

## THE CASE FOR CAUTION

### THIS SYSTEM IS DANGEROUSLY FLAWED

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#### Introduction

On any election day, interested citizens want to know one thing—who won. News organizations are in the business of getting accurate results to their audience as quickly as possible, but counting actual votes takes hours, and sometimes days.

Beginning in the early 1960s, news organizations developed ways of projecting the outcome of races in order to speed the process of reporting before votes were actually counted. They began to develop methods and systems of modeling and polling that could indicate, statistically, the likely winner in any given race. The motive was to give the audience what it wanted—the faster, the better. Of course, the news media intended to make their projections as accurate as possible.

In time, polling and analysis became increasingly sophisticated. Results from preelection samples, along with extrapolations from precinct models, exit polls, and partial election returns, were combined into what I will refer to as the networks' election-day polling and projection system. This system provided the basis for making election projections faster and better, meaning with fewer mistakes. Year after year, the systems were improved, spurred on by competition among the news organizations to be the first to report outcomes to their audiences. Not incidentally, the highly competitive polling and projection business grew increasingly costly.

In 1990, the first network pool for exit polling and projections, Voter Research and Surveys (VRS), was formed with the intention to meet the increasing costs and share expenses. Cost sharing made it possible for the networks to provide the greatest sweep of polling. Without the pool, the networks would have had to restrict their reach and coverage because of budget limitations. Of course, in journalistic terms, pooling meant the information would be less reliable. While the networks could, by combining resources, undertake larger polling operations and more sophisticated modeling that could reduce the risk of certain types of error, the vulnerability of the networks to

any errors that did result was increased. When data are wrong, with only one source of information, there is no opportunity for correction. Nevertheless, financial considerations trumped reliability—and the best practices of journalism.

By election day 2000, after several permutations, a comprehensive polling and projection system was in place backed by a consortium of five television networks and the Associated Press. Its purpose was to collect and disseminate polling data and voting information by which news organizations could make their independent calls, maintaining an element of competition among them. In thinking about this system in its entirety, we must consider not only the Voter News Service (VNS), the reconstituted consortium operation, but also the analysis and reporting operations of the separate networks as well.

qt The system was economical, and it was fast. But was it accurate? The answer: not as accurate or as reliable as it was intended, promised, or needed to be, especially when it came to calling a very close race. We learned that answer on election night 2000. At the core of the reporting problem were two mistaken projections in one state, Florida, which turned out to be key to the outcome of the national election. The television networks and other news outlets twice projected the winner and twice recalled those projections. News executives, particularly television news executives, as well as editors, correspondents, and producers themselves described election-night coverage as a “debacle,” a “disaster,” and a “fiasco.”<sup>1</sup>

Something had gone wrong—terribly wrong—in the polling and projection system. It is not the purpose of this article to ferret out the exact sources of the errors on that night. The experiences of election night 2000 do, however, serve as a useful lens through which to examine the overall efficacy of the system that was in place. It is my contention that this system is too fraught with the potential for error for news organizations to rely on its projections in the way that they have in the recent past.

## Background

Several reports and reviews were commissioned by the networks to examine the performance of television news on election night 2000. (For further information, see the article by Frankovic in this symposium, and the full network reports in the appendix in the electronic version of the journal.) CNN asked three journalists, Ben Wattenberg, Jim Risser, and me, to constitute an independent panel to investigate its performance on election night to determine the following: What went wrong? Why did it happen? What should be done

1. We should note, also, that Florida was not the only state in the 2000 election in which projections were made based on exit polls and models that later were retracted. Mistaken calls were made in New Mexico and Washington State, and not until more reliable and complete information became available, were the actual outcomes in those states known.

to guard against a recurrence in future elections (Konner, Risser, and Wattenberg 2001)?

In our report to CNN, we said that among the most obvious failings were an emphasis on speed over accuracy in reporting; excessive competition and the pressure to come in first; outdated technology; human error; a flawed polling and projection system; and, finally, overconfidence in the system and in the polls themselves. We stated, "On election day 2000, television news organizations staged a collective drag race on the crowded highway of democracy, recklessly endangering the electoral process, the political life of the country and their own credibility, all for reasons that may be conceptually flawed and commercially questionable." (The full text of our report is included in the electronic version of the journal as an appendix to this symposium.)

The failure of the news media and all that followed from it may be unforgivable, but it was not unforeseeable. Although election polling and projection techniques have grown increasingly sophisticated and reliable over the more than 30 years during which the systems have been evolving, their potential for error has not been eliminated. Estimates made from models and samples are always subject to a margin of error and built-in distortions, factors taken into account by the professionals. However, in addition to factors that are subject to calculable margins of error, various nonsampling factors, the effects of which are more difficult to gauge, have surfaced over time, for example, increasing numbers of early and absentee voters, increasing non-response in exit polls, and misreporting of vote returns. These nonsampling factors can distort the results. More than one factor can act simultaneously, and the errors can be reinforcing in specific instances. In very close races, the variables can lead to significant and costly error. In the case of election 2000, they did.

Before election 2000, the system had performed remarkably well. Mistakes were made in the past, but they were few in number and never as damaging as they would be in election 2000. Now we have the experience that, at least in very close races like the Bush-Gore one, the system has proven itself to be much less reliable than the public has been led to believe, and perhaps less reliable than even the professionals had thought.

Much of what follows is developed from material and information gathered for "Television's Performance on Election Night 2000: A Report for CNN" (Konner, Risser, and Wattenberg 2001). I periodically quote from interviews conducted in connection with the preparation of that report. The reader should note that I undertake this review as a journalist, not an expert on polling or statistical methods. I shall attempt to lay out the case for caution, based on what we learned in preparing our report.

## The System and How It Works

Voter News Service (VNS), the pooled exit polling, vote tabulation, and outcome projection service in place for election day 2000, was formed in 1993 through a merger of two predecessor organizations. The membership was later expanded and the organization was modified in its structure. For this election, VNS was funded and operated by a consortium of five television networks (ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox News, and NBC) and the Associated Press, and in 2000 it operated under a single head. It gathered preelection data, conducted exit polls, collected actual vote results, and projected winners. Many print and broadcast outlets subscribed to the service. All relied on VNS data on election night. The budget of VNS was \$35 million, \$33 million of it from the networks and the AP, and the rest from subscribers.

92 Voter News Service engaged in several data collection operations: exit polls in sample precincts, and vote tabulations from a larger sample, including tabulations from a selected group that reported early. It also obtained actual tabulated vote totals from a larger group of sample precincts and vote tabulations from every county. In addition, VNS did its own analysis of the data and made predictions.

The data collected by VNS were processed through a series of calculations and decision models. Decision models were designed on the basis of pre-election research, polling, and analysis, including data on voter characteristics in selected counties and sample precincts and analysis of voting patterns in prior races. This pre-election research provided key elements of the decision models by which the election-day data were to be evaluated.

All the information was processed through various computer models and transmitted to members and subscribers for all House, Senate, and gubernatorial races, as well as the state-by-state vote for President. Projections were made from a number of sample precincts, which were intended to mirror the wider population. A subset of this sample of precincts is selected for exit polling. In Florida, 120 precincts out of 5,885 were designated sample precincts, for which quick reporting of results to VNS was prearranged. Exit polling was conducted in 45 of these precincts. In these precincts, voters were sampled systematically, with sample sizes set to keep sampling error within tolerable limits. Selected voters indicated who they thought they had just voted for by filling out questionnaires that also included questions about issues and key demographics. The results from the exit poll precincts were used to call races before tabulated actual results were in hand if the decision models determined that a candidate had a sufficient lead in the exit poll. In very close races, a call must wait until the tabulation of a significant number of actual votes from sample precincts. When there were consistent indications of a clear lead for a candidate, VNS made the call for the estimated winner.

Voter News Service was only one part of the system of decision making on election night. Its call is not the call that reaches viewers and voters. The

networks and news organizations also had their own decision desks to analyze and interpret the VNS data; CNN and CBS collaborated with a shared decision desk. The decision desks were charged with making projections, independent of other news organizations, based on the data and information received. They would then make their recommendations to the news executives in charge, who would authorize the information that was given to the public. The news decision desks varied from VNS calls and projections several times during the coverage that evening. At times VNS led the networks; at other times VNS followed or, as it turned out in the network call for Bush, VNS did not make the call at all.

Thus, it is the individuals at the decision desks in each of the news organizations who are responsible for making the calls that are announced to the public as "projected winners." Those on the decision desk are experienced analysts of the kind of data that reaches them from VNS. They look at the constantly changing, multiple screens of data provided to them via VNS computer hookups, and they interpret these data. They then make their recommendations to the responsible news personnel, and the news executives make, or authorize, the call. They do so in a context where minutes count and competitive pressures are prominent. As stated in CBS's postelection report, "the Election Night broadcast occurs in a cauldron of competitive heat" with each individual and each network burning to be the best and the first.

There were other sources of data and information available as well. The AP had its own data collection system, not as comprehensive as VNS's, but available to all AP subscribers, including the networks. The AP's vote-counting system was not tied into the VNS system. Official state, county, and local vote tabulations were also available, albeit on a slower timetable. But as emerged in the several postmortems, in the race to be first, despite many warning flags concerning the VNS data throughout the evening, the backup sources were ignored.

Unlike the networks, the AP, relying on its own independent reporting, held back from making the second, mistaken, call (for Bush). In fact, VNS, acutely aware of errors in its system earlier in the evening, also held back on projecting Bush the winner. Even without projections from VNS and the AP, all the networks plunged ahead on that call without checking any of their other possible sources.

In short, the news organizations relied on a single source of information and lacked, or did not make use of, the checks and balances required for reliable reporting. The pooling concept itself explains, at least in part, why election 2000 was "an accident waiting to happen." With the broad outlines of the system described, let us review some of the areas in which uncertainties, approximations, random variations, omissions, and just plain mistakes can lead to wrong results.

## Exit Polls

Exit polls are the means of gathering data from voters after they vote, as they leave the polling center. The exit polls are conducted throughout the day in a selected sample of precincts throughout a state. A person from the local community, trained in advance, usually distributes the questionnaires in the exit poll. The interviewer asks selected voters to fill out a questionnaire—sometimes a short questionnaire, sometimes a longer one.

Three times during election day, the interviewer tabulates the votes from those questionnaires and calls in the information to VNS. The interviewer also reports information about the total number of voters and the response rate to the exit poll. The exit poll responses are entered into an exit poll database. In precincts where the actual vote counts are available early, they are used as a check on the accuracy of the exit poll results. In many elections, exit polls alone do not provide the information necessary to call a race. In some cases, the sample is too small, and actual vote counts are collected in the particular exit-poll precinct in order to make the projection.

In one of our interviews with Warren Mitofsky, he referred to exit polls as “blunt instruments,” meaning that many factors come into play that can distort the findings. Among the variables that may affect accuracy are the quality of the questionnaire; the training and quality of the field personnel; the responsiveness of the voter and, therefore, the degree of nonresponse; the location of the interviewer in relation to the polling location; and the truthfulness of the responses. Some voters deliberately falsify information. One known distortion in exit polls is that they tend to overrepresent Democrats, a distortion that is taken into account in the calculations. Nonresponse is a growing problem in exit polling. Added to these difficulties, different locations have different rules governing where the pollsters may stand. Many polling locations have problems with several exits and varying restrictions and guidelines for the pollsters. Some locations require that pollsters stand at least 50 feet away from the polling location. These local variables could play a role in just how accurate an exit poll can be. For these reasons and others, exit poll data do not always reflect the final margin. There is always sampling error, from the sample of precincts drawn and from the sample of voters drawn within each precinct. Bill Schneider, CNN’s on-air political analyst, opined in an interview conducted for the CNN report that taking exit poll information from one source is “inherently risky.”

In Florida, many of these factors came into play and were at the root of faulty results from the exit polls. Nonresponse was a problem, with unknown consequences for nonresponse bias. In some cases the interviewer did not select the right voters. Some interviewers were positioned poorly. In one location, the interviewer was not able to intercept a single voter. There were situations in which one candidate’s voters seemed more willing than the other to complete exit poll questionnaires. In a postelection memo, Warren Mitofsky,

the head of the joint CBS/CNN decision desk and widely recognized as the man who built the polling and projection system, reported that at the time the early call for Gore was made, the exit poll in Tampa was off by 16 percent due to an overstatement of the vote for Gore. (This same figure was reported in the postelection review from Murray Edelman, the editorial director of VNS.) The actual vote from Tampa was not yet available at the time, so the faulty exit poll formed part of the basis of the mistaken call for Gore. In Miami, too, the exit poll was also significantly off in favor of Gore. (Ironically, at 7:45, just before the mistaken call for Gore was made, according to the CNN decision team, with 4 percent of the vote counted, Bush, not Gore, was in the lead by 6 percent.) According to Mitofsky, other precincts were off as well because of overstatement for Gore. Edelman wrote, "The reality is there is some risk in making calls from models" (Voter News Service 2000).

In Florida, those who did participate, that is, the people who did report how they had voted, assumed that their votes were being counted. That was not necessarily the case. Many votes were not counted. Also, many people voted incorrectly on what turned out to be a very confusing ballot. The hanging chads, the not-fully-perforated chads, and the butterfly ballot became famous icons of voter confusion and disenfranchisement in the aftermath of the Florida vote. The failure to record some intended votes may have further distorted the exit poll findings.

In a postelection review, it was also noted that VNS was able to staff only 84 percent of the sample precincts nationwide (meaning that 16 percent of the precincts were not covered). The VNS report (2001) stated that exit poll data were received from all but one precinct. As the RTI report (Biemer et al. 2001) states, "This was important because vote tabulations feed into the projection models." Moreover, there were some issues of quality control of the data collection activities, both in the training and supervision of the workers. Adequate staff goes to the very foundation of the usefulness of polls.

In sum, the VNS exit polls in Florida were judged to be inaccurate, with implications for exit polling generally. One can assume that many of the same distortions and errors occurred elsewhere, but the races were not so close as to make these variations critical in the projections. We should note that there were problems in other states as well. In Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina, exit polls reported a closer race than what proved to be the eventual outcome. Part of the problem was identified to be a result of too small a sample of exit poll precincts.

A postelection memo from Mitofsky and Joe Lenski, Mitofsky's associate and partner on the decision desk, stated that on election day 2000 VNS's exit poll overstated the Gore vote in 22 states and overstated the Bush vote in nine states. In only 10 states, the exit polls matched actual results. The VNS postelection report says its exit poll estimates showed the wrong winner in eight states. The faulty exit polls actually resulted in three wrong calls (Konner, Risser, and Wattenberg 2001, app. 4). The CNN report concluded that exit

polls are useful for analyzing voting patterns after an election. They are not reliable in projecting outcomes of elections. The latter task requires a degree of precision that exit polls cannot reliably deliver when a race is close.

### **Modeling and the Precinct Sample**

The exit polls tell directly what happened in a small number of sampled precincts. It is only by plugging these results into a larger projection model that VNS analysts are able to estimate the percentage of votes that each candidate will get statewide. Statistical models are complex. The choice of who and what to model is very important, and there is no escaping the fact that the projected result is driven by information drawn from a small portion of the votes that will be cast.

All those responsible for election-night projections admit that no one expects models to be entirely accurate. They acknowledge that any estimate is an estimate only, and they operate on the assumption that there is a one-in-200 risk of error across all races. These odds are based essentially on considerations of sampling error, and do not fully take into account nonsampling sources of error. It is probably not well known or well advertised to the general public that any statistical model can be inaccurate and that the possibility of error increases in close elections.

The models for covering this election were built based on the selection of a sample of precincts and polling within some of those precincts. (Later on election night, actual vote tabulations are used along with those for which only exit poll results are known.) The sampled precincts are intended to mirror, statistically, the general population of the state. There is a potential for error in selecting sample precincts, as well as a potential for errors in the sampling of voters. Many dynamic factors in sampling and polling make models less stable than they may appear; among them are changes within key precincts, absentee and early voting, and the quality of the exit poll results that constitute the key input for the model. We have reviewed above some of the factors affecting exit poll results.

There was another problem on this election night. The projection of results from the sample precincts onto the entire state was accomplished by comparing the election-night results with vote returns from the past. Only one past race was used in this estimation procedure. Results can be skewed due to the choice of a particular prior race for comparison. In Florida, the algorithm in use by VNS selected the 1998 gubernatorial election as the past race that would provide the best possible basis for projection on election night. It turned out to be the wrong race to use. In hindsight, it was determined that either the 1996 presidential election or the 1998 Senate race would have provided a more useful comparison. In a close race, every little modeling assumption counts, and so it did in this one.

Murray Edelman's postelection report on VNS performance (quoted in Konner, Risser, and Wattenberg 2001) noted that prior to this election, models have been used to call approximately 2000 election races, and only six errors had occurred. That may have been a reason for confidence, but it should not have been for overconfidence. There is always a risk in making calls from these models, as the professionals themselves acknowledged. Small early precinct samples were a leading cause of the erroneous call for Gore early in the evening; if more precincts had been included in the exit poll, the results of the projection at that early stage may have been closer to the actual statewide result. (Later, the erroneous call for Bush revealed actual errors in the vote-tabulation process as well as deficiencies in the computer model's assumptions about the outstanding vote yet to be counted.)

The RTI review (Biemer et al. 2001) praised VNS's preelection research that went into creating the models. The research was described as "appropriate" and "well-designed" with "timely information" on voters, their preferences, their characteristics, their opinions, and more. If nothing else, what Florida provided was evidence that statistical sampling can go wrong. As one election consultant put it, "Sometimes good samples produce bad estimates." Statistical sampling went terribly wrong in Florida and—along with other difficulties—exacerbated the modeling problems.

### Response Rate

There is a downward trend, in general, in the willingness of people to respond to polls. This is a growing threat to the accuracy of election polling generally. The average response rate in the 2000 exit polls was 51 percent, a drop from 55 percent in 1996 and 60 percent in 1992. The pattern is sometimes referred to as "polling fatigue." Polling for commercial and political purposes is widely used—probably overused—and more and more people are refusing to participate. The result of a lower response rate is a correspondingly higher risk of nonresponse bias. This occurs when the votes of those who do not respond are substantially different from the votes of those who do choose to be part of the poll. That, added to traditional problems, such as individuals who cannot be contacted, can yield a sample that is either too small or skewed. A bias in sample estimates is not to be confused with deliberate bias. Many representatives in Congress believe that both the polling and the projections are deliberately or unconsciously biased to favor one candidate over another. We did not find any evidence to support that view. What we did find is that, in general, response rate to any survey or sample is a growing problem for the industry. While there is no clear evidence that nonresponse played any large role in the Florida debacle, the declining response rate leaves the system increasingly vulnerable to error. The lack of nonresponse bias in one poll or precinct does not guarantee that it will be absent in another.

## Precinct Changes

Since the projection models incorporate a direct comparison of current precinct results with those from a past election in the same precincts, it is crucial that each precinct represent the same set of potential voters as it did in the past race. The Florida sample precincts were selected from the 1996 presidential race. Between 1996 and 2000, some precinct boundaries and names were changed by election officials. These changes sometimes produce demographic or other shifts that can make models inaccurate or obsolete. While a shift in one sample precinct can be insignificant in a race where one candidate dominates significantly, in a very close race it can cause serious flaws in the calculations.

## Early and Absentee Voting

More and more people are voting before election day and voting by absentee ballot. In some states, early voting is permitted in specific locations. Oregon has adopted a system of voting by mail. The VNS projection model did not sufficiently take into account a surge in absentee ballots in Florida.

Phone surveys were conducted by VNS in three states in which the absentee vote was expected to be especially significant—California, Oregon, and Washington. The sampling in Florida did not take into account the full weight of Florida's absentee vote. Based on past races, VNS estimated that there would be a 7.5 percent absentee vote. In fact, 12 percent of the vote was cast by absentee ballot. Also, the absentee vote was projected to be 15.3 percent more Republican than the election-day vote. In the final tally, the absentee vote turned out to be 23.7 percent more Republican than the election-day vote.

Clearly, for any polling information to be accurate in projecting the outcome of an election, there has to be some means for accounting for this growing segment of voters. Pollsters say there are ways to do this, but it would cost significantly more. It is doubtful that this kind of polling will be adopted unless the expense issue can be overcome. The increasing numbers of absentee voters may turn out to be one of the biggest problems to overcome in polling for the purpose of projection.

## Other Issues

There were many other problems with the data in the Florida election. The most significant were attributable to technical and human error, a breakdown in communications, and voting irregularities. Election workers improperly entered votes into the computer. Precinct workers incorrectly copied or misread ballot tallies. Faulty tabulations were entered into the total vote. In Duval County, there was a significant key-punch error. There was an especially large

error from Volusia County that exaggerated Bush's lead. A memory card malfunctioned. This is not to mention the large number of ballot irregularities—voters being challenged, voter errors, and incomplete voting. Errors and computer problems were not communicated to the decision desks. At one point, late on election night, there was a serious miscalculation of the number of votes that remained to be counted. To be sure, some of these errors were made by local government workers rather than VNS staff. But when the errors are large enough and not detected soon enough, they affect the accuracy of the projected election result.

Follow-up studies also revealed that there were problems with outdated equipment, with the software, and with quality control. In sum, there was a serious underestimation of the true total error in the estimates. The true probability of calling the race wrong was far greater than the "one-in-200" estimate that VNS had set as its guideline in building its models. Beyond that, it is questionable whether even those optimistic odds are acceptable. And there is reason to wonder whether those odds are actually respected in the moment of highest heat in the "cauldron of competition."

### **The Rush to Be First**

In our report to CNN, we wrote that the networks indulged in "excessive speed" in making their election-night projections and calls. Predictably, those on the decision desk said that was not the case and that those who believe that the pressure to be first outweighs the pressure to be accurate are "cynics." This "we said/they said" controversy cries out for common sense. The brief amount of time separating the networks in making both the faulty Florida calls, as well as other calls throughout the evening, clearly points to what one news executive called an "arms race."

In our report to CNN, we concluded that these calls being so close to each other does not allow sufficient time for reasoned judgment and decision making. We largely discounted the decision team's insistence that time pressure was not a problem in calling Florida prematurely. Time pressures are the whole reason for the use of exit polls and other devices in calling the winners of states before the actual computation of complete returns is known. Tom Johnson, then chairman and CEO of the CNN News Group, backed this up. He said, "The competitive drive to be first played a powerful role. It's more important to be right, but in the pressure of the election, there is a raw competitive race to be first, like athletes on the playing field." Or as another decision maker said, "There is at least the fear of being left behind."

Anyone who has worked in a newsroom, or been in a television news control room, especially on an election night, as I have, knows that Johnson's characterization is accurate. News does not operate in a time vacuum. Deadlines are and always have been an imperative in the news business, in tandem

with the imperative to beat the competition. Today, with deadlines every second on television and on-line, the pressure is even greater. That does not mean there is not equal, maybe greater, pressure to be accurate, but the rush to judgment in news reporting has accelerated, with a growing number of inaccuracies and mistakes to document it. Even the most respected mainstream news organizations have thrown principle to the wind to get the story, get it first, or, at the least, not be too far behind the competition.

Television critics also play a role in increasing the pressure of time on the news networks. The critics may analyze content in their weekly columns or on their weekly media review programs, but in their daily news coverage, they rank the networks like racehorses. As one CNN executive put it, "If we don't come in first, the critics would say 'CNN was weak,' when we would say 'We were responsible.'"

News reporting may be regarded by some as a competitive sport. But to the citizens, to the country, to democracy itself, and, one would hope, to journalists, reporting is not a game. Reporting election results is as important as journalism gets—especially in a presidential election. This is our democratic life. Presidential elections, and other elections as well, determine the locus of power. On election night we witness the orderly transfer of power in the world's greatest democracy. As Dan Rather, CBS News anchor, said on election night 2000, "This is as close as we come to a kind of sacred time in this country."

## Conclusion

Polling has become standard in reporting on elections. Findings generated by the polling industry make news every day. To challenge polls or the polling system is to challenge a religion of statistics. But polls are statistical calculations, not factual realities. They are imperfect measures of voter intent and actual voting, and their inaccuracies are especially perilous in close elections. While the record before election 2000, and even for election 2000, was, for the most part, a record of success, much of that success came from elections where the outcome was relatively clear-cut. Each of the postelection reports and the memoranda noted above cited problems and made recommendations. They dealt with many facets of the difficulties encountered in the Florida reporting. But many of the problems were directly related to the polling and projection system. Consequently, there is a growing awareness that there is a need for more cautious and considered use of election-day data derived from the exit polls.

The inquiry we conducted for CNN and the judgments and recommendations we made in our report were based on the ideals, the principles, and the best practices of journalism. Our evaluation of CNN's performance on election night 2000 was based on the following principles, stated in the report:

That the central purpose of a free press in a democratic society is to provide the public with information upon which the people can form intelligent decisions concerning important public matters on which they have the power to act;

That public affairs journalism is the pursuit of truth in the public interest, and its major values are accuracy, fairness, balance, responsibility, accountability, independence, integrity and timeliness.

We believe that all the journalists involved in election coverage at CNN subscribe to those principals. Nevertheless, we concluded that because of several factors, CNN, along with the other television networks, failed in their core mission: to inform the public accurately about the outcome of the election. We reported an impulse to speed over accuracy, and we attributed that impulse to the business imperatives of television news—to win the highest ratings, which is not a journalistic standard but a commercial standard. The ratings drive the price of commercials, and commercials determine the bottom-line profits of the corporations that own the news networks. There was substantial evidence in the postelection reports that the polling and projection system in place, and many of the problems that resulted, were budget driven, from outdated technology to underpaid workers. As stated by Bernard Shaw, one of the anchors of CNN's election-night coverage, "The network newsroom culture is that decisions are made and actions are taken in ways that are driven by ratings and profits."

We are living now in the commercial age of television. The bottom line controls the thinking, the decisions, and the actions of those at the top of the corporate ladder. There is no doubt that there is an equation between money and truth in news, and that more money is needed to improve the system. Again and again in the postmortems, budget issues emerged as a determining factor in decisions as an answer to many of the problems. The networks may argue that the operation is already too costly, but one can easily conclude from any of the networks' annual reports that they can well afford it.

Some journalists feel it is irresponsible to make any projection, and that all reporting should wait until actual votes are counted. Some argue that calling any race before all the polls have closed throughout the country depresses the number of voters. Studies on this issue have not offered any conclusive evidence. In our report, we concluded that polls have some value as preelection indicators and for postelection analysis. It is clear that there is a great deal of work to be done if the polling and projection system is to be fixed.

## Recommendations

Among the recommendations that were offered in the report to CNN were the following:

- Networks should emphasize accuracy over speed, and make this com-

mitment known.

- Voter News Service should be reexamined, fixed, or reinvented.<sup>2</sup>
- A second source of information should be available.
- Viewers should be better informed concerning the sources of information.
- Exit polls should be used for analysis purposes only.
- No call should be made until all the polls in that state are closed.
- Call states on the basis of actual counted returns.
- No call should be made until all available sources of information are checked.
- Cease the use of exit polling to project or call winners of states.

Finally, we recognized in the report that the practices recommended would noticeably slow election-night reporting. We wrote, "Given the problems noted, we do not regard this as a bad thing. To the contrary, we believe such an outcome would result in clear benefits to journalism and democracy."

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- Konner, Joan, James Risser, and Ben Wattenberg. 2001. "Television's Performance on Election Night 2000: A Report for CNN."
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2. The networks and the AP decided to discontinue the Voter News Service in January 2003. The consortium is planning a new polling joint venture to be backed up by other independent polling operations.