Covering Election Night: Uncertainty, Early Results, and Lessons from the Past

Kathleen Hall Jamieson

October 22, 2020
Lesson 1: Independent journalism has value. At 2:37 am, the AP reported in an urgent update that the race was still up for grabs. At 3:11 am, it dispatched an advisory saying that the outcome was still in doubt.

Lesson 2: Beware the presumption created by pre-election surveys. The networks assumed Bush was going to win, which led to the assumption that the presidency was his to lose.
Lesson 3: Projections were treated as if they were results. The networks’ overconfidence in their projections was unjustified by the science on which they were based. Dan Rather: “We’ve lived by the crystal ball and learned to eat so much broken glass tonight that we’re in critical condition.”

Lesson 4: Beware the illusion of convergent data. The networks created the illusion that each had its own polling operation, when instead they were relying on voter news service data with a few added questions unique to each network.
Lessons from the Russian #DemocracyRIP plan in 2016

Anticipate the possibility of:

- Breaches in electoral infrastructure
- Troll campaigns to delegitimize the election

- *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don’t, Can’t, and Do Know*
  2nd edition,
  Kathleen Hall Jamieson,
  Oxford University Press, 2020
Identifying troll campaigns to delegitimize the election

@heyits_toby · 8 Nov 2016

@hollandpatrickk · 8 Nov 2016

The FIX is in! #StopTheSteal #VoterFraud #RiggedElection
https://t.co/lJai08pg7u #TrumpForPresident

United States / English

+ more details

The Troll Intervention
Identifying sleeper personae that may be able to infiltrate mainstream news

A Troll tweet about rigging infiltrated the mainstream news

where some voters said they tried to vote the Republican ticket only to see the Democratic boxes checked on their touchscreen – caught the attention of Donald Trump.

“There are reports that when people vote for Republicans, the entire ticket switches over to Democrats. You’ve seen that. It’s happening at various places today," Trump said.

“Pennsylvania Voters Report a Few Cases of Vote Flipping”

NBCNews.com, November 8, 2016
Difference between 2000 and 2016/2020

Annenberg Survey, Nov. 2000: “As you may know, early in the evening, on Election Day, the media declared Al Gore the winner in Florida. Later in the night, the media reported that George W. Bush won Florida. Finally, the media said the race was too close to call. In your opinion, what best explains why the news media made mistakes in reporting the Florida results?”

- **Carelessness**, or reporting the results before knowing who won – 56.1%
- It was an **honest mistake** because the race was too close to call – 21.4%
- Reporters **wanted Al Gore** to win – 12.4%
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Election Resources

News: APNews.com

Race Calls: @AP_Politics on Twitter

Fact Checks: apnews.com/hub/ap-fact-check

Fact Checks: https://www.politifact.com/