

Comcast, Facebook, and Apple Music are making mobile video moves

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With Xfinity Stream, Comcast has some new ammunition in the ever-escalating war for mobile viewers' eyeballs.

A recent announcement of this improved mobile-video app for subscribers comes during the same week that major mobile-phone providers have proffered new or improved subscription offerings with an all-you-can-stream option, appealing to those on-the-go viewers.

Also, two high-profile online services not normally associated with video - Apple Music and Facebook - have just shared plans to make and push original video content to their user base.

Launching Feb. 28 as the successor to the current Xfinity TV App, the Stream upgrade will fine-tune and enhance the added availability of subscribers' channel lineups on their phones, tablets, and laptops. New to the mobile app is "X1-like" functionality, including the ability to navigate the app in Spanish as well as English, to search content by categories, access content ratings and reviews (from Common Sense Media), and customize parental controls.

When viewing out of the house, subscribers will now have access to more than 200 live channels, including 95 that were not on the streaming service just a year ago. Network TV channel content remains rare at present for "away" viewing but is accessible when the Xfinity Stream app is running on a non-TV device inside the subscriber's residence.

Xfinity Stream also will offer for the first time mobile access to 50 specialty audio channels from Horsham-based Music Choice. It will also offer polished, popular features including on-the-go viewing and remote programming of DVR recordings, on-demand access to more than 40,000 movies and TV shows, and "thousands" of choices available for downloading and viewing on

a device where connectivity is slow or nonexistent.

For voracious mobile viewers willing to pay the freight, Verizon Wireless announced for the first time in six years its phone subscription plans with "unlimited data" built in, priced at \$80 for a single-user subscription. It's a decent deal for heavy streaming video users who regularly exceed their 5GB monthly data cap and suffer surcharges. A day later, T-Mobile counterpunched with an enhanced and cheaper version of its own, unlimited data deal. Not incidentally, both offerings will deliver video content in data-intensive high-definition form, rather than compressing it to a lower bit-rate standard-definition form. Users might not see much improvement on a phone screen, but certainly will on a larger, high-resolution tablet or computer display.

Living up to the Ray Davies tune "Everybody's in Show-Biz," both Facebook and Apple Music are now raising challenges to the likes of Netflix, Hulu, and YouTube by backing the production of original video content and making it more accessible to their base.

Last year, Facebook struck one-year deals with media companies and celebrities to create videos for its nascent Facebook Live feature. This year, those companies are saying that Facebook is more interested in developing exclusive, original, content, along the lines of scripted shows, game shows, and sports. This week, it announced that videos streaming on Facebook through a users' news feed will now start playing the soundtrack as you land or scroll past. (Do you prefer peace and quiet? You'll need to go into the Facebook settings to make silent movies the default.)

Also underscoring the social-media giant's enhanced agenda is a new Facebook video app for TV, rolling out soon to app stores for Apple TV, Amazon Fire TV, and Samsung Smart TV "with more platforms to come," said Facebook's

announcement. "You can watch videos shared by friends or pages you follow, top live videos from around the world, and recommend videos based on your interests. You can also catch up on videos you've saved to watch later, as well as revisit videos you've watched, shared, or uploaded."

During the "Grammys" broadcast, Apple previewed the first show "Carpool Karaoke" (a spin-off of late-night TV host James Corden's running sketch) to be available to Apple Music subscribers in April as part of the \$10-a-month fee. Other original videos, including scripted dramas and the reality TV series "Planet of the Apps," are also forthcoming, starting in the spring, said Jimmy Iovine, chief of the Apple Music service.

"There are a bunch of projects. We're in it," Iovine shared with a reporter recently, suggesting the evolution of the streaming-music service into more of a cultural platform "with video and other things I can't talk about."

Next stop, "Jersey Shore - Second Generation"?

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