CBS Dominates Week -- and Season

Rash Report: Seven of Top 10 Shows This Week on Eye Network

By John Rash

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MINNEAPOLIS (AdAge.com) -- Last week NBC's announcement of Jay's jump from late night to prime time stole the headlines. This week -- as with many other weeks this season -- CBS stole the viewers, at least according to the weekly top 10 list of prime-time programs in the ad-centric adult 18-to-49 demographic, as the network accounted for seven slots, compared with three for NBC.

'Survivor: Gabon - Earth's Last Eden'
Photo Credit: CBS

Sure, some were seasonal spikes made possible by football (NFL "Post-Gun," second with a 7.5/22 and lead-out "60 Minutes," seventh with a 4.4/12) or finales ("Survivor: Gabon," 4.4/10, good for eighth). But several were scripted series, including sitcoms, which compared to last year for all networks are maintaining ratings better than dramas.

Just as Jay Leno can't be quantitatively compared to his predecessor Johnny Carson, as the Big Three networks have exponentially expanded to the little 300 on many cable and satellite systems, CBS's Monday night comedies can't be compared to last generation's "Murphy Brown" and "Designing Women"-led lineup of a generation ago.
But by today's standards, there are a lot of people laughing at the same hapless guys on Monday night. This has been the case for awhile with "Two and a Half Men" (third, 5.6/13), but this week "How I Met Your Mother" (sixth, 4.6/11) and "The Big Bang Theory" (tenth, 4.1/11) not only cracked people up, but cracked the top 10, as both hit series highs.

CBS dramas have also performed well this year, as perhaps the public is in the mood for the scientific order of its police procedurals. But this week it wasn't the senior series of the genre -- the original "CSI" -- which tumbled from the top 10 after only locking up a 2.9/8 for a repeat. Rather, it was freshman hit "The Mentalist," which along with timeslot rival "Fringe" on Fox, has emerged as the new season's only two true hits. And just like some of the sitcoms, "The Mentalist" also hit a series high, with a ninth place 4.2/11, partly due to "Fringe" running a rerun.

As usual, reality TV also had ratings representation in the top 10, and CBS's most dependable entry, "Survivor," made the list with the finale of "Survivor: Gabon," which posted an eighth place 4.4/10. But like most reality shows, "Survivor" didn't thrive, as it was down 15% from last fall's finale. Holding steady from last fall, however, were the finale ratings for NBC's "Biggest Loser: Families," which weighed in with a fifth place 4.6/12.

Of course, the week's top 10 is just that -- a prime-time performance Polaroid that often changes on a weekly basis. Fox got sacked without a football (and new episodes of its "animation domination" lineup), but will soon have weeks of "American Idol," days of "24" and hours of BCS Bowl games and NFL playoffs.

ABC's dramas will have original episodes soon, and the originality of feature filmmaking will be honored -- and highly watched -- during February's Academy Awards.

And NBC will have the Super Bowl, which not only will kick in the highest rating of the season, but will provide a promotional platform to reacquaint viewers with its lineup. Already it showed the prime-time power of the NFL, as its "Sunday Night Football" game was the week's top-rated show, delivering an overall 8.6/21. (And the pregame "Sunday Night NFL Pre-Kick" finished fourth with a 5.2/14.)

And CBS itself (let alone a lot of fans), will soon have football withdrawal. And it, too, faces the same challenges of a broadcaster retaining resonance, let alone relevance, in a narrowcast world.

But at least for a week, CBS had at least a glint of its old Tiffany shine. And given the media meltdown of ratings and revenue that is truly transforming nearly every media entity, let alone company, even a glint of glory can help get through these increasingly bleak times.

WHAT TO WATCH:

Friday: Between Rod Blagoevich and Bernie Madoff, it's hard to tell the Grinches without a scorecard. The New York Times' David Brooks and syndicated columnist Mark Shields sort it all out on their regular Friday appearance on PBS's "Newshour with Jim Lehrer."

Saturday: "Elf" is a live-action theatrical with the animated Will Ferrell as a very big helper to Santa.

Sunday: With the snowstorms set to blanket much of the country, it's a good night to stay home and see which team gets home-field advantage in the playoffs -- the New York Giants or the Carolina Panthers, who play on NBC's "Sunday Night Football."
WHAT TO WATCH FOR: The football game to blitz the rerun lineups on rival networks. ~ ~ ~

NOTE: All ratings based on adults 18-49. A share is a percentage of adults 18-49 who have their TV sets on at a given time. A rating is a percentage of all adults 18-49, whether or not their sets are turned on. For example, a 1.0 rating is 1% of the total U.S. adults 18-49 population with TVs. Ratings quoted in this column are based on live-plus-same-day unless otherwise noted. (Many ad deals have been negotiated on the basis of commercial-minute, live-plus-three-days viewing.) John Rash is senior VP-director of media analysis for Campbell Mithun, Minneapolis. For more, see rashreport.com.