MINNEAPOLIS (AdAge.com) -- While it may seem the "D" in DTV stands for delay, of course it signifies digital, which is how signals will be sent out once the analog spectrum switches Friday night. The delay, derided by some as yet another "nanny state" hand-holding for procrastinators, was put to good use, however, as the number of homes Nielsen considers "completely unready" shrank from 5.8 million to 2.8 million. And because those most vulnerable to losing broadcast were among the most vulnerable in society -- including non-English-speaking households and some poor and elderly viewers -- waiting was wise.

So more people are ready. Are broadcasters? Technically, sure, or at least as ready as they will ever be before they work out the inevitable connectivity kinks. But from a programming perspective, probably not, as affiliates' parent networks seem to struggle to even fill one channel of summertime prime time, let alone the three or four new digital channels their stations will have.
Take last night's prime-time grid, in which five low-cost reality shows took up eight of 13 available hours. The rest, including CBS's entire schedule, were reruns. And there was only one original scripted series: "The Unusuals," which ABC is amortizing after its ratings failure this spring.

To be sure, many enjoy the genre, as witnessed by Fox's 3.3/10 rating and share in the ad-centric 18-to-49 demographic for "So You Think You Can Dance," which won the night for the network over ABC's 2.4/7, NBC's 1.7/5, CBS's 1.5/4 and the CW's .4/1. ABC garnered 3.0/9 two-hour average for "Wipeout," its absurdist obstacle-course game show. (Please see chart for individual and network program ratings.)

But for most, Wednesday's lineup was a "gone fishing" sign by broadcasters just days before their affiliates will have the capacity to quadruple their programming power.

Of course, it's not up to the networks to fill the digital grids, but rather local stations. If the end result is simply shelf space for syndicated packages, then it belies some of the premise, if not the promise, of the digital transition. To be sure, many have already benefited from the switch, including the Treasury, which, according to the Federal Communications Commission, is $19 billion richer after auctioning off the freed-up spectrum. Many of the buyers were wireless providers, which plan on adding to the communications cornucopia of Apple, BlackBerry and Palm. Most important, first responders will have more spectrum space to improve interagency cooperation, which was one of the 9/11 Commission recommendations.

Shouldn't viewers benefit too? After all, even though the new digital channels won't technically need license renewal, their parent stations still need to meet standards of "public interest, convenience and necessity." Sure, that sounds quaint in this era of smart observers using smartphones to live blog the breakup of the mainstream media model. But this is a once-in-a-career -- if not a lifetime -- chance to experiment with new news and information formats that can concurrently enlighten and entertain. Done right, ratings and revenue rises are sure to follow.

As the consternation over converter boxes shows, the DTV transition hasn't been easy. And it will be a lot tougher when sunrise brings dark screens for millions on Saturday morning. Undeniably, much has been asked of viewers, including cash (and coupons) for converter boxes, cable or satellite services, and digital TVs. And all in the midst of a recession. So it's not too much to ask that stations reciprocate by rising to the opportunity. Indeed, viewers should expect nothing less.

**WHAT TO WATCH:**

**Thursday:** Game four of the NBA Finals will be pivotal, as it will either tie the series or give the Lakers an all but insurmountable 3-1 series lead. ABC, 9 p.m.

**Friday:** Forget pivotal games; game seven of the Stanley Cup Finals between the Pittsburgh Penguins and Detroit Red Wings will be decisive. NBC, 8 p.m.

**WHAT TO WATCH FOR:**
A tight contest between the Magic and Lakers but an easy win for ABC.
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.)

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