devices and operating systems. And these ad sellers benefit from keeping advertisers within their own ecosystems, buyers said. This is among the reasons marketers and ad buyers said a universal ID is unlikely to be introduced anytime soon. "I'd love a universal ID that goes across absolutely everything, but it's unrealistic right now because of the walled gardens," Mr. Stockton said. Louqman Parampath, vice president of product management at Roku, likened any universal ID that isn't backed by identity-based data—like the type Roku has because of its registered users—to "a passport without a name or address." – ***Wall Street Journal***

When ViacomCBS Inc. unveiled plans last week to launch Paramount+, a supersize streaming service featuring content from across the media company's myriad units, something was missing: Showtime.

The omission set off a round of speculation about the fate of the premium network, best known for well-regarded dramas such as "Homeland" and "Ray Donovan." Some observers viewed the move as a lack of confidence in a service that has toiled in the shadow of much-bigger rival HBO and competes in a crowded environment that includes rivals Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime Video. "We have urged them to sell this asset to someone else," said Michael Nathanson, media analyst and founding partner at MoffettNathanson.

Don't bet on that, says ViacomCBS Chief Executive Bob Bakish, who holds that the network, with its mix of original shows, movies and boxing, is strong enough to stand on its own. "Showtime is not thought of as a leader in premium, but it is leading this year," Mr. Bakish said in an interview. Showtime's direct-to-consumer streaming offering, also called Showtime, gained more subscribers in the first six months of this year than it had in the previous three years, he said.

ViacomCBS doesn't break out subscribers for Showtime—which is available as an add-on channel on cable or through the streaming platform—but people familiar with the operation say it has 27 million subscribers, seven million of whom are coming through the Showtime streaming service. Credit Suisse expects that number to top nine million next year. Those numbers still pale in comparison to HBO and Netflix, which respectively have 36 million and 60 million subscribers in the U.S. The size of the gap has prompted some media analysts to question Showtime's long-term value to ViacomCBS.

Mr. Nathanson said Showtime "is on a very modest revenue growth trajectory," adding that he doubts the network can spend at a level to compete with its rivals. "I think we're a little bit underestimated," Showtime CEO David Nevins said in an interview. Bakish said some of Showtime's streaming growth can be attributed to people staying at home during the coronavirus pandemic and buying additional content, but that ratings for all versions of the service have been solid.

Showtime got strong performances from the final seasons of the spy drama "Homeland" and the Hollywood detective serial "Ray Donovan." Newer dramas including the high-finance soap "Billions" and urban drama "The Chi" have also been solid. The network also has unscripted fare, such as the late-night talk show "Desus & Mero." Showtime has also benefited from the surge in new streaming services that might have overwhelmed and confused consumers, Mr. Nevins said. "Our competition becomes a little diluted in their brands," he said, alluding to the fact that HBO was briefly available on three separately branded streaming platforms: HBO Now, HBO Go and HBO Max.

Showtime's streaming growth comes at a critical time for ViacomCBS. Revenue was down 22% in the company's most recent quarter, in large part because advertisers are cutting spending during the pandemic. Theatrical revenue was nonexistent for the same reason. Showtime's streaming subscribers are more profitable to ViacomCBS than cable and satellite subscribers because more of the revenue goes directly to the network.

Mr. Nevins said Showtime's willingness to form partnerships with all distributors gives it another edge. New streaming service HBO Max hasn't been able to reach agreements to be distributed via Roku and Amazon's streaming devices, and NBCUniversal's Peacock doesn't have a deal with Amazon. Showtime is available everywhere. "We're a pure-play content company," Mr. Nevins said. "We have a flexibility other people don't have that gives us a competitive advantage." Unlike HBO Max, which is owned by AT&T Inc., and Peacock, a property of cable operator Comcast Corp., "we have no ulterior motives to support a distribution system" that complicates relationships with third parties, he said.

ViacomCBS was also the first programmer to cut a deal with Apple Inc.'s new Apple TV+ streaming service, which is now selling access to Showtime as part of its own content offering. Showtime has been acquiring more documentaries and nonfiction programs, both because of their popularity and to keep fresh content available as the coronavirus slows the production of scripted fare.

Although some veteran Showtime programs such as "Homeland" and "Ray Donovan" ended recently, "Billions" and "The Chi" are still in their prime. The hit "Shameless"—about an extremely dysfunctional family—will be back later this fall and a new limited series about the relationship between President Trump and former Federal Bureau of Investigation Director James Comey—starring Jeff Daniels as Mr. Comey—is scheduled to make its debut next week. On top of that, Bryan Cranston of "Breaking Bad" fame is starring in a legal thriller called "Your Honor" set to premiere later this year. – ***Wall Street Journal***

A federal judge on Tuesday declined to stay his own ruling that Gov. Tom Wolf's size limits on gatherings are unconstitutional. U.S. District Judge William Stickman IV said the administration had failed to show "imminent and irreparable harm will occur" if the state can't limit event crowds to 25 people inside and 250 people outside. State officials had asked Stickman, an appointee of President Donald Trump, to delay enforcement of his ruling while they appeal.

Stickman's ruling invalidated key parts of the Wolf administration's early pandemic response, including his orders requiring people to stay at home and shuttering thousands of businesses deemed “non-life-sustaining.” Wolf, a Democrat, has since eased many of the restrictions, but Stickman also ruled against the state’s current size limits on indoor and outdoor gatherings, saying they violate citizens' constitutional right to assemble. Stickman’s Sept. 14 ruling has already prompted some Pennsylvania school districts to greatly expand attendance at high school football games.

Rejecting the state’s request for a stay, the judge said Tuesday that state officials failed to explain why they have allowed commercial businesses to operate at a percentage of their capacity — meaning hundreds of shoppers inside a large store, for example — while capping numerical attendance at social, political, cultural and other gatherings. Wolf said at a news conference Tuesday that his administration will appeal to the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia. – ***Associated Press***

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