



How did we get it

The media's election-night screw-ups resulted in a complex game of finger-pointing. What happened – and how do we avoid it in the future?

By Meredith O'Brien

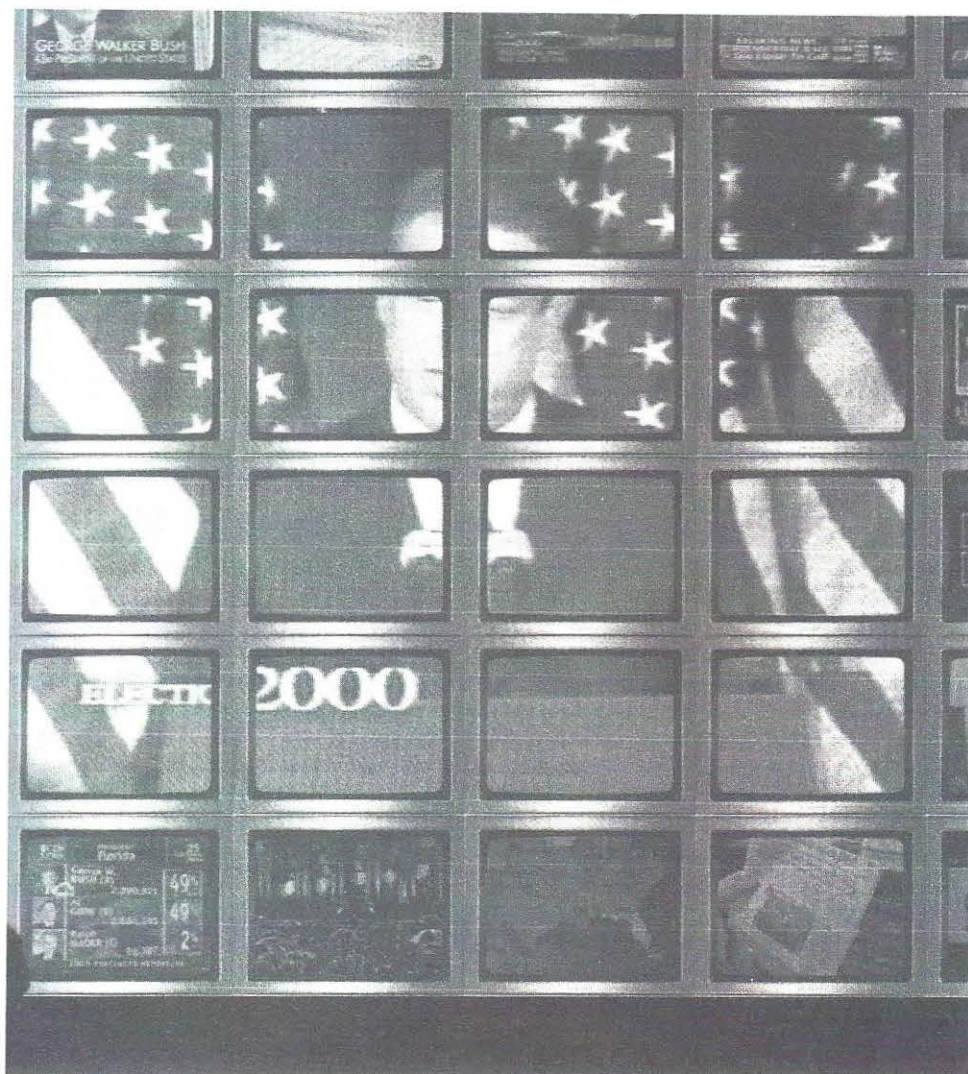
Some say it was faulty data from the Voter News Service (VNS), which provides the networks and The Associated Press with exit polling and raw vote counts. Some blame Florida for producing flawed vote counts. Still others say that what is being called a night of unmitigated disaster – during what should have been the networks' premier moment – exposed television news organizations' vulnerable underbelly and embodies what's wrong with network news.

The national television networks have been eating a lot of crow for weeks since they blew presidential election night calls twice, once predicting that Vice President Al Gore had won Florida and later prematurely dubbing Texas Gov. George W. Bush president-elect. Both calls were taken back in unceremonious form with network electoral maps shifting the Sunshine State's color from Gore blue to Bush red and

then to an uncertain yellow or gray color lil restless chameleons. The graphics, which are briefly identifying Bush as the next president also had to be shelved for more than a month until the Florida vote count and the U.S. Supreme Court finally made a Bush victory official.

What happened on election night? How could the networks have gotten not one, but two major calls so wrong? Why the mistakes happened depends largely upon who one asks. Whatever the cause, many agree that the credibility of the networks has suffered. In at least two national polls conducted soon after the election, the public said it disapproved of the way the media handled itself on election night.

But how to avoid the mistakes in the future? The suggestions are plentiful in number, but so far, none have shown any legs.



so wrong?

BAD DATA

The current hypothesis among those involved with making the network predictions is that the mistakes resulted from a combination of bad data from VNS and the state of Florida.

VNS is the lifeblood of the networks on election night. This service – a polling consortium funded by ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, NBC and The Associated Press – was created in 1990 to save the networks money by not having to collect their own individual data. The group conducts exit polling around the country and provides its members with the poll results and as raw election data from which the networks and AP draw their own conclusions and make projections.

An internal report by VNS found a number of problems with the group's data collection methods on Nov. 7. "VNS said it underestimated the number of absentee ballots cast in Florida and the advantage they would give Bush," the

AP reported in late December. The Washington Post characterized the VNS analysis saying: "The group had no reliable way of estimating the number of Florida's absentee ballots in the presidential race, which were almost double what it had expected. What's more, the news service dramatically underestimated the number of Florida votes still uncounted at 2 a.m." The Post also quoted the report – which has not been released to the public – as saying that "budget limitations ... have placed heavy burdens on all VNS staff and [have] made the task of covering elections far more difficult than necessary."

When contacted by Quill, Lee C. Shapiro, VNS' director of media services, said: "We are undergoing both internal and external reviews, and at this time we have no comment."

In the meantime, the networks, which live and die by VNS numbers, have been making a plethora of comments – some made on election

'Let's get one thing straight from the get-go. We would rather be last in reporting returns than be wrong. If we say somebody has carried a state, you can pretty much take it to the bank, book it that that's true.'

CBS ANCHORMAN DAN
RATHER ON ELECTION
NIGHT 2000

'This where we appear to be folks. CBS News has now, for the second time tonight, pulled back Florida.'

RATHER, HOURS LATER

'... If you're disgusted with us, frankly, I don't blame you.'

RATHER

'What the networks giveth, the networks taketh away.'

NBC NEWS ANCHORMAN
TOM BROKAW

'We don't just have egg on our face. We have omelet all over our suits.'

BROKAW

'Could you pass the crow?'

CNN ANCHORWOMAN
JUDY WOODRUFF



'It was an unenviable, naked showcase of what the network news is about right now. The infi

night speculating about how Gore created such momentum — they'd like to take back.

The problems started between 7:49 and 8 p.m. on Nov. 7, according to an AP timeline chronicling the mistaken calls. Between those times, all of the members of the VNS consortium — citing VNS projections from exit polling data — declared Gore the winner of Florida. This was crucial because Florida had long been predicted by the pundits as one of the must-win states in order to capture the presidency. With Gore apparently securing Florida, in addition to winning battleground states like Pennsylvania and Michigan, the hopes that Bush could win grew dim. According to several Republican congressmen and the Bush campaign, the first mistaken call of Gore winning Florida — made while polls were still open for 10 minutes in the Florida panhandle — disenfranchised voters, not only in Florida but throughout the western part of the country where polls weren't closed yet.

At around 9:55 p.m., upon reviewing incoming data and receiving complaints from the Bush campaign, the networks began retracting the Gore win in Florida. NBC's director of elections, Sheldon Gawiser, later told the AP that the VNS numbers were skewed because they didn't antic-

ipate the number of absentee ballots and used sample precincts that were "too Democratic."

But the night was far from over. By 2:16 a.m., the Fox News Channel became the first to declare that Bush had won Florida — and the presidency. The rest of the networks, though not AP, made the same call minutes later. AP sent an update at 2:37 a.m. warning that the race was still too close to call. "The pressure to join the parade was enormous, but AP people who know the state of Florida and understood the voting patterns and the tabulations we were seeing held firm, to their great credit," said AP President Louis D. Boccardi in a statement.

Not only did all the networks jump on board naming Bush president, but several newspapers, basing their information on TV broadcasts, made the same leap. The Boston Globe, The New York Times, The Miami Herald, The Philadelphia Inquirer, USA Today and The St. Louis Post-Dispatch were among the publications that told their readers that Bush had won, only to have some of the companies chase down delivery trucks to retrieve the newspapers when the networks pulled back their Bush declarations a little before 4 a.m. Even Gore himself, after seeing the network reports, called Bush to

concede. But, following the networks' lead, he soon called Bush back to retract the concession.

NETWORKS RESPOND

CBS' Dan Rather, who made the early election night promise that CBS would rather be right than first and wrong with a call, later admitted the errors. "We made a mistake," he said on CNN's "Reliable Sources." "We were wrong. We were just flat wrong. CBS News has by far the best record in the business on election nights. And statistically over the years, we've called about, I think, at least 20,000, probably 30,000 races. And I think we've been wrong on 20. But that doesn't excuse what happened the other night."

Most of the fingers have been pointed at VNS.

Kathleen Frankovic, CBS' director of surveys, said everything VNS was telling the networks about Gore winning Florida seemed solid. "All of the evidence was pointing toward a Gore call, all of it," she told the AP.

ABC's Sam Donaldson echoed Frankovic's sentiments. "It happened, the old garbage in, garbage out, a lot of the information coming to the Voter News Service in Florida," Donaldson said on "Reliable Sources." "There were 120 precincts down there. Forty-five of them had exit polls. These were matched by the computers. The information was called in to New York. And a lot of it turned out to be wrong. And therefore, based on that, we all made our projections."

"We are very disappointed in what [VNS] did," Marty Ryan, Fox News' executive producer for political coverage, also told CNN. "We don't think their work was up to par. And we think something has to be done about VNS, and whether that's restructuring the way it's done whether it's a technology issue or a sampling issue, something has to be done."

The networks have either released statements or made people available to talk about the mishaps, as well as set up both internal and external review committees to assess where the blame lies. Quill was able to get comments from all except for Fox News and CNN.

In their release, NBC News said it wouldn't renew its membership with VNS "until it is satisfied that VNS has taken the steps needed to ensure the accuracy and integrity of its data





cture blood and bone is not there anymore. —ALEX JONES

Additionally, the network said it would no longer project a winner until after the last poll closing in a state.

ABC News' statement also vowed that it would wait until all polls are closed in a given state before making a call. It also called for an outside review of VNS and would "take all reasonable steps to insulate those involved directly in making projections from the pressures of competition from other news organizations."

At CBS News, its spokeswoman Sandy Genelius was rueful. "We in no way take lightly the bad calls on election night," she said, adding that results of their investigation would be made public when it's completed.

In a letter to Louisiana Congressman Billy Tauzin's office, CBS News President Andrew Heyward said the problems with the Florida projections weren't limited to VNS errors and included what he called "a very significant computer error made by the Volusia County [Florida] Elections Department." He also said there were incorrect vote tabulations in Duval County. "We were as good as the information we were getting from the sources we trusted," Heyward wrote. "In this case, that information was not good and neither were we."

Warren Mitofsky, president of Mitofsky International, who advised CBS and CNN on their election night calls, put it more succinctly: "It was a disaster."

But Mitofsky said that bad data, specifically from the state of Florida regarding vote counts, was the root of the problem. "The numbers we were being supplied with were wrong," said Mitofsky, who has been in the business for more than 30 years and is considered one of the founders of exit polling. The entire series of mistakes is erroneously casting a pall over exit polling, he said, adding that VNS has only made one error before, in a 1996 New Hampshire Senate race. "If this had happened in a minor state, this wouldn't all be going on. But everybody blew the identification of the next president."

While it would be ideal for the networks to collect their own data, it's not realistic, he said.

EMPEROR'S GOT NO CLOTHES

The fact that the networks formed VNS to save money and rely almost exclusively on its

data is indicative of a larger problem with television news, say media critics.

"These mistakes probably would have been avoided 15 years ago," said Tom Rosenstiel, director the D.C.-based Project for Excellence in Journalism. In recent years, there have been major cutbacks in the networks' polling units, depth of expertise and political reporting staff, he said, coinciding with a shift "toward softer news features."

Alex Jones, director of Harvard's Shorenstein Center for Press, Politics and Public Policy, agreed that the problems go deeper than what happened in Florida. Instead of allocating resources to bolstering bureaus, obtaining and retaining experienced editors and staff and promoting "a culture that is about news," Jones said networks opted to spend money on on-air talent and equipment, making them "a shadow of what they used to be."

Jones said he was shocked when all the networks recanted the initial call for Gore in Florida. To him, that indicated that the networks "had no real basis for making this decision. ... It effectively said to me that the emperor has no clothes."

And to make the mistakes on such a high-profile night, when TV broadcasts are where everyone—including the candidates—turns, was not just bad luck, Jones said.

"It was an unenviable, naked showcase of what the network news is about right now," he said. "The infrastructure blood and bone is not there anymore."

Rosenstiel said he doubts whether there's enough commitment by the networks to spend the money necessary to reinforce their news organizations to try to prevent a repeat of the election 2000 miscalls.

Venerable CBS newsman Walter Cronkite also weighed in on the election imbroglio and knocked his former profession. "I don't understand the need for this speed, although I was certainly one of the progenitors of the whole idea of exit polling," Cronkite told a West Virginia newspaper. "Nowadays, with the exit polling, we're calling these states so early that there are really some three hours left of voting time on the west coast and it seems to me that very probably it could work just as well to withhold the returns until all the states have voted."

The public seems to agree with Cronkite. A national poll conducted by the Pew Center for People & the Press between Nov. 10 and 12 found that 69 percent of its 1,113 respondents said they felt anger or disappointment with the networks' mistaken calls. Fifty-two percent said the first miscall of Gore winning Florida likely had an effect on how people voted in the western portions of the country. Eighty-seven percent of those polled said they want the networks to wait until "nearly all the votes are counted on election night rather than predicting a winner," according to the center, which noted that 81 percent think the only reason for the projections is for a network to be able to say it was first with the news.

A CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll conducted during the same period found similar results. Fifty-five percent of the 1,014 people surveyed said they disapproved of how the media conducted themselves on election night.

Time magazine Managing Editor Walter Isaacson was even harsher in his assessment. "And it was almost like you were there at a symbolic moment, like, 'Don't trust TV anymore.' They don't because basically, the TV commentators don't trust the viewers," Isaacson told CNN. "They just try to say, 'We'll make a call,' without explaining all the details about it, without being nuanced about it, without giving raw numbers."

CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS SLATED

Several Republican congressmen took the criticism further. In calling for hearings before the House Telecommunications Subcommittee to determine how the election night projections were made, Rep. Tauzin, R-La., chairman of the subcommittee, said the timeliness with which the networks made their calls is worrisome.

Tauzin's spokesman Ken Johnson said while the hearings — where the networks, AP and VNS are requested to testify — are not meant to be "a witch hunt," there were "inherently biased" calls made on election night for which people need to be accountable.

Tauzin maintains that in every state where Gore won by six or more points, he got an immediate victory call from the networks, while in 11 states where Bush won by similar margins, the calls were delayed, sometimes by extended periods.

"The networks' election night victory calls portrayed a skewed electoral picture," Johnson said, giving the image early in the night of Gore "sweeping to victory." After the Florida call for Gore, Johnson said it appeared to voters that "there was little chance" Bush could win, given Gore victories in Michigan and Pennsylvania.

Despite the vehement protestations of network officials that calling Florida when there were 10 minutes left for voters in the state's panhandle to vote did not drive anyone away from the polls, Johnson said Tauzin has evidence that people did indeed leave the polls because of the

projection. "Whether it was one or 1,000 [voters], the networks did a disservice to the American voters," Johnson said. He cited a study that he says estimates that 10,000 voters went home after the networks called Florida for Gore.

But Harvard's Jones says that the talk of disenfranchisement in the western part of the United States is bunk. "I've never seen any evidence ... that calling elections in one state affects another," he said.

In a letter to Tauzin, ABC News said: "Studies raise questions whether projections of winners for some races in some parts of the country affect voters in other parts of the country. This year in particular, the outcome of the presidential election remained entirely uncertain during the approximately two hours that ABC projected that Vice President Gore would prevail in Florida."

CBS' Heyward made the same argument in his letter to Tauzin. "In the case of Florida, it would be extremely difficult to argue any impact on turnout of a call made at 7:50 p.m.," he wrote. "The polls were closed in all but 5.8 percent of the state's precincts, with the rest closing just 10 minutes later."

CBS' chief anchorman concurred.

"For a long time, I thought that there might be that effect," Rather told CNN. "But there has been study after study and there is no empirical evidence, and I say no, zero empirical evidence that it affects that vote."

Regardless of Rather's point of view on whether it has an effect, he, along with his own network, ABC and NBC advocate the establishment of a national poll closing time so that any projections made by the networks would be done after all the polls close.

Tauzin and Congressman Ed Markey, D-Ma., plan to introduce a bill this winter to establish a uniform closing time — 9 p.m. for the east, 8 p.m. for the central part of the country and 7 p.m. for the west. Tauzin's spokesman said having the polls open for 24 hours or delaying daylight savings time until after the election could ease the implementation of a national closing time. A previous attempt in the early 1980s to create such a uniform closing time failed.

But Rosenstiel said the most important caveat journalists are missing is that they shouldn't be influencing the way the process works. "The problem is it's not the role of journalists to tell Congress how to set up elections," he said. "It's our job to cover elections as they exist."

Jones said the whole notion of a national poll closing time is a red herring that doesn't get to the heart of what caused the errors on election night in the first place.

"I think they really ought to do some soul searching," he said.

Meredith O'Brien is a free-lance writer.