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Printer Friendly

Online Extra: "Cue the Hubbub"

National Public Radio gears up for election night with a trial run.

*By Lori Robertson
Lori Robertson is AJR's managing editor.*



NPR's election night studio (Photo by Kim Hart)

Ellen Weiss, senior editor of NPR's national desk, makes the announcement: "OK everybody, it's 7:50 Tuesday night."

A few minutes later, she discovers the first serious glitch of election night coverage: There's no paper in one of the printers.

"We don't have paper. We don't have paper," Weiss says, waving her arms in the air. "We need to get paper."

That's just one reason to have a dry run, a mock trial if you will, of what may occur--and who can really predict that?--on November 2. So on the Thursday before the election, in a cavernous radio studio, a space that normally serves as the network's musical performance studio, NPR has set up its election night mission control. Six or seven large tables, draped with white tablecloths, are neatly covered with black keyboards and flat screen monitors, cream-colored phones and black headsets. A number of "npr" logo signs are taped up around the room. Yellow crime-scene caution tape dangles from one corner of the stage-like



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platform where hosts Linda Wertheimer and Jennifer Ludden sit, shuffling papers and waiting for their cues. There are three TVs in front of them, TVs behind them, TVs over in the corner--and there'll be more TVs, Weiss promises, on election night.

"One minute to air," Weiss says, and the chatter in the room abruptly stops.

Earlier, the crew--which on the big night will number approximately 125 people, including reporters in the field--was given some ground rules. "No swearing," warns Neal Carruth, executive producer of the election unit, since mikes will be on all over the room. And "no cheering or booing" for your candidate. But NPR does want to have background noises on the air. ("We want it to sound live," adds Weiss. "We just don't want it 'bad live.' ")

"All right, uh, 15 seconds," Weiss says, as NPR readies to go "on air."

"Cue the hubbub," she says, and everyone starts mumbling and grumbling, one particularly loud hubbubber repeating "watermelon, cantaloupe, watermelon."

The mood is light when the news isn't real.

Cue Linda Wertheimer: "Polls have closed in 17 states," she says, reminding listeners that this could be the closest presidential election ever. "From NPR News, this is live coverage" of election night 2004.

Jennifer Ludden chimes in about the high voter turnout thus far. Wertheimer notes that legal challenges have been launched already, and later in the program, listeners are told, we'll hear from Scott Simon, stationed at a bowling alley in Wisconsin.

NPR, like many news organizations, runs at least one of these dress rehearsals of election night to make sure the phones aren't dead, the sound levels are right, the guests are properly corralled to and from the mikes, the printers have paper, and the electoral map on the plasma screen TV works like a charm.

As for the "scripts," Senior Washington Editor Ron Elving says, the idea is to throw the hosts "a curveball."

At least one. Actually, there were many: One reporter told of a hurricane that had washed some Floridians away. It was unclear if they had made it to the polls or not. Any posthumous challenges to the vote? Wertheimer asked. As Jerry Falwell said, replied the reporter, "This was God's way of deciding the election."

The biggest curveball came when Republican Alan Keyes upset Democrat Barack Obama in the Illinois Senate race, despite the fact that Obama had a 45-point lead pre-election. Why, you may ask? One factor: The freak snowstorm that kept many Illinois voters from the polls.

In less than an hour, the test was over. Only 84 of the electoral votes had been distributed: Bush with 26, Kerry with 58.



Linda Wertheimer (front) and Jennifer Ludden practice for election night during NPR's dry run. (Photo by Kim Hart)

There were kinks to be worked out, for sure. The hosts' delivery was halting at times. Weiss warned that NPR staffers should not "call" a state; they should instead "project" a winner. Two phones didn't work, and one staffer noted that the Kerry and Bush columns on the oh-so-1970s white boards on the wall were in a left-right order, the opposite of what appeared on the little slips of paper handed to the hosts and online folks when a state is officially "called." Sorry, that's "projected."

In talking with this reporter, Elving and Vice President for News and Information Bruce Drake cited the need for caution, something they would use much of on election night 2004. "We want to be quick," says Drake, "but we would rather be right than first."

Elving says for the news media this year, "Subjective human restraint...is crucial."

He and Political Editor Ken Rudin will be the ones responsible for projecting the winners of states and handing those little slips of paper to the hosts. Elving, who before his six years at NPR covered election night as political editor at USA Today and Congressional Quarterly, says their decisions will be based on exit polls, projections by other journalists, a state's history, raw voting data and his and Rudin's experience. NPR, like other major news organizations, will get its information from **Edison Media Research**, the entity tapped after Voter News Service collapsed in the wake of the 2000 election debacle. Pollster Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, will be the network's in-studio analyst.

Everyone's preparing for a marathon. Wertheimer and Robert Siegel will host the coverage from 8 p.m. until about 1 a.m. Ludden and Frank Stasio will then take over until 5 a.m., when NPR's "Morning Edition" begins and broadcasts live until noon. NPR will cover the election live from 4 p.m. Tuesday, Elving notes, straight through to 10 p.m. Wednesday--at least.

How will he personally prepare for Tuesday? He's hoping to take a nap sometime that day, between the early exit poll returns. If that fails, there's always caffeine. Plenty of caffeine.

In 2000, NPR ran out of food. This year, that's not an option. The caterer will provide dinner, lunch and breakfast, in that order, all night long, enough food for 90 people--everything from poached asparagus to breakfast sausage.

Wertheimer, who has been with NPR since its start in 1971 and has covered elections since 1980 or '76 (she's not sure), will try to sneak a few brownies into

the studio, just in case she can't dash out for food. Once the coverage starts going, she notes, it's like a ride "you can't get off."

She has prepared for the night by covering the concerns of voters throughout the year, and studying a giant three-ring binder full of research from NPR's library. Wertheimer is reassured that Siegel will be sitting beside her. As former longtime "All Things Considered" cohosts, she says, "We've been able to finish each other's sentences for years."

As for what the outcome will be, Wertheimer says, "I don't know. I'm all over the map." But it's fascinating, she says, "I can't recall an election that was more dramatic."

Some things she and her coworkers most likely won't see: snowstorms in Illinois, hurricanes in Florida and an upset in the Illinois Senate race. Well, most likely.

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