Western Union teams up with Thunes

Western Union (NYSE: WU), a leader in cross-border, cross-currency money movement, has teamed up with Thunes, a cross-border payments network for emerging markets, to enable Western Union customers to send funds directly into mobile wallets around the world.

This press release features multimedia.

Senders can now utilise Western Union's growing digital network or an agent location to send funds directly into a recipient's mobile wallet.

"We are continuously expanding and enhancing our account payout portfolio, providing customers with multiple payout options including bank accounts, cards or mobile wallets," said Sobia Rahman, Global Head of Account Payout Network for Western Union. "Our goal is to make digital money transfer services more accessible, with a specific focus on enabling mobile transactions."

The collaboration will enable greater financial access for consumers – especially those who lack access to traditional financial services - by connecting them to alternative payment solutions, such as mobile wallets, that ultimately help drive better financial inclusion on a global scale.

"We are delighted to be working with Western Union to provide global reach for their customers," said Steve Vickers, CEO at Thunes. (RTRS)

Viacom stock takes hit amid DirecTV battle

Viacom shares took a 5% hit Wednesday, a day after the company went public with its brewing battle over a new carriage agreement with AT&T's DirecTV.

Most traditional media stocks were down on a day when the Dow teetered between being slightly up and slightly down before closing down 141 points, a half-percent decline. Netflix saw a 5% gain, and other tech shares were generally up. Traditional media shares may have been dragged down by the sheer level of turmoil and transition at present among the largest firms.

The stock of the newly minted Fox Corp. was down for the second day in a row, falling 4.2% to close at $38.62. Fox shares opened on the first day of trading in its new configuration on Tuesday in the $40 range.

Viacom shares fell 5.5% to close Wednesday at $26.01, which marked the company's lowest ebb since December. On Tuesday afternoon, Viacom began warning viewers that its channels may go dark as of Friday night on DirecTV as the existing carriage deal expires. The company also issued an aggressive statement accusing AT&T of price gouging consumers and favoring its own channels in distribution agreements.

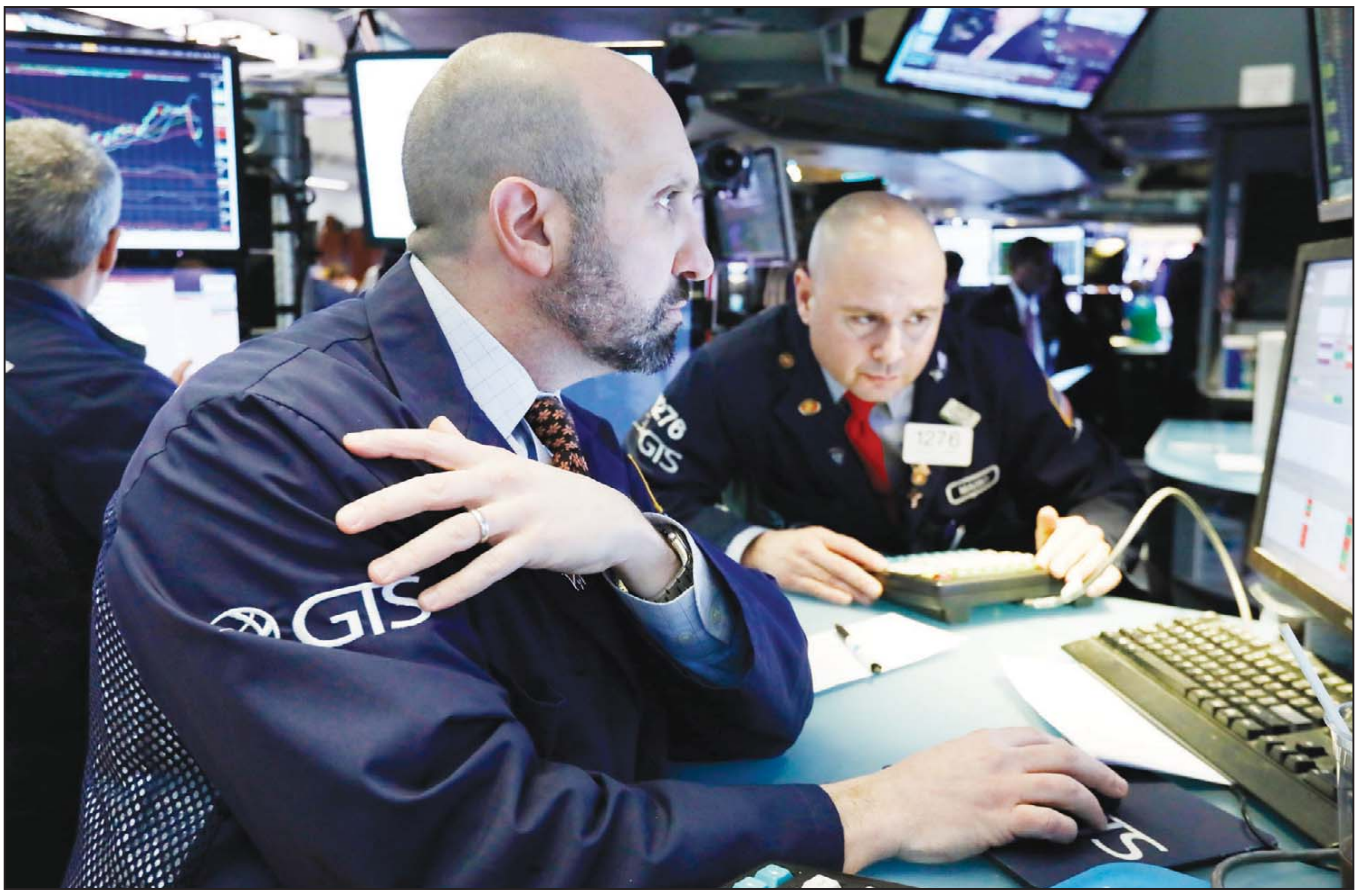
AT&T shares were down half a percent to close at $30.51.

CBS, which closed at $46.16, and Discovery ($26.69) saw 2% declines. Comcast was down less than 1% to $39.47. (RTRS)

Business Plus

Fed's plans for no credit tightening this year send Treasury yields tumbling

New Fed forecast for 2019: Slower growth, zero rate hikes



In this file photo specialists James Denaro, (left), and Mario Picone work at a post on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. The Fed left its key short-term rate unchanged and projected no rate hikes this year, reflecting a dimmer view of the economy as growth weakens in the United States and abroad. (AP)

> We think the Fed's forecasts are still too upbeat. The sluggish growth will lead the Fed to start cutting rates early next year

By Martin Crutsinger

The Federal Reserve sent a stark message Wednesday: The economy is slowing. And it won't be raising interest rates anytime soon.

The Fed left its key short-term rate unchanged and projected no rate hikes this year, reflecting a dimmer view of the economy as growth weakens in the United States and abroad.

The central bank said it was keeping its benchmark rate – which can influence everything from mortgages to credit cards to home equity lines of credit - in a range of 2.25 percent to 2.5 percent. It also announced that by September, it will no longer reduce its bond portfolio, a change intended to help keep long-term loan rates down.

Combined, the moves signal no major increases in borrowing rates for consumers and businesses. And together with the Fed's dimmer forecast for growth this year – 2.1 percent, down from a previous projection of 2.3 percent – the statement it issued after its latest policy meeting suggests it's grown more concerned about the economy. What's more, with inflation remaining mild, the Fed feels no pressure to tighten credit.

In predicting no rate increases for 2019, the Fed's policymakers reduced their forecast from two that were previously predicted in December. They now project one rate hike in 2020 and none in 2021. The Fed had raised rates four times last year and a total of nine times since 2015.

The central bank's theme, in its statement and in a news conference by Chairman Jerome Powell, is that it will remain continually "patient" about pursuing any further rate hikes. In his news conference, Powell used some version of the word "patient" no fewer than 10 times.

Stock market indexes initially rallied on the news, but the gains soon faded and many stocks finished the day down. The Dow Jones Industrial Average lost 141 points, or 0.5 percent. Analysts said the Fed's downgraded outlook for the economy might have alarmed investors.

"We think the Fed's forecasts are still too upbeat," said Michael Pearce, senior US economist at Capital Economics, saying he thinks sluggish growth will lead the Fed to start cutting rates early next year.

The Fed's decision was approved on an 11-0 vote.

Stock prices have been generally surging since early January, when Powell abruptly reversed course and made clear that the Fed was in no hurry to raise rates and would likely slow the runoff from its balance sheet.

And while stocks struggled Wednesday, the Fed's plans for no credit tightening this year sent Treasury yields tumbling, with the 10-year yield touching its lowest level in more than a year. The yield reached 2.53 percent, down from 2.61 percent late Tuesday and 3.2 percent late last year.

The Fed's policymakers have clearly settled on the belief that more than a decade after they cut their benchmark rate to a record low near zero – and kept it there for seven years - that rate has now reached what's called "neutral": neither stimulating nor restraining economic growth.

The central bank's pause in credit tightening is a response, in part, to slowdowns in the US and global economies. It says that while the job market remains strong, "growth of economic activity has slowed from its solid rate in the fourth quarter."

Some Fed watchers have said they think the next rate move could be a cut later this year if the economy slows as much as some fear it might. But at his news conference, Powell played down that prospect.

"It is a great time for us to be patient and to watch and wait," Powell said, invoking the theme he has sounded in recent months.

The Fed spelled out a plan for stemming the reduction of its balance sheet: In May, it will slow its monthly reductions in Treasurys from $30 billion to $15 billion and end the runoff altogether in September. Starting in October, the Fed will shift its runoff of mortgage bonds into Treasurys so its overall balance sheet won't drop further.

The central bank had aggressively bought mortgage and Treasury bonds after the 2008 financial crisis to help cut borrowing rates, spur lending and stimulate growth. With the economy now much stronger, the Fed has been gradually shrinking its bond portfolio. But now it's prepared to slow and then stop that process to avoid putting upward pressure on loan rates.

The Fed's new embrace of patience and flexibility reflects its response since the start of the year to slow growth at home and abroad, a nervous stock market and persistently mild inflation. The Fed executed an abrupt pivot when it met in January by signaling that it no longer expected to raise rates anytime soon.

The shift toward a more hands-off Fed and away from a policy of steadily tightening credit suggests that the policymakers recognize that they went too far after they met in December. At that meeting, the Fed approved a fourth rate hike for 2018 and projected two additional rate increases in 2019. Powell also said he thought the balance sheet reduction would be on "automatic pilot."

That message spooked investors, who worried about the prospect of steadily higher borrowing rates for consumers and businesses and perhaps a further economic slowdown. The stock market had begun falling in early October and then accelerated after the Fed's December meeting.

President Donald Trump, injecting himself not for the first time into the Fed's ostensibly independent deliberations, made clear he wasn't happy, calling the December rate hike wrong-headed. But after the December turmoil, the Fed in January began sending a more comforting message. At an economic conference soon after New Year's, Powell stressed that the Fed would be "flexible" and "patient" in raising rates.

Powell, appearing last week on CBS's "60 Minutes," denied that pressure from Trump had influenced the Fed's policy shift. Private economists generally agree that a slowing economy and a sinking stock market, which eased Fed worries about any possible stock bubble, were more decisive factors. (AP)

Do a subscription evaluation on a regular basis

Millennial money: How to stem 'subscription creep'

> The situation with subscriptions could end up being death by a thousand cuts when it comes to your budget

NEW YORK, March 21, (AP): From Netflix, Spotify and Amazon Prime to Blue Apron, Birchbox and beer of the month, your debit or credit card statements are likely littered with subscriptions that are costing you dearly.

Not that all subscriptions are bad.

You might be happy to pay a monthly fee to work out at the gym or type in Microsoft Office 365. But maybe the benefits of subscribing to credit monitoring or razors by mail were, uh, more fleeting.

Recurring charges can be insidious, some eating away at your wealth when you don't value the subscription anymore. Three $30-per-month subscriptions don't sound like much until you realize they total nearly $1,100 per year.

Inertia leads to a dozen free trials morphing into mainstays on your Mastercard. (Maybe not much longer, though. Mastercard has said it will require merchants to get your approval to proceed with charges after a free trial ends, although it applies only to physical-product subscriptions, like home-delivered sampler boxes .)

"The situation with subscriptions could end up being death by a thousand cuts when it comes to your budget," says Bruce McClary, spokesman for the National Foundation for Credit Counseling. Adding to the problem are so-called gray charges, deceptive and unwanted credit and debit card charges

In this file photo, a person displays Netflix on a tablet in North Andover, Massachusetts. From Netflix, Spotify and Amazon Prime to Blue Apron, Birchbox and beer of the month, your debit or credit card statements are likely littered with subscriptions that are costing you dearly. (AP)

that stem from misleading sales and billing practices. They total more than $14 billion a year among US cardholders, or $215 each, per a 2013 study by industry research firm Aite Group.

Here's how to spring-clean recurring charges so you can spend on things that matter to you more.

■ SUBSCRIPTION AUDIT. Job No. 1 is to identify recurring charges. Scan recent payment statements, including credit cards, debit cards or online accounts, like PayPal. Go back 12 months to catch auto-renew annual subscriptions. Don't ignore the analog world: lawn mowing, home security monitoring, pest-control service and memberships in social and professional organizations. Some credit card issuers, like Citi, identify recurring charges in your online account.

■ MULTIPLY BY 12. A frog in a stovetop pot of water will complacently boil to death if you raise the temperature slowly, the saying goes. Accumulating monthly subscriptions is similar. To feel the full impact, multiply monthly charges by 12 to get an annualized idea of what you're spending. If you see yourself keeping the subscription five years, do that math too. Then, a seemingly insignificant $30-per-month expense becomes $1,800.

"On the surface, subscription costs may seem minimal, but when you add them up it can really pinch your monthly budget," says Paul Golden, spokesman for the National Endowment for Financial Education. "If you're putting subscriptions on your credit card, is that hindering your ability to pay off your balance each month? If so, this is a red flag."

■ REASSESS VALUE. Do you use and value the subscription? A gym membership is perhaps the best example of a noble subscription gone wrong – when you quit going but continue paying.

Ask yourself if a subscription saves you money or time. Has it lived up to its promise? Does a delivered subscription box bring you joy or guilt?

"It's a good idea to do a subscription evaluation on a regular basis – perhaps a couple of times a year," Golden says.

■ IS IT REDUNDANT? If you have cable or satellite TV, plus Netflix, YouTube TV and Amazon Prime Video, you have overlap. "There are so many redundancies across those platforms that you're more or less paying for the same service over and over again," McClary says.

The same assessment goes for streaming music services, cloud storage and phone services. Are you hanging on to a landline for no reason?

■ OPT TO SHARE. Can you legitimately share a subscription? "Some of these subscriptions offer a buddy pass," McClary notes. YouTube TV allows family groups to share subscriptions, and certain New York Times subscriptions come with a bonus subscription to share. Some families choose to group their wireless phones on a single plan to lower costs.

Don't forget about freebies at your local public library, which can substitute for subscriptions: digital access to books, audiobooks, movies, music and magazines.

■ DOWNGRADE. Downgrading or subscribing seasonally can work, too. Can you downgrade from the premium to free version of software or website access? Are you getting value from your credit card's annual fee? You can probably downgrade to a fee-free card with the same issuer and keep your long credit history.

■ CANCEL. Liberally pause or cancel services . You can always restart and resubscribe later. You might even receive a discount offer to return.