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Trying to avoid repeat of 2000 election

TV networks take steps to ensure right candidate is declared the winner

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Little matters more in television news than being first. Live, immediate coverage, after all, is what gives television that competitive edge when reporting daily events.

But Tuesday night, viewers will witness what amounts to a philosophical about-face: For the first time in the 56-year history of TV election coverage, the major networks and cable channels covering the presidential vote will aim not to be first.

"I think we will all be vying to be last, which is something I've never heard before," said Linda Mason, the CBS News vice president who will be in charge of declaring winners Tuesday night in the network's newsroom.

"Nobody wants to be first this time," said David Bohrman, Washington bureau chief and executive producer of CNN's election night coverage.

The profound change is a direct result of the debacle of election night 2000 when the networks and all-news channels projected Al Gore the winner in Florida, only to reverse themselves later to announce that Republican candidate George W. Bush carried the state and won the presidency. That embarrassment was followed in the wee hours of the next day with the networks finally admitting that the race was too close to call.

No one in the television news business wants to find himself or herself in NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw's position of four years ago. As the veteran journalist who also serves as managing editor told viewers in 2000: "I not only have egg on my face, I have an entire omelet all over my suit."

Armed with next-generation computers, teams of numbers-crunching statisticians, battalions of attorneys, and new, rigorously tested methods of conducting exit polls, TV news executives vow that they will get it right this time. In news studios at NBC, ABC, CBS, CNN and Fox News Channel, studios have been redesigned to project an on-air image of accuracy and responsibility - and the watchwords this year are transparency and caution.

At CBS, the site at which all projections and announcements of winners are made has been dubbed the Decision Desk - and moved from a third-floor office into the first-floor news studio to ensure constant communication among producers, reporters, analysts, executives and the anchor team led by Dan Rather.

"It's a big deal to move it into the newsroom, because our newsroom is extremely crowded," Mason said. "One of our mantras is to be transparent, and what that means is that we want the viewer to understand what is going on. ... We want the viewer to be along with us. We're no longer omniscient, knowing everything. That's different from 2000."

Though it won't be on-camera, ABC News has established an Oversight Desk. Dan Merkle, director of the unit, holds a doctorate in public opinion research. He and a team of other social scientists, journalists and political analysts will "serve as a double check" on every projection and election call before it is made at the anchor desk by Peter Jennings, Merkle said.

NBC is transforming Rockefeller Center into what it calls Democracy Plaza. The landmark skating rink will serve as a giant map of the United States, with cutouts of each state (blue for Democrat John Kerry and red for Bush) put in place as it is called for a candidate. It will serve as backdrop to Brokaw, who will be doing his last election-night broadcast before retirement from a booth built on the plaza.

Beyond cosmetic measures, the network will aim for a better grasp of voting patterns by conducting absentee ballot surveys in 13 states - up from three in 2000. In response to controversies surrounding the vote count in Florida in 2000, the network has set up a Voter Alert Line and is urging viewers who notice irregularities to report them. That data will be analyzed by experts from nonpartisan organizations and universities and passed on to teams from NBC News.

At CNN, the newscast will be made from the Nasdaq stock market site in Times Square, where more than 100 screens will be used to display data flowing into the newsroom: "There are so many stories going on election night, and the board will help viewers understand them," Bohrman said.

A CNN team of legal experts led by Jeffrey Toobin will be on hand: "One of the other lessons learned from 2000 is that lawyers also matter - legal challenges can hang an election," Bohrman explained.

The cable network will also offer a 30-person on-camera Election Analysis Center: "Transparency is in vogue this year. We want viewers to be able to look over the shoulders of those folks as they analyze the results. And we want the people in the Election Analysis Center to challenge and tear apart everything that comes to us from the National Election Pool before we put any of it out on the air," Bohrman said.

Exit polls

The most significant change in this year's coverage, however, involves how exit poll data is collected and reported to the television networks. After the embarrassment of 2000 was followed by a total meltdown on election night 2002 of what were supposed to be new and improved computers, the 10-year-old consortium known as Voter News Service (VNS) was abandoned by the six news organizations that funded it.

In the wake of having been left with no exit poll data while trying to report the midterm elections, ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, Fox and the Associated Press decided enough was enough and set about looking for a new way to get sample precinct and exit poll data on which to base predictions. (It was faulty information from VNS that had caused the disastrous Florida calls in 2000.)

A new consortium, the National Election Pool, has replaced Voter News Service, with two highly regarded opinion survey firms, Mitofsky International and Edison Media Research, gathering exit poll and sample precinct data for the six news organizations. Simple vote tabulations will be done by AP, which has successfully counted raw votes for more than 150 years.

"The biggest new thing this year is NEP," says Marty Ryan, executive producer of political coverage for the Fox News Channel. "We've been using it through the primaries, we've seen it in battlefield conditions, and everything worked fine. So, we think we are not going to have the kinds of problems we saw in 2000."

Like CBS, ABC, NBC and CNN, Fox also has a decision desk that will challenge each projection offered by NEP before anchor Brit Hume announces it.

Measures questioned

Still, not everyone is convinced that these measures are adequate. Some observers remain concerned that the networks are still over-reliant on one source.

"Instead of each doing its own news gathering, the networks in an effort to save money, have come to rely on a single source of information that they all subscribe to," says Lawrence K. Grossman, a former president of NBC News and PBS. "Everybody is feeding off the same source, and if that source is wrong or off-base in any way, then everybody is [wrong]. Even though Mitofsky and Edison have a good deal of experience, this is what the networks are again setting themselves up for."

Philip M. Seib, author of *Campaigns & Conscience: the Ethics of Political Journalism*, is also skeptical of the methods employed by NEP: "The usual opinion-gathering tools have been made even more suspect by the remarkable change in the electorate. All the new, unpredictable voters will make even the most reliable exit polling not worth much."

If anything can be learned from history, Grossman said, it is that new-and-improved technology can fail under the stress of a tight deadline. Grossman, who described election night 1964 in a *Columbia Journalism Review* article, set the scene: In NBC's famed Studio 8H at Rockefeller Center, Chet Huntley and David Brinkley were poised to report up-to-the-minute election results from a "Potemkin space-age" election set.

"NBC had spent millions to promote its high-tech election night coverage featuring extensive use of computers for the first time," Grossman writes. "Unfortunately, when the vote tallies started coming in, the highly-touted RCA computers gave up the ghost."

Luckily, a skeptical producer at NBC News had put a backup plan in place consisting of a "low-tech army of corporate bookkeepers" equipped with desktop adding machines.

"The accountants saved the day," Grossman said, remembering the moment. "As someone who championed satellite newsgathering, I value technology. But you need to be skeptical when you hear how new technology is going to solve all the old problems. Human beings using common sense and good judgment are still needed."

As election night unfolds, one network to watch may be PBS. Public television is not part of the National Election Pool.

Instead it will get vote tabulations from AP, with anchorman Jim Lehrer and correspondents at campaign headquarters around the country reporting only data gathered firsthand or projections vetted by AP - and then vetted again by the PBS teams of analysts.

"We have always been very careful and cautious," said Les Crystal, executive producer of *The*

NewsHour with Jim Lehrer. "And my guess is that this year, everyone is going to be a little more cautious in terms of really checking the numbers. I think people are going to be more willing than ever to say it's still too close to call and more willing to be open about why they can't make a call."

If, in the heat of battle Tuesday night, the networks and cable channels hold to their promises of more cautious behavior, "I think it will be good for all of us," Crystal said.

Even if it is for only one night in the otherwise first-at-all-costs, dog-eat-dog world of TV news.

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