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And now . . . let the exit polling begin

True colors

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Dave Walker

CNN's 1980 founding changed television news forever, launching the cable-news era, the 24-hour news cycle and, eventually, the never-ending TV-news ticker.

While still a network with unprecedented worldwide reach and impact, Time Warner's CNN has been marginalized domestically by the smartly-marketed Fox News Channel and the explosion of even-more-instant Internet information sites, and enters tonight's election-coverage test an underdog.

The network's grand plan to capture the attention of returns-surfers is to originate its coverage from the massive video wall of Nasdaq's New York City showroom.

The borrowed setting will allow CNN to display a giant map of the country.

States will flicker red (for George Bush) or blue (for John Kerry) as polls close.

Or not.

The networks will attempt to "call" states as voting ends in cascading fashion from coast to coast and beyond using methodology similar to the system used to "call" the presidential race in 2000, remembered as not a very good year for election coverage on TV.

Refinements and improvements have been made, though the magic numbers will still be derived from exit-poll results and early returns, and everybody vows not to call Florida for Al Gore again.

On CNN's big board, the color purple will signify too close to call. Expect to see a lot of purple.

If a CNN state flickers light brown, your Starbucks stock has turned to "sell."

Wolf Blitzer, CNN's primary anchor tonight, has been rehearsing in front of Nasdaq's wonder wall for more than a week.

"There are 96 screens, so as an anchor you've got to feel comfortable walking around in there," he said in a phone interview. "The phrase 'wall-to-wall coverage' takes on a new meaning."

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A different anchor might describe tonight's presidential race as "tick-tight."

Blitzer said he anticipates a long night that could extend to several. As today unfolds, he'll be watching two keys:

-- The weather in battleground states. "If the weather's better, more people will come out," he said. "The general consensus is, that's good for Kerry."

-- Long lines at polling places. "The higher the turnout, the better it is for Kerry," Blitzer said. "That's the rule of thumb."

The rule of another finger: If impulse voters turn out in big numbers and run into long lines, will they stick around to actually vote? Instead of wandering off to, like, buy an iPod or, you know, whatever?

"It's all about mobilizing the passions of core constituencies," said Blitzer, picking Pennsylvania, Ohio and Florida as the battlegroundiest of the battleground states. "If Kerry captures two of those . . . I think he's going to be president."

Exit question: Are you confident we'll know who our next president will be by bedtime?

"No, I'm not confident," Blitzer said. "I think it's possible we'll know. It's also very possible we won't know and that we won't know for several days."

One network exit-poll contractor posits that the Oval Office's occupant for the next four years might not be definitely decided until midday Wednesday.

"There is a small but quite real chance we won't know who won for weeks," wrote **Larry Rosin, president of Edison Media Research**, on the company's Web site (www.edisonresearch.com).

Weeks?

Will there be bathroom breaks?

On Edison's Web site, Rosin notes tonight's state-by-state poll-closing "call" times and offers this excellent advice for election-coverage watchers: "Plan your bathroom breaks between :50 and :58 of each hour."

Joining Blitzer, either at Nasdaq or elsewhere, will be Aaron Brown, Anderson Cooper, Jeff Greenfield, Larry King, Bill Schneider, Carlos Watson, Judy Woodruff and Bill Hemmer, but look for legal analyst Jeffrey Toobin to get an awful lot of air time given the many expected legal complexities of casting a vote in this election.

In fact, every network will hawk voting irregularities, expected to be tonight's Big Story.

For example, correspondent Jake Tapper has been exclusively assigned that task at ABC, whose coverage will otherwise be overseen by anchor Peter Jennings, while George Stephanopoulos and Cokie Roberts will analyze.

At CBS, Dan Rather will anchor, with backup from Ed Bradley and Lesley Stahl from "60 Minutes" and Bob Schieffer from "Face the Nation." On the hot seat: Mika Brzezinski, who will attempt to explain the network's "Decision Desk" methodologies.

Tom Brokaw, weeks away from retirement, will anchor the broadcast side of NBC's array of networks, which also includes cablers MSNBC and CNBC.

Also working NBC's giant outdoor set in Rockefeller Center will be "Meet the Press" host Tim Russert and incoming "Nightly News" anchor Brian Williams.

"Hardball" host Chris Matthews will lead the shouting on MSNBC.

Fun sidebar: MSNBC intends to get all blog-wacky today, with reports from Ana Marie Cox of Wonkette -- a hilarious political Web log that's one of my favorite ways to kill time, er, do research -- and other Internet-based correspondents.

Brit Hume will anchor Fox News Channel's cable coverage, for which most of the Fox usuals -- Fred Barnes, Mort Kondracke, Bill Kristol, Juan Williams, Susan Estrich and Greta Van Susteren -- are expected to punditize.

Meanwhile, Shepard Smith will ringmaster coverage aired by Fox network broadcast affiliates.

Assigned exit-polling watch, Chris Wallace will likely ping-pong between the two.

The WLAE-Channel 32 schedule shows an election-night edition of PBS' "The News Hour with Jim Lehrer" at 7 p.m.

Later, WYES-Channel 12 will carry PBS' live election coverage, anchored by Lehrer, at 9 p.m.

Also at 9 p.m., Comedy Central's "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" will offer a live program titled "Election Night 2004: Prelude to a Recount."

The digital-cable Sundance Channel will air a TV version of Al Franken's Air America radio show from Kerry campaign headquarters, at 10:30 p.m.

Also posted at Kerry HQ will be Michelle Miller, formerly of WWL-TV, who will contribute to a one-hour edition of "BET Nightly News" anchored by Jacque Reid in New York starting at 10 p.m.

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