



Creating Compelling Election Coverage – A Ross Guide

Patrick Twomey

Published April 2020

INTRODUCTION

In the current political news landscape, global voter bases have become more invested in election results than ever before. They eagerly await the vote tallies on election night, and consistent, accurate reporting has become more important than ever. Misinformation is commonplace, especially online, and this can have significant consequences if unchecked.

News departments are therefore faced with the task of delivering election results and news to viewers quickly while also making sure that claimed facts are verified. They must also work to keep viewers engaged by providing expert analysis and striking visuals. The latest graphics technology offers tangible advantages because it allows newsrooms to tell stories and display data in new, compelling ways.

This whitepaper will provide an overview of the current political news landscape and explain how election results are captured and shared by news departments. It will also outline the ways that news broadcasters use today's graphics technology to visualize information, engage audiences and keep viewers informed.

The Current State of News

Every news department is defined by the way it tells the big story as well as the way the audience receives it. Speed and accuracy are a big part of audience perception in today's highly evolved world of real-time communications. The consumption model of media has also changed – appointment viewing of the day's events is no longer the functional business model, and saving the headlines for the dinner hour newscast has become a thing of the past. Even the most traditional broadcast networks have established digital divisions to share breaking news as soon as it comes in.

Online and mobile news organizations are relative newcomers to the industry, even if they are part of more established newsrooms. Many of the brands operating in this new digital landscape tend to be more concerned with being the first to break a story than taking the time to ensure that all of the details are correct and have been verified. This section of the industry is extremely competitive, and the goal is to be fast and first. Social media is also full of misinformation, rumour and gossip; this can lead to stories spreading quickly and appearing legitimate before the accuracy of the information has been examined.

The old guard of broadsheet newspapers, radio and television stations still hold the line as the most trusted sources of accurate reporting. They have long-standing rules about citing sources and providing verified first-hand or eye-witness reports before reaching out to tell the story to their audience. In most cases, newspapers still have a period of time between when they acquire news stories and when they report them. This is due to printing and distribution logistics, which provide a shield of time to review and verify facts before sharing them with the world. However, the introduction of on-line outlets for print journalism may be weakening this shield.

Consistency and accuracy have provided a level of trust that makes real-time storytellers from radio and television organizations the go-to sources for verification of news stories that may initially come from social media or digital sources. Despite the attacks on journalism and mainstream media, the fact-checkers are still a vital part of getting the story right.

Politicians as Reporters

Once merely the subjects of news coverage, politicians are now re-shaping the distribution model of news by acting as messengers themselves. They use social media to tell their stories directly to the public and avoid the potential filtering of their messages by the press. As a result, politicians have become reporters of their own actions and opinions, and are often able to get their stories into the public domain before news organizations can.

Politicians also perpetuate the idea that only the first mention of a subject can represent the 'bombshell' truth, and this can leave journalists defending themselves against claims of misinformation and bias against certain candidates. In actuality, these candidates oftentimes either want to smear a news story with their version of the facts (alternative facts) or spread false and negative statements about a reporter or news organization who presents the "other side of the story". The public is then left to decide if what they hear directly from the politician is accurate, or if the filtered and reviewed version from news organizations is more accurate and less biased.

In the contemporary environment, the court of public opinion has to contend with mixed messages from both traditional outlets and social media, where supporters and self-proclaimed subject matter experts force friends, family and even co-workers to choose sides. This has undeniably affected what people consider to be socially acceptable behaviour. Previous generations used to regard religion, politics and personal beliefs as subjects to avoid discussing in polite company. Now, anyone with a web browser or smartphone can act as a pundit and post their opinions on social media for the world to see.

The frenzy that social media can create has, in turn, fueled a more engaged and invested voter base than in the past, and voters have more passion for the candidate who has earned their support. In some societies, elections are considered a civic duty to help shape the government, while in others they may be perfunctory and have little effect on the outcome. Regardless, the reporting of election results is a story that all voters await. They hope to revel in the victory of their point of view, entrusted to their chosen candidate.

Telling The Real-time Election Story

Television still holds the high honor of being the medium which reports election results in closest to real-time. While the votes are being counted, partial numbers may be shared and analysed by on-air experts until verified final results are reported and winners are declared.

Whether the election cycle in question includes multiple concurrent races across a nation or just one local contest, the votes that get reported after the polls close are just numbers. To the uninitiated, the running total numbers that are periodically updated on election night telecasts can generate false hope or despair. As numbers without context, the results are usually not compelling television. This drives the requirement for expert analysis and visualization of the data to continue to attract the viewing audience.

REPORTING ELECTIONS RESULTS

Tote boards that show accumulated vote totals per candidate as they are reported are a minimum baseline of election reporting. To help set viewer expectations, the news department can provide explanations of current vote totals and predictions on how the pattern of pending votes per candidate might change as the count continues. Tools that provide analysis of the data by experts in the field can also be used to help shape an understanding among viewers of the potential outcomes that could arise as more votes are counted and verified.

Visualization of the voting patterns, including geographic and cultural influences that may not be apparent in early totals, help analysts create educated viewers, retain them throughout the election reporting, and entice them to return for the next election cycle. Improved clarity in the visualization and more relatable information both support the analysts and help the viewers at home develop their interpretative skills. The goal is to get the results out quickly and accurately while also shaping more informed members of the voting public.

Where Do Results Come From?

Not every news organization is staffed well enough to place personnel at each polling site. As the votes are counted and verified, totals may be shared by government officials with reporting organizations in various forms. Some totals are shared as verbal or printed updates at scheduled intervals. Some municipalities distribute totals electronically as final results or periodic updates, and these totals can be distributed for general public consumption or to a few select individuals with proper credentials.

The industry is made up of trusted third-party organizations that vow to remain impartial and are staffed to gather and share the election data equally as it is made available. These reporting agencies cover as many election races as possible and distribute the results via commonly shared newswire services to all their subscribers at the same time.

Not all third-party agencies are harvesting the results of all races – they may choose to only focus on national and top-level regional races. This leaves many smaller state or regional/provincial elections for local broadcasters to report. Other agencies choose to staff elections as requested by their subscribers (various local news organizations) for a fee to provide more election results from a wider number of locations. Those subscribers attempt to provide more localized coverage than their competition in the market and may find that agency reporting gives them an edge on election night.

Getting Results To Viewers

Election results on television have evolved from white letters on black backgrounds or art cards to dynamic electronic titles on character generators. In the past, artists worked hard to keep the information updated as quickly as possible. Often, title cards were created and re-created several times, but not quickly enough to keep up with changing vote totals pouring in over the phones.



Images courtesy of NBC .



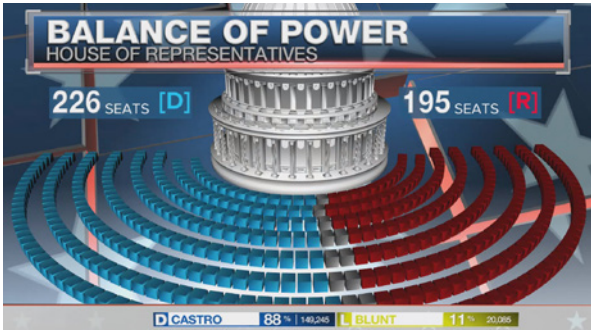
Images courtesy of BBC.

As the pace of election results increased, the ability to do more than simply report vote totals became increasingly important. The need to analyze data for broadcasters meant that political researchers, political insiders, retired campaign managers and politicians all became personalities. They shared their insights into the trends of the results and helped news crews make better predictions regarding the projected outcomes of races that were far from decided. Communicating these trends allowed viewers to better understand them, which in turn helped them learn how to predict races in their own areas as well.

Visualizing Results Data

As technology improved and allowed the integration of data feeds into broadcast graphics systems, election results moved into the form of constant data streams known as tickers, which crawl across the bottom of the screen. Graphics that merged candidate photos, party colors and animated text began to populate full-screen graphics in the 1990s. Geographic representations of political demographics also became more prevalent and accessible to regional and local broadcasters.

At first, national and state or provincial distinctions were presented in on-screen maps. Eventually, dynamic displays of geographic regions down to municipal levels began to appear in local election coverage. Interactive maps became widely used, and they could not only zoom into voting regions but could also change the screen content from national or state maps to displays of local candidates and the vote results in their respective locations. Computer-generated graphics eventually allowed those graphical representations to show the political representation of governing bodies as well. Displaying the number of chairs in a house or parliamentary setting for each political party helped to visualize the makeup of the governing body.





Currently, three-dimensional images of election results are presented as augmented or virtual graphics, and this allows the on-set talent to interact with them to tell the story of election night. Whereas the news personalities are currently the storytellers, the usage of 3D elements rising from a virtual floor to visualize election results allows the story to begin to tell itself to viewers.

Web technology and smartphones are also leveraging the powerful growth in visual media capability. News outlets must now merge the data they once subscribed to for on-air presentation into their web and mobile platforms.

The release of information must not only be accurate but also in sync across all outlets and channels.

This is where traditional media companies are now competing with new media firms and social media feeds.

They are fighting for viewers and trying to maintain their reputation for being the go-to source of verified information, even on the newer digital platforms.

Current Trends

Today's broadcasters need to centralize their election night tools and bring members of every group in the news production department together to collaborate in one location. This includes writers, producers, reporters, analysts, designers, technicians, web and mobile crews and even cable news outlets. This cross-departmental collaboration is imperative when working to create a unified presentation of elections results.

Data provided by third-party agencies, government sources and even internal resources attending election events must still be reviewed, analyzed and approved before distribution. The gatekeepers of the editorial workflow still need to be part of the process, but the pressure is on them to be able to make difficult decisions in seconds or risk being beaten to the punch in their news and elections coverage. Not being first, fast and accurate can have an impact on their ratings, which can be the difference between financial success or failure.

Conclusion

While the political news climate is currently experiencing a period of growth and change, the core goal of the news department is the same that it has always been – get the story to the viewer quickly while ensuring the facts are verified. Regardless of whether viewers are consuming content via traditional broadcast methods, on the web or through a mobile app, it's more important than ever to attract and maintain audience attention and get them the results that matter.

Speed and accuracy are key factors for building a reputation as a trusted source, but news departments should also look to find new ways to convey the information that viewers want to see. Technology has improved many times over since news broadcasts began using graphics to report election results decades ago, and current capabilities now make it possible to generate striking, attention-grabbing imagery to visualize data in new and compelling ways.

By embracing rigorous fact-checking, cutting-edge graphics technology and collaborative workflows, news departments can ensure their election night telecasts deliver accurate results while keeping viewers informed and engaged.

