MINNEAPOLIS (AdAge.com) -- Even by today's standards, this week's news narrative was unpredictable: chimpanzees on the attack, literally and, if you offend easily, figuratively in the New York Post. Another alleged bilking billionaire uncovered, as investors hold their breaths wondering how many mini-Madoffs are out there. And the departments of Justice and State deciding which are more dangerous: Swiss bank accounts or Iranian and North Korean nukes. Isn't anything predictable anymore?

More people tuned in to watch Carly Smithson, Michael Johns and the rest of this season's 'American Idol' contestants than for any other show. Photo Credit: Frank Micelotta

Well, yes, actually: the week's list of the 10 top-rated shows in the ad-centric 18-to-49 demographic. But while the predictability of the list should reassure audiences assaulted with the jarring journalism, it should make the networks nervous, as change is what keeps prime-time programming relevant.

Not that the top 10's dominant genre is stale. Rather, reality reinvented much of prime time's ratings (and business) model. But the shows themselves, both in production and popularity, are about the same. Fox's "American Idol," for instance -- which saw its Tuesday and Wednesday versions land at Nos. 1 and 2 with a 9.6/24 and 9.0/24 rating and share -- is in its eighth season. CBS's "Survivor," ranked No. 7 after...
last night's Nielsen fast-affiliate data reported a 4.5/12, is in its 18th iteration. And ABC's "The Bachelor" (4.4/10, No. 10) has been around long enough to have a kid -- literally, in this case, as its ratings resurgence is mostly due to Jason Mesnick, this version's bachelor, toting along his tot.

What's missing is a newly minted reality show that will become the next gold standard of this essential genre.

**Dramas not new either**

Dramas face the same predicament, although two new shows, Fox's "Lie to Me" and CBS's "The Mentalist," came close to this week's list, at No. 11, with a 4.1/10, and No. 15, with a 3.7/9. But most of the list is like "Lost" (tied for No. 4 with a 5.2/13), "Desperate Housewives" (No. 6, 4.9/12) and "Grey's Anatomy" (No. 3, according to the fast-affiliate data, with a 5.8/14), which made their debuts on ABC four ("Grey's") or five years ago ("Lost," "Desperate"). Sure, "Grey's" lead-out "Private Practice," which launched last year, made it too, at No. 8, with a 4.4/12. But it did so based on a TV tactic spawned in the '60s and '70s: the spinoff, and story lines intertwined between the two shows.

Even Fox's "House" (5.2/14, which tied it for No. 4 with 'Lost') is half a decade old. And CBS's "CSI" (No. 9, with a fast-affiliate 4.4/11), which seemed so cutting-edge when it launched the forensic frenzy that increasingly has defined CBS, has run for nine years.

But the ratings stasis for reality shows and dramas is nothing compared with what ails sitcoms, none of which made this week's list. Even the two that often make it, CBS's "Two and a Half Men" and NBC's "The Office," which were both repeats this week, got their starts in 2003 and 2005, respectively, and "The Office" is based on the BBC classic conjured up by Ricky Gervais in 2001.

CBS has made great sitcom strides on Monday night, with relatively new comedies "The Big Bang Theory" and "How I Met Your Mother" having breakthrough qualitative and quantitative years (both were also repeats this week). But overall, the struggling sitcom is no laughing matter for the nets, or for their affiliates, which could use some syndication hits coming down the pipeline.

This week's small-screen ratings -- and programming -- predictability stands in stark contrast with the unpredictability of the big screen, which will crown its creativity on Sunday's Academy Awards. With rare exceptions, the nominees are new, novel concepts and constructs, including the Bollywood-meets-Hollywood "Slumdog Millionaire," the probable best-picture winner. Indeed, the only lock seems to be a posthumous Oscar for Heath Ledger, not because he went through the motions in the movies' version of a spinoff -- a sequel in the "Batman" franchise -- but rather because of the startling originality he brought to his Joker character in "The Dark Knight."

**WHAT TO WATCH:**

**Friday:** Two Oscar-nominated films, "Apollo 13" on AMC and "Good Will Hunting" on Bravo, will get you in gear for Oscar weekend.

**Saturday:** The long-overlooked short-documentary category gets the Academy Award treatment on the Sundance Channel with "In Short," which shows six Oscar-nominated or -winning short films.

**Sunday:** Then it's the big night! Make some microwave popcorn (more healthful and $6 less than the movie-theater kind!) and settle in for the red carpet and gold statues on ABC.

**WHAT TO WATCH FOR:**

Will the recent box-office boom go bust or continue for Sunday's Oscars?

~ ~ ~
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.