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## Networks aim to be last -- and right -- on election night

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With Tuesday's presidential election looking like a dead heat, stress levels will be at an all-time high in the Bush and Kerry camps. Perhaps the only place where you'll find more raw nerves and anxiety attacks?

The television networks.

Stung by the 2000 debacle -- in which networks credited Florida's crucial 25 electoral votes to Al Gore, corrected that, then announced that George W. Bush had won the state, then pulled back on *that*, then waited weeks for the actual outcome of the national election -- television executives at all the major networks and cable outlets are being very cautious this time around.

It's not something that comes natural, they admit.

"All the networks are campaigning to come in last," says Linda Mason, vice president of public affairs for CBS News. "In my lifetime, I haven't seen that. But, of course, we're going to be very, very sure."

In broadcast news, a business where patience is rarely a virtue, the networks appear determined to go slow and get it right this time.

They've made superficial changes, adding words such as "estimate" and "apparent winner" to their election night vernacular. NBC has released a 10-point plan detailing how it will avoid repeating the historic blunder.

And all the networks are pointing to an overhaul of the collective vote-projection system as the key to avoiding a *deja vu* disaster.

Much of the blame for 2000 was placed on Voter News Service, a consortium of the four major networks, CNN and The Associated Press that relied on exit polls and incomplete vote counts to help news media decide who was winning the election.

The networks have dissolved that and created ... the National Election Pool -- a consortium of the four major networks, CNN and The Associated Press that relies on exit polls and vote counts to help news media decide who is winning an election.

Sounds the same, but it is different, says Dan Merkle, decision-desk director for ABC News.

"Whereas VNS used to do everything for us -- exit polling, vote tabulation, projection modeling -- we split it up into two entities that have already demonstrated expertise in these areas," he says.

One of those is The Associated Press itself, which has been doing vote tabulations since the 1800s and has added checks and balances this year as further safeguards. (In 2000, the AP was one of the media outlets that *didn't* call a winner on election night.) In addition, Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International will work together to do the exit polling and projections.

"There are two systems in place now, whereas in 2000 and 2002 there was only one," says Thom Bird, executive producer of news, special events for Fox. "Together, they're great, but you can work with one or the other separately."

The research firms are being pretty cautious themselves; Joe Lenski, Edison's executive vice president, has a four-part article on the company's Web site detailing more than a dozen scenarios that could lead to a miscount or bad call. But they've taken measures to help the networks be as error-free as possible.

"What we've learned is that the actual vote-count numbers that we get from election officials at the county and state level are not always accurate on election night," Lenski says. "We have put in place safeguards so that if there are any seeming discrepancies in any of the vote data we're receiving, it will be flagged and highlighted."

In some cases, entire county-voting histories will be available for news organizations to review.

Still, media watchdogs are concerned that the same old errors will creep in. After all, the networks are relying on a lot of

the data they used to make their calls in 2000.

"I think the underlying problem is that the networks and The Associated Press have decided to cooperate rather than compete as a cost-cutting measure," says Gary Hill, chairman of the Society for Professional Journalists' Ethics Committee. "If you've been in the business as long as I have, you can remember when ABC, CBS and NBC each did their own exit poll."

Hill, who is director of investigations and special segments for KSTP-TV in Minneapolis-St. Paul, points out that other media outlets (including his station) pay into the National Election Pool and also get the same data.

Many print-media outlets followed the broadcast media's calls or the VNS data in 2000, leading to their own mistakes.

"I don't think there'll be the same kind of lemming-like decision-making (this year), because we were so badly burned by that," Hill says. "But still, there's the potential to have a bad outcome."

Although all the networks are working from the same data, each has its own "decision desk" that will make the calls.

"The data is the data," Mason says. "It's what we do with it. ... There's a real difference between the decision desks."

Mason says CBS will rely on its own statisticians, analysts and correspondents -- especially in "battleground" states -- to help inform its call. And the network will show much of that on the air.

"Our mantra this year is 'to be transparent,' to share with the viewer exactly what we're doing," she says. "We'll do that by having a correspondent at the decision desk, who at the beginning of the evening will explain how we reach our decisions. And then, if there are problems during the evening. ... we'll go back to her to explain."

ABC's Merkle says the network has increased training for the people working its decision desk. And an oversight team will back up the decision desk, double-checking all projections before they air.

"We've put a new criterion in place since 2000, such that ABC News will not make a projection in a race if the margin between the candidates in the tabulated vote is less than a percentage point late in the night," says Merkle.

The networks are also being careful in their word choices. CBS graphics, Mason says, will emphasize the word "estimate." NBC issued a news release with its plan to avoid the mistakes of 2000, and one of the points emphasizes such cautious terms as "apparent winner" and "projected winner," which will also be explained on the air.

As close as this election is, it's entirely possible that no networks will call or project a winner Tuesday night. Edison Media Research's Lenski says there's precedent for that; elections in 1960, 1968 and 1976 were all called the next morning.

He chuckles when he hears Mason's comment about the networks campaigning to be last. He knows restraint doesn't always win in the pressure-cooker of covering a political race, but 2004 might be different.

"I think this time," he says. "They're all campaigning to be right."

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