

## **Election Night 2006: An Evening in the Life of the American Media**

For the blogosphere, a fairly smooth election night made things something of a disappointment. For top newspaper Web sites, finding the balance between speed and offering a rich narrative still has to be reconciled. For television, slow results and a lack of prepared material tilted coverage toward chatter, especially for the cable networks.

Perhaps the destinations best suited to Election Night 2006 were the Web sites of TV news operations, plus one aggregator. They offered a combination of quick access to results plus the ability of users—largely through access to exit poll data or Associated Press material—to plumb a wealth of statistical information on their own.

These conclusions—plus five lessons about the media—are among the findings of a widespread review of media outlets on Election Night 2006.

If the mid-term election of 2006 marked a transition in American political life—the loss by the Republicans of both the House and the Senate—the campaign also marked a transition in the rapidly changing landscape of the news media covering it.

For the first time in a quarter century, new anchors hosted the coverage on all three broadcast networks. The three cable news channels, while still trailing in Election Night viewers, now dominate the evening in their dedication of time and resources. The number and categories of Web sites covering the evening has exploded. The traditional news media have now generally come to recognize the Web as the platform of the future, and election night as a moment when old media like newspapers can compete.

And after emerging in 2004, the blogosphere represented a cohort of the media spectrum this year significant enough that one of the cable channels gathered up a group of bloggers to put on TV—a plan that would prove vulnerable to technical failure.

If a citizen were to plan to figure out how to penetrate the election, where should he or she go for what kind of information? Do some media sectors excel at certain things but not others? What relationship do older media, such as broadcast or cable, have with their sibling Internet sites?

To find answers, The Project for Excellence in Journalism assembled a team to survey the performance of 32 different news outlets—18 Web sites, 6 stand-alone blogs, four broadcast networks, three cable channels, and NPR, from 2 p.m. through 11 p.m. and beyond if it took that long to call the House.

The study, descriptive or “qualitative” in nature, tracked the character of the reporting or blog posts, including the frequency of updating, the type of sourcing, and the topics covered.

From that review, five lessons emerge:

1. The two most valuable things the news media offers on these fast-moving election nights now is a quick summary of key results for those wanting the headlines and deep veins of data that users can mine on their own. That may explain why TV Web sites fared well.
2. In contrast, rich narrative story telling and snap punditry, the long suit of the morning newspaper and the TV telecast, may be less valuable—at least as the numbers are rolling in on the first night.
3. Most news organizations are still finding their way in this new multi-media environment. Often they are trying to do too many things and lack the resources and flexibility to adjust to the speed of the news. They need to make clearer choices.
4. The Exit Poll may be more important today, not less, since users are probing that information directly, functioning as their own editors--going state by state, looking for demographic information, late deciders, and more. This is not just the purview of experts and academicians anymore.
5. When the system works—voting occurs without widespread problems and the media establishment isn't faltering—citizen sentinels, bloggers, and other observers, while potentially important watchdogs, have a more restricted role.

There are also clear distinctions medium by medium.

**The Aggregator Sites:** Aggregators such as Google and Yahoo!, might seem ideal destinations for such evenings, as they can assemble a good deal of information quickly. But some sites are grappling with this opportunity far better than others in getting beyond the grab bag nature of aggregation. The recipe for success may involve something not everyone is offering—a combination of human editors and the judgment to leave things out. This night, that probably described Yahoo! most of all.

**The Blogosphere:** Despite the intrigue they brought to the problems and media mishaps of the 2004 election, bloggers were caught somewhat empty handed by the relatively error-free election of 2006. Some, such as Wonkette, got downright cranky that no one was leaking examples of fraud and abuse. Others just got nasty about who was winning and losing. The blogs, in the end leaned toward opinion this night than information.

**Newspaper Web sites:** Newspapers online appear to be a medium in transition. They are still struggling with the possibilities and risks of real-time news, something television has more experience with. The ones that did better at getting the news out quickly, especially the Washington Post, relied on the Associated Press and others for much real time news to the Associated Press or others, for much of their real-time news, using their own

brand-name reporters for features like live discussions with users or working on stories that would appear the next day or beyond.

**The On Air Networks:** The three broadcast networks, ABC, CBS and NBC, have so reduced their hours and trimmed their ranks, that their anchors play an ironically bigger role in their abbreviated programs. This accentuated the scarcity of experienced reporters who know politics from the ground, where it is really practiced.

**The Cable Channels:** Despite the time they have to fill, the three main cable news channels continue to organize themselves largely to produce live programs dependent on fast moving events. Their programs this night represented the place to go on television for up-to-the-minute news—and they seemed more reserved than in the past—but their reliance on being live, and their seeming resistance to offering reported, edited background pieces left them leaning heavily on panels of familiar celebrity spin doctors to fill the time between election calls.

**The Television Web sites,** in contrast, may have offered the best combination. While they varied in design and ease of use, the sites set up by some TV news operations represented some of the strongest destinations of the night, coupling speed, organization and depth. It may be that they have finally found a platform through which they can deliver the heavy volume of information they had always collected but had never felt they could offer viewers on television. Consider the fact that the Drudge Report by evening's end mostly offered readers links to several TV sites.

The election of 2006 was ultimately a good story for the news media, at least on two fronts. The news business escaped without major disaster, be it a breakdown of the exit polls, leaks of partial data, or false projections on the air that had to be recalled. That alone distinguished this from the three previous election cycles.

The election of 2006 was also an exciting story, just as 2000 and 2004 were, this time with a plot line about a shift in power in the House and Senate. Sometimes politics really is a horse race, one driven by policy and a clear message from voters about things like corruption. When elections send coherent messages, it tends to make for better journalism.

Yet there is also a sense in monitoring the media this night that the news industry is still finding its footing as it begins to wander uneasily into the era of the Internet. So is the citizen media that now accompanies it. Some of the newer media categories are vulnerable because they lack staffing. At the same time, the older traditional major news organizations now have so many different roles they can play, and audiences to play to, they have not sorted out their election night franchises.

### **The Aggregators**

With events moving quickly, aggregator sites such as Google, in theory, might seem a perfect place to get a handle on everything that is happening. After all, they can provide

users with material from any number of sources and are less burdened with trying to promote their own branded material, which might in the end not be as good as what is available from others.

Aren't the aggregators a perfect way to navigate the richness of the Web, to help people find the good stuff? Aggregators, in effect, could be the online equivalent of the ultimate TV clicker, letting people know the latest, faster and from a greater variety of places and in a manner easier to digest than trying to flip around the TV dial.

We monitored the three most popular aggregator sites, Google News, Yahoo News and AOL news. From 2 p.m. to 11 p.m. we monitored (or refreshed) the sites every 20 minutes

Their success varied widely this night depending on which site one visited. Yahoo! was pre-arranged for the election in a manner that capitalized on the power of aggregation. Google made no accommodation at all to the special event, leaving it to their computers to edit, which proved less satisfying when something more discriminating was needed. And AOL prepared in such a way that was hard to follow. Depending on where one landed, the aggregators could provide a fairly disjointed and even contradictory account of the campaign's culmination.

In the end, it was Yahoo!'s combination of computer algorithms, human editors and a simplified, easier-to-navigate approach that seemed to succeed most. A key, in other words, was making choices and leaving things out.

### *Google News*

Google News on election night was the same as Google News always is—an algorithm of the top news stories based on which ones are linked to most at any given moment. There was no special place to go just for election news. (“United States” was as close as one could get). Still, from 2 p.m., when we began our monitoring, the top story link almost always happened to be about the election, with several other related links underneath.

What kind of election stories did the computer search deliver? The flow was drawn from an extremely wide array of outlets, more perhaps than any other source. The flow, moreover, was constantly updated.

But tracking what was actually new became fairly disjointed. The articles pulled were from new sources, but were often about the same thing and gave citizens little sense of flow, or timing, about what was happening at the moment. Google News was aggregating press narratives, not information, which on this occasion may not have been optimal.

From 2 p.m. until as late as 7:30 p.m., the headlines were dominated by stories about scattered incidents of election fraud, problems at the polls and early forecasts—a good two hours after some other sites were already delivering exit poll results. “Early Voters Get First Tryout of New Voting Machines,” *Hurricane Valley Journal* (7:46); “Voting

Irregularities, Dirty Tricks, Mechanical Problems Stymie Voter,” MTA (7:45); “Rothenberg: Dems to Win 30-36 House Seats; GOP Insiders Panicked,” TPMCafe (7:39).

And if one wanted background on the races or a quick education in what to look for, it would have required reading through until one happened upon just the right story.

It was not until 8:05 that users got any headlines related to exit polls, and the source was not from an American source but The Australian, Australia’s national daily newspaper and Web site (“Early exit polls show Democrats in lead,”).

The first two election calls (Indiana and West Virginia Senate seats, no surprise) came in shortly thereafter in the form of an AP story in the Prescott Herald, a wire-based Web site that calls itself “the voice of rural North Arizona.” A visitor to Google News would not see another race called until 8:45.

In addition to lagging behind other sites, stories were also sometimes contradictory. In the same line-up users saw: “U.S. voters head to polls despite glitches,” Xinhau (8:48 p.m.) and “Electronic Voting Machines Confound Some Poll Workers, Prime Extended Voting Hours,” (International Herald Tribune, AP) was followed moments later by “No Widespread Election Problems Seen,” (NPR, 8:51). The user has to be their own gatekeeper editor here, deciding for themselves whom to believe, and whom to consider less credible. In this context, with events moving quickly, that is probably a tall order.

How did Google fare when it came to the call of the night—the Democratic capture of the House called on network news around 11 P.M.? Google’s report came from Boston’s ABC affiliate, WCVB-TV, at 11:05, “Democrats New Control of House.”

### ***Yahoo News***

Unlike Google, Yahoo! News had a special Election page, [http://news.yahoo.com/fc/US/Midterm Elections 2006](http://news.yahoo.com/fc/US/Midterm_Elections_2006), which contained a wide range of content from various sources, was easy to navigate, clearly labeled, and inviting to probe more deeply. What people would find here, moreover, was a combination of stories, multi-media, interactive features, and even separate pages for more specific tracking of races or party news.

The main election page, for instance, led with AP stories, plus links to live streaming video from ABC News, a slideshow of pictures from Reuters, and a discussion board on posted articles. An interactive map made it easy to search information by state or candidate and to find specific information about them. There were also loads of other features such as “interactives” and even a poll locator tracking women voters.

The page also led to separate pages for all of the more specific issues such as Senate Races, House Races, Gubernatorial Races, U.S. Electoral Process, Democratic Party, Republican Party, and U.S. Congress. There was also was an option to personalize the page and sign up for RSS.

Though packed, the site struck our coders as surprisingly easy to navigate, helped by shading and highlighting. Each story was clearly labeled. If one wanted more specific information about a particular race, it was easy to search by state or race. The interactive features struck our testers as engaging and clearly one of the site's strong points.

The site was also current. Largely due to its use of AP and Reuters wire updates, Yahoo! was posting race calls as soon if not sooner than cable. One of the closely watched races, the Pennsylvania Senate seat was posted at 8:35—about the same time as Fox, approximately 4 minutes behind MSNBC, 4 minutes earlier than cbsnews.com, and roughly 30 minutes ahead of CNN. From 9:40 until our final check at 11:20, the lead AP headline (and photo) remained “Democrats gain ground in Senate, House,” but the story was continuously updated with the latest calls.

All in all, Yahoo! came closer to meeting the potential that aggregation might offer on this night than any site monitored.

### ***AOL News***

Users of the newly recast AOL might have felt that they had to spend as much time clicking and hunting around the site as they did actually learning about the election. Its coverage struck our coders as disorganized, harder than others to navigate and seemed to suffer from an attempt to perhaps cut the news up too many different ways.

The main election page, for instance, was buried two links deep—links not so easy to find—and once there users were greeted by confusing features. AOL's various election blogs, called The Stump, for instance, were divided into six areas (All Races, Senate, House, Governor, President 2008, Ballot Issues) and each of these, in turn, were broken up further into sub-issues.

There was a good deal here, if one probed hard enough, from a somewhat hard to find section on “Key Races to Watch,” to a “Newsmakers” box, featuring a picture of Julia Roberts that focused on who she was stumping for, plus a second small box with a feature called “Ask Sam Donaldson.” It took some diligence to find the small boxes with headlines on different races, including the presidential contest of 2008, but generally the content was divided into too many parts and was hard to find.

The lead image at 2 p.m., for instance, was headlined “Iraq weighs heavy on voters minds.” But when users clicked it they were taken to a page of “Latest News” headlines that were all about people at the polls. There was no story with the Iraq headline. Also confusing, the stories here were almost identical to the stories on the main election page that fell under the heading “more Election News.”

### **Newspaper Web sites**

For a generation of election nights, the nation's newspapers have been relegated to an afterthought. While they might have promised depth and analysis, in reality, it was often

less clear what the papers the next day offered that political junkies who had watched well into the night had not already learned.

The Internet offers the potential to turn that upside down. Whatever advantage might be promised in the supposed thoroughness, precision, sophistication and turn-of-phrase offered by the culture of newspapers and the nature of the edited written word could now be delivered to audiences in real time. Newspapers could compete directly with television.

How did newspaper Web site fare?

After monitoring several sites, one has the sense of a medium in process, still finding itself. Several questions still need to be answered.

It is unclear whether newspapers are comfortable trying to combine giving readers news instantly while providing the depth and nuance for which they are famous. How much should a newspaper Web site concern itself with breaking news, versus interpreting it, since the two tasks are often at odds when time and resources are limited? One option would be incorporating real-time news from other sources, such as wire services. But what is a newspaper site to do if those other sources contradict each other? How much should the secondhand sources be segregated from the newspaper's original information on the site, or integrated? Do the standards of accuracy that the newspaper promises the next morning hold in the faster environment online? For the biggest sites, such as the Washington Post or The New York Times, how much should they emphasize national versus local if they are directly competing with the broadcast and cable sites that have no hometown?

The answers were not settled in 2006. The questions simply became easier to identify.

To get a sense of this, we monitored four different newspaper Web sites: those of two national papers—the NYTimes.com and the Washingtonpost.com, the largest West Coast paper—the LA times.com, and one that was in the home of a key Senate race—the Virginian Pilot.

### *NYTimes.com*

On NYtimes.com, ranked as the 5<sup>th</sup> most popular news site according to Nielsen//Net Ratings for October, the election took lead position on both the home page and in a full column of headlines along the left-hand side. The vast majority of this coverage was staff produced and catered to a combination of both a local and national audience.

At 2 p.m., the lead headline was national: “As Voter’s Pass Judgment, Many Confront Technical Bugs”—and it sat over a multi-media package with a narrative piece on voters’ problems, a related staff audio report and links to two other related stories. But the lead photo was local: the New York State Comptroller heading out to vote, with a narrative report and additional local voting information attached. Below the photo, was a link to “Blog Blast,” the site’s blog that, on Election Day anyway, was more local than national.

There were two other interactive election features on the front page. The first was a discussion forum that asked readers what headlines they would like to see in the morning. The first few posts were titled, “Earth Collides with Pluto, Not A Planet Says Bush” and “America to George Bush: DROP DEAD!”

The second interactive feature, further down the page, was a link to a “2006 Election Guide”—an interactive map with a complex filtering system. Users could choose to sort through states where President Bush or Bill Clinton campaigned, for example and could also “create scenarios” where one could select from a list of possible outcomes to see how the map would look in each case.

From 2:30 to 6:00 p.m., before any official election results arrived, the front page remained relatively static, with slight updates to the lead story and a new video about voters in Virginia. The staff blog was a bit more active. There were postings on Senator Lieberman, the election night line-up at the network anchor desks, and New York campaign funds.

After 7 p.m., the site began to offer more regular news updates, but nothing close to continuous coverage. At 7:33 p.m. there was an exit poll story examining which issues were on voters’ minds. Beyond this first story though, the exit poll data was noticeably absent from the content.

When it came to calling races, historically a TV strength, the site was a few steps behind. Many races were called 20 – 30 minutes or more later than on TV or even other Web sites. The Santorum defeat, for example, was not posted until 9:31 p.m.—roughly 30 minutes after being announced on air. The interactive map was updated more regularly and gave a quick rundown on where certain races stood. But even here, the tallies lagged behind TV.

From 10 – 11 p.m. the news updates turned more local with articles on Democratic challenger Ned Lamont’s concession in the Connecticut Senate race to Joe Lieberman and Jeanine Pirro’s concession to Andrew Cuomo in the race for NY Attorney General. The Times’ blog posts were also often related to local candidates like Lieberman and Spitzer.

Overall, the Times’ Web site offered users a wealth of original content, and some combination of depth and speed. But in trying to be speedy its potential depth may have been undermined. One senses that trying to walk the line between being an “election night live” site and a newsroom organization that tries to understand and explain, is a divided task that will take some sorting out.

*Washingtonpost.com*



Election news was front and center at the Washington Post Web site with a page jammed with campaign-related headlines and other multi-media content. It was these extras that made the site distinctive.

The lead package at 2 p.m. was about voters heading to the polls and had six different related links, including an opinion piece by Post columnist Dan Froomkin, a viewing guide for the night called “The Fix” and an interactive map.

Below that was a local story about voter turnout and again nearly half a dozen related links including video and a live Q & A with a prominent local politics commentator. The highlighted opinion piece of the day was also election-related—liberal commentator Michael Kinsely’s critique of the Democrats’ official platform accompanied by a lead photo image that was a series of rotating images from voting stations across the country.

The site also featured several different interactive offerings. There was “Midterm Madness,” a game one could play about control of Congress, and “Voter’s Voice,” an election discussion forum with both local and national threads. Users posted both long- and short-winded accounts about their voting experiences: “May I just point out that in Northern Virginia there were lines to vote. As my candidate would say - OOH RAH!”

And a bar across the top held a video report on voter issues and a link to the locally focused “Election 2006” page with information such things as voting hours and locations.

The site changed little until around 7 p.m., when a ticker appeared across the top of the screen that continuously updated races. It was fed by the Associated Press and, as a result, the calls were much more timely than at some other sites. The Pennsylvania Senate race call, for instance, ran across the ticker at 8:30 p.m., a full hour before that story appeared on the New York Times site.

There was still staff reporting from 7 to 9 p.m. In those hours, the bulk of activity came from the ticker, the blog, the open discussion and the Q&A.

From 9 to 11 p.m., a few new stories finally appeared. One analyzed the Maryland Senate election and the Democratic Senate seat pick-ups in Ohio and Rhode Island. In the 10 o’clock hour there was an odd back and forth on the Maryland Senate race. The Post ran the Associated Press’s call that Cardin had won. But then it rescinded the call, raising the possibility that the race was still in play. At 10:58 p.m., the site posted a story that Democrat Ben Cardin was ahead and that the Associated Press had already called the race for him. Before long, though, the Post itself projected a win for Cardin.

Such contradictory elements may reflect two differences with newspaper Web sites and some other traditional news organizations. TV networks are accustomed to building Election Night political desks that make official declarations about what races can be called and what cannot on the air, which enforces a kind of official declaration or uniformity, including assembling academics, political scientists and pollsters to help them make those calls. Newspapers do not have that history. Second, Web sites are a hybrid of

aggregated material from others and original content, in different places on the site. Such combinations invite contradictory verdicts, at least as of now.

### *LATimes.com*

The Web site of the Los Angeles Times was a combination this election night of an up-to-date version of its newspaper with the added bonus of interactive and multi-media features. There was a blog, with postings from users, and what would prove an up-to-the-minute graphic on House and Senate races. But ultimately the site was not as deep as some others for national news, and by the time it was 11 p.m. on the East Coast, the California news had not yet come in, though the governorship was settled.

The site's home page had most of the latest material. Its special election page did not become particularly active until late in the evening.

At the beginning of the afternoon, the home page featured two political stories, each with links to the Times' political blog (Political Muscle), photo galleries and a public discussion board—"Who's going to win control of Congress? What races are you watching? Does this election matter as much as people are saying?"

The site was easy to navigate and understand and made heavy use of multi-media components, not just interactivity. Most of the political stories came with graphics, photo galleries and video from the paper's sister TV station, KTLA.

It was also easy for users to see how up-to-date the material was. The site refreshed automatically and featured time stamps on all the stories so users could see how fresh they were.

As the afternoon unfolded, the Times featured a lead story about balmy weather and its affect on turnout. At 5 p.m., there appeared a story about both technical problems with voting machines and high turnout – 12 minutes later a new photo gallery illustrating the story was posted. At 5:30 p.m., the lead photo on the home page changed, referencing the story.

Just before 8 p.m. EST, the site added a colorful table on top of the homepage, using the AP as a source, to start calling races and how many seats each party needed for the House or Senate, though it was unclear whether these "calls" in the races were based on exit polls or actual results or a combination. It began with a Republicans net loss of 11 seats, then 12, then by 9 p.m. it was 13.

This, however, for some time represented the page's most up-to-date element. And it offered no clear idea of which seats were being called. This made the map less useful than some others available from national news sites such as ABC or CNN.

Late in the evening, the Times site became a major source for California news. But for anyone on the East Coast, as Sinatra might have crooned, this came in the wee small hours of the morning.

### *Virginian Pilot*

In Virginia, PilotOnline, the Web site of the Virginian Pilot newspaper, would offer an interesting test of how much a significant local and regional paper could offer users about a pivotal race.

The site offered a voter blog and a place where Pilot reporters were posting real-time reports—of a very limited nature. There were also links, for those savvy enough to know which ones would be useful, to places like the board of elections that would offer up-to-the-minute results. These, however, were fairly subordinated on the site.

Overall, local newspapers looking to be detailed election night resources can do a great deal more than the PilotOnline. The site's election page was accessed through an "Election" graphic on the home page and was highly local, focused on the US Senate race between George Allen and Jim Webb, and the US House 2<sup>nd</sup> District race between the incumbent Thelma Drake and Phil Kellam. The page was designed to help voters throughout the campaign rather than on election night per se. The bulk of the material, in other words, was older stories that had accumulated over weeks on the two races. For election night, the paper simply added some links to the top of the page to races from around the country and links for users to send in photos of their voting experiences. This photo section also included a clean, easily grasped graphic illustrating which Senate seats were up for grabs and how they had come out.

There was no video or audio here, but there was a notable emphasis on user comments and "have your say" features. But in all, readers would post a mere seven comments through the night.

At the bottom of the page, there was a special section on state's proposed marriage/union amendment, with the full text of the proposed amendment, and links to news stories about the amendment posted during the campaign. Also at the bottom of the page was a paper-sponsored blog where reporters would post material through the night, plus links on voting logistics: state board of elections, election night results, finding one's polling place, some of which would be helpful for getting results if one knew to look there.

As the afternoon began, the site featured a story about high voter turnout and some voter intimidation. At 2:45 p.m., that piece was updated with a story about turnout perhaps being double that of the last midterm.

From then on, much of the activity on the site was on its reporter blog, with updates that were all in a tone more informal than the newspaper would be. At 3:25 p.m.: "We're more than half-way through Election Day 2006. Here's what we've learned so far." Or a few minutes later: "About those phone calls. Don't be confused....State election officials

promise they are not calling people to tell them their voting precinct had changed.” Through the evening, the reporter blog would accumulate a total of seven posts.

In the end, the site was a blend, its campaign election page converted, for an evening, into an election night page, but not really being designed as that. Yet there was a fair amount of good thinking, and attempts at helping voters, built around those parameters.

### **The Cable News Networks:**

With their wall-to-wall coverage, their battle-ready brigade of pundits and correspondents, and exit poll results already in hand, the cable news channels were eager for election night. The genre of national TV news born in 1980 with CNN now dominates election night coverage on television, at least when it comes to time and personnel devoted to the effort. The commercial broadcast networks have in that sense ceded the ground to cable.

When it came to delivering on that time, the late nature of the election calls exposed cable news’ inordinate reliance on live talk, particularly from outside “experts.”

While the coverage was pervaded by a sense that Democrats might be headed for a big night, many of the tight victories in key Congressional districts did not become apparent until later in the night—and in the case of the Virginia and Montana Senate races, until a day later. This left cable anchors and commentators with a stagnant electoral map for large chunks of time. (“Great, at least we can project something,” snapped mildly annoyed Fox New Channel anchor Brit Hume, when informed that the network, at 8:30 p.m., was ready to predict that Tennessee voters would pass a gay marriage ban.)

That problem was exacerbated by the lack of both fresh reporting from the field and prepared story packages to fill that void. That left in-studio pundits with a lot of time to rehash familiar themes and spin. When CNN contributors Bill Bennett and Paul Begala spent time debating the merits of Begala’s characterization of Rush Limbaugh as a “drug-addled gas bag,” it was one signal of a dearth of news.

In the end, while cable news has the time to fill and an audience that is presumably so serious that it can’t wait for the broadcast networks that were to come on at 10:00, the channels are still imagining their role as putting on a live show and reporting and analyzing results. They defined the story as what occurred that night, relying on people in the studio rather than written and edited reporting from the field to explain how and why that might have occurred.

### ***The Fox News Channel (FNC)***

Just one minute into the network’s 6 o’clock “Special Report with Brit Hume” election show, FNC exit poll point man Chris Wallace was already hinting at a potential Democratic victory, rattling off exit poll numbers that showed 58% of voters

disapproving of Bush's job performance, 62% of them saying national issues mattered most, and 57% of late deciders breaking for the Democrats.

It was a key early "tell," as to the possible outcome, as were the exit data an hour later showing that 54% of the voters in Virginia—site of the pivotal Jim Webb-George Allen Senate fight—opposed the war in Iraq, a favorable sign for the Democratic challenger.

But there was a paradox at play. Even as the network was showcasing some exit poll data, a significant part of its coverage entailed Hume's repeated assertions that the exits—which have had their problems in the past three election cycles—were unreliable and biased toward the Democrats. That story line came to a dramatic conclusion at 9:25 p.m. when FNC contributor Michael Barone stared glumly into the camera and informed viewers that because of a tilt toward the Democrats of between six and eight points, "we are not going to be relying on exit poll information anymore," in projecting winners. Fox was the only network to treat the exits data with such disdain and mistrust and to make it a major theme of the early commentary.

Observers might not have needed exit polls to sense the electoral winds when at 9:15 Republican National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman talked with interviewer Chris Wallace enthusiastically about the prospect of bi-partisan governance in Washington.

Some 20 minutes later, after the network projected a key Democratic win in Kentucky's Third Congressional District, Hume—who remained wary all night about predicting the overall outcome—gingerly acknowledged that "we're beginning to see the early outlines of what we could consider a trend."

Fox relied on its main Fox political panel of pundits to fill much of its airtime. The group, Fred Barnes and William Kristol of the Weekly Standard, veteran commentator Mort Kondracke, and Juan Williams of National Public Radio, endeavored to sustain their energy throughout the course of the long and sometimes static evening. Kristol, using a John Madden-style telestrating device to keep track of changing Congressional seats, seemed listless at the task. Without reporters in the field with news, or background packages offering context or documentary style recap of the race and its dimensions, they carried the load.

One hurdle may have been the reliance on opinion journalists. Kristol and Barnes—top editors at the conservative Weekly Standard magazine—may have had little enthusiasm about the evening's events, particularly Kristol, who remains an advisor and activist as well as an opinion journalist.

The night also did not pass without one Democrat taking a slap at Fox (Democratic operatives now make accusations that Fox tilts rightward one of their talking points). When Chris Wallace asked Democratic National Committee chair Howard Dean, shortly after 9 p.m., if he wanted to declare victory, Dean demurred, responding that "we're being very conservative, if I may say so, in a conservative station."

It was more than two hours later, at 11:18, when the FNC, which eked out a narrow ratings win over CNN, became the last major network to declare that the Democrats would capture the House. Conspiracy buffs may be suspicious, but the late call was in keeping with Hume's innate caution, the network's expressed lack of faith in its exit poll, and some history. The last two presidential election nights looked glum for the GOP early on, too, and turned around, enough to give any journalist caution.

## *CNN*

CNN apparently has begun requiring that its newscasters repeat as a marketing slogan the claim that it had the "best political team on television"—in much the same way that Fox newscasters appear to be instructed to repeat "fair and balanced." On election night this team seemed eager to stage an extravaganza, using a combination of high-tech bells and whistles and a battalion of anchors, correspondents, pundits, and bloggers.

But CNN ambitions for technical superiority—the cable equivalent of shock and awe—had its limits. At one point the cameras panned to the flat screen monitor in front of commentator William Bennett only to discover he was watching the same thing that people at home were—an image of William Bennett watching CNN anchor Anderson Cooper.

The moment reflected a noticeable self consciousness in CNN's election coverage. So aware seem CNN's people of trying to brand themselves with viewers, their coverage at times seemed as much about CNN as well as the election returns.

On paper, the advantage CNN has always had over its cable rivals was that it has a larger staff, more reporters, bureaus and producers. But it has struggled over years how to capitalize on the advantage.

This night it crammed its cavalcade of stars into the coverage, though in studio rather than from around the country. Wolf Blitzer hosted, and Jeff Greenfield was the key analyst. Cooper, the prime-time personality the network is most aggressively marketing, was the ringmaster handling one panel of pundits and another comprised of CNN correspondents. An odd couple of political analysts, Bill Schneider and prime time host Paula Zahn, helped dissect the exit polls. Financial journalist turned opinionated populist, Lou Dobbs, handled the big interviews, and curmudgeonly Jack Cafferty was on hand to solicit emails. Blitzer and Cooper would emerge as the figures getting the most camera time.

On occasion, CNN skipped around to its correspondents for reports from Democratic headquarters in Washington and from hotly contested Virginia, but that represented only a small part of the coverage. This was augmented by a highly touted array of bloggers, ensconced in a Washington DC café. The idea was a nod to the growing influence of this "new media" platform. But the few blogger segments—including one about their role in promoting the insurgent candidacy of Connecticut's Democratic Senate candidate Ned Lamont—were marred, according to the bloggers themselves on their sites, by technical

problems, which may have limited their appearances. It is also not clear how blogging, which involves people typing text into a computer, plays as television. Is a blogger talking on TV a commentator?

CNN's coverage would also careen from cues about a Democratic sweep on the one hand and a lot of close, late-breaking races on the other.

Some hints came early. Correspondent Dana Bash talked about "depressed" Republicans and "giddy" Democrats as early as 6:02 p.m. A short time later, Republican strategist Ed Rollins practically admitted defeat, declaring, "We thought we were election proof, and obviously this election shows we weren't."

Among CNN's own contingent, the palpable reluctance to predict a Democratic victory lasted well into the evening, leading viewers to perhaps wonder whether the early positive indicators for the Democrats were—as was the case in 2000 and 2004—about to be proved wrong.

At 9:22, CNN projected Democrat John Yarmouth to unseat Republican incumbent Anne Northrup in a key race, in Kentucky's Third Congressional District. But in an interview with Dobbs an hour later Democratic Congressman and House victory architect Rahm Emmanuel, at least publicly, was still avoiding declarations of victory. By 10:30, Bill Bennett was acknowledging that the Democrats, in their new role, would have to come up with a plan for Iraq. Still, it wouldn't be until 11:08 EST that CNN would project a Democratic takeover of the House.

For cable, of course, that is 10:08 p.m. Central time, 9:08 p.m. Mountain, and 8:08 p.m. Pacific. The night was still young.

### *MSNBC*

At 6:30 p.m., in interview with the brother of soon-to-be former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum, NBC's Lisa Daniels asked whether the Republican incumbent was mentally prepared for a loss. ("He tried his best," was the understandably guarded response.)

Yet it wasn't until 15 minutes later that MSNBC released actual exit poll numbers that illuminated the factors working against Santorum on November 7.

The moment partly illustrated what would emerge as MSNBC's tendency, signature might be too strong a word, to be slightly more aggressive about making calls and trying to signal events this night. The No. 3 cable channel has clearly tried to brand itself for the intensity of its political coverage, getting major prime time hosts to anchor hours of daytime coverage in the run up to the election, in place of its regularly scheduled programs. On Election Day, MSNBC displayed a running ticker keeping track of how long it was until the polls closed.

Indeed, it would be MSNBC, along with sister broadcast network NBC, that were first to project a Democratic majority in the House, at 10:57 p.m.

Like the other cable networks, one of the MSNBC's strengths was the ability to go live to some notable election night events, like incoming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's remarks at 9:20 and to potential 2008 presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton's acceptance speech about 90 minutes later. It also had the advantage of using some of the big name NBC network talent—who weren't on the air during much of the evening—such as Tim Russert, Brian Williams and retired anchor Tom Brokaw. And in offering a quick lesson in the difference between a cable pundit and a broadcast anchor Williams at one point declined to speculate about the results: “As you know, I don't do opinions.”

But as was the case with its other cable rivals, MSNBC also provided few interviews and fresh news from the field. So like its rivals, its program was dominated by punditry, commentary, and spin from inside its studio.

That approach, as was the case elsewhere, put much of the burden on the two men anchoring the coverage. One was the fast-talking self-styled political insider and host of “Hardball,” Chris Matthews. The other was the liberal leaning host of the prime time program “Countdown,” Keith Olbermann, who has started to distinguish himself as a cable personality with ironic tones, arched eyebrows and self-appointed rival of Fox's Bill O'Reilly. On this night, at the outset of the 6 p.m. election special, he predicted that if the Democrats emerged victorious, the country might “get out of the [Iraq] war faster than Britney Spears got out of her marriage.”

Olbermann was not alone in trying to quip. Matthews—interviewing former Republican House Majority Leader Tom Delay—said he envisioned the next Bush State of the Union Address replete with Vice-President Dick Cheney wearing a “sideways snarl and sitting on his left is a very attractive knock out woman”—an obvious, if somewhat sexist, reference to Pelosi.

At 9:25, when MSNBC projected the crucial Yarmouth victory over Northrup in Kentucky, it was Matthews—who was dominating the proceedings—who mused aloud that only a Democratic wave could spell the end of the Congressional career of such a nice woman.

If the tone MSNBC was looking for was hip and ironic, the sometimes excruciatingly slow pace of the evening pressured that, just as it did the insistence on covering the event with largely in-studio pundits. At 9:50 political prognosticator Charlie Cook noted that the outcome of only three of the 50 most important House battles have been called to date—all for the Democrats.

And at 11:04, seven minutes after the outlet had projected the Democrats to gain control of the House with about 230 seats, Matthews was still predicting that they would not capture the Montana, Missouri, and Virginia Senate seats needed to become the majority party in that body. He would be wrong.



But it was an illustration of the role MSNBC has for its hosts. They are not really anchors in the traditional broadcast journalism sense. And aside from reporting results, speculation and personal opinions probably trumped basic reporting this night.

### **The Broadcast Networks**

The broadcast networks, which have reduced their special event political coverage over the years, played a cameo role Nov. 7. They tried, to varying degrees, to foreshadow the eventual outcome on their evening newscasts, had brief chances for updates at the top of each hour, and then capped off the night with a one-hour prime time special (90 minutes in the case of ABC) that were a showcase for their top anchors.

This limited role has put these programs into an odd but interesting position. On television, the networks have ceded the more committed audience to cable. They also each had their own Web sites for those who wanted more information—and wanted it sooner.

So what is the target audience of the network election shows? Are they to program for the politically interested or assume those people are lost? Should they focus on audiences that might have a more passing interest, and less knowledge, and could use background pieces on the war, the election, the corruption scandals and more? Or are somewhat perfunctory shows now, headline programs designed mainly to attract curious viewers to the networks' regular news shows, but with minor significance otherwise. Where, in the new landscape, do programs that are on briefly fit in? Can you program successfully for both? Or do you serve neither?

All three of network anchors —ABC's Charlie Gibson, CBS's Katie Couric, and NBC's Brian Williams—were experiencing their first election night in the big chair. ABC, with the strong lead-in of "Dancing with the Stars," won the night's ratings battle handily.

Given their limited time on the air, moreover, the broadcasts arguably rely more heavily on the star power of these anchors to carry these election shows and convey a sense of authority and credibility than they did in an earlier era. The networks, according to insiders, have gradually dismantled over the years of the size of their once-formidable election desks, staffed by in-house experts who knew the political landscape county political chairman by county chairman and who could read the political map in their heads. The reduced number of seasoned political hands to draw on was evident on the air.

What we saw, in a sense, was that the networks aren't quite sure. The programs were not squarely for the uninformed. If a viewer was not particularly interested in politics, there wasn't much in the way of background pieces or anything out of the usual. Nor were the programs distinctly different in character from what viewers might have found on cable. They were just more abbreviated.

What we saw, not unlike the cable channels, was networks focused on producing a live program, with results flashing by, a quick dissection of exit polls, the effect on the House and Senate, and some live discussion with experts. The emphasis was on the big, broad picture as opposed to the dynamics of important individual races, or background pieces on how and why the election played out as it did. Viewers may have gotten a synopsis of events, but they were more likely to remember a good line uttered by Gibson or the aggressively low-tech white board Tim Russert used to track the results than any reportorial work or interviews, either with politicians or voters. The emphasis seemed to be on picking who would be on the air—featuring the now reduced number of personalities who make up the brand of the news divisions.

### ***ABC***

The 6:30 newscast, with Gibson solemnly warning that there would be no early calling of races, remained studiously neutral about what was happening in the voting booth.

After reporting on exit poll data reflecting attitudes about the president and the war, Correspondent George Stephanopoulos curiously suggested a “long, tough night ahead for the Democrats,” either an apparent misspeak or was it a misreading of the data? A few minutes later, Gibson, however, talked about “a challenging year for Republicans.” Reports from the extremely tight battleground Senate races in Tennessee and Montana added to the sense of uncertainty and deadlock. The broadcast ended with a look at a roster of possible 2008 presidential contenders. It was, however, substantially free of the “we know something you don’t know” vibe that sometimes accompanies early election night reporting.

By the time the 9:30 special aired, ABC had some catching up to do. It made quick calls of Democratic Senate winners in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and New Jersey—projections that had been made earlier on the cable networks with their continuous coverage.

Almost an hour later, at 10:22, correspondent Terry Moran gets off one of the night’s better lines by describing Democrats in Washington: “They can feel it. Taste it. Smell it. And they’re starting to drink it.” Thirty-six minutes later, the network called the House for the Democrats.

The tone set for most of the night by ABC was one of institutional caution along with Gibson’s comfortable conversational tone that evinced a familiarity with key races. In general, this was a glitch-less broadcast that highlighted the professionalism on the news team—even if there was nothing dramatic or particularly revelatory in the coverage.

Gibson also displayed a flash of wit that got picked up in the next day’s newspaper accounts of the coverage by noting that Hillary Clinton’s big New York Senate win “had all the surprise of a Doris Day movie.” A nice line, but it was also one that, for better or worse, probably meant most to the aging network news demographic that can actually remember Day’s celluloid frolics with leading man Rock Hudson.

## *NBC*

If ABC was tilting toward caution, NBC was more willing to lean toward prediction, or at least hint.

In beginning the evening, NBC's half-hour evening newscast seemed determined to give voters an early sense of the trends by leading with correspondent David Gregory's report that privately, he'd been told that Republicans won't hang on to the House.

That was followed two segments later with some exit poll data indicating voters were displeased with the handling of the war in Iraq and the broader direction of the country. Tim Russert was next with a report that Democrats "believe" they can carry the key Midwestern races that will determine the fate of the House. That led into Tom Brokaw's segment concluding that voters were angry about "dysfunction in Washington." A message, and a not-so-subtle one, was being sent.

During the brief 8 o'clock network one or two minute update, NBC reported that Jim Webb was winning narrowly in the Virginia Senate race with about a quarter of the votes counted. The problem was that the local NBC affiliate in Washington broke in immediately after that with very different numbers in that same Virginia race.

It wasn't long into the 10 p.m. special—which included the power troika of Williams, Brokaw and Russert—that the latter's white tote board—first noticed during the tight presidential contest in 2000--made its appearance. At this point, the focus seemed largely on the Senate contests with Williams, trotting out one of the classic election night clichés: "We still have a long night ahead of us." Perhaps, but not for viewers, as NBC would be off the air by 11:00 to make room for local news and then Jay Leno.

With little specific breakdowns of the individual races, this broadcast opted for broad thematic narratives. The Democrats had tacked toward the center with moderate candidates. They had taken a pragmatic approach and made inroads into the middle of the political spectrum. The Midwest is proving to be the new battleground. It was a national network given a national context to a nationalized election. But the real energy and excitement was attached to the dozens of incredibly hard fought and breathtakingly close local and state battles.

## *CBS*

Like NBC, the "CBS Evening News" got out of the box quickly with potentially good news for the Democrats and bad news for the Republicans. Veteran Washington watcher and former interim anchor Bob Schieffer led the broadcast with some of the anti-war numbers in the exit polls and the declaration that "If our exit poll is right, the wind is blowing very much for the Democrats and it is a strong wind."

Correspondent Jim Axelrod, hammering on the same theme, then weighed in from the White House where he characterized the mood as “not exactly optimistic.”

During the 8 p.m. update, the network made an aggressive, early projection that Democrat Sherrod Brown would unseat Republican Senator Mike DeWine in Ohio, an expected but hugely important Democratic pickup. The CBS call of that race came well before any of the cable networks even picked a winner in that contest.

As the prime time special began, Couric opened with broad promises, vowing to tell viewers the what, why, and what it all means of election night.

Whether the program that followed delivered, or whether news is really in the business of delivering meaning, is another question. Much of the information —Schieffer’s review of the exit polls, Gloria Borger’s backgrounder story on the Senate races and Sharyl Attkisson’s primer on the House battles—didn’t offer substantively more than what had aired at 6:30.

The night moved slowly and as a result, the show seemed to lose some momentum along with it. The special opened with CBS showing the Democrats with a nine-seat House pickup—something repeated at 10:30—and three quarters of an hour later, the tally had only inched up to 11. And despite the aggressive tone set by the first few pieces of the evening newscast, CBS became the last of the broadcast networks to actually project the Democratic takeover. For analysis, Couric reached out to a former Democratic and a former Republican operative.

As for Couric, the reviews were generally polite, if mixed. CBS’s recent house cleaning meant that Schieffer was the single veteran voice, followed by Borger, who is relatively new to viewers as a television presence. As if to illustrate the obstacles Couric faces, consider this excerpt from journalist turned memoirist turned screen writer Nora Ephron’s election-night blog on the Huffington Post: “I don’t mean to be sexist about Katie Couric. I think she’s brilliantly talented and totally appealing. Every time I turn her on I want to be able to evaluate how she’s doing, and I want to be hopeful and positive. But it’s impossible for me to make any sort of evaluation at all about her, BECAUSE I CAN’T BELIEVE HOW BAD HER MAKEUP IS.”

### **The Television Web Sites**

If one were to generalize, probably the most successful destination for voters, whether they wanted a quick summary of results or to delve deeply into the demographics or even state-by-state data from the exit polls, were the Web sites of the broadcast and cable TV news organizations.

If one wanted to see early on, for instance, that “late decider” voters in Missouri, those making up their minds at the last minute who to vote for, broke heavily Democratic—a strong signal of which way this race would tilt several hours before the race would be called—the TV Web sites generally had this information in a way that was easy to find.

The TV Web sites tried to offer their audiences a variety of tools for following a complex national midterm election, one in which the story line involved more than 50 key races across 10 states. There were customized results trackers, blogs, links, video, exit polls, vehicles for user content, and even some semi-shameless plugs for the on-air talent.

And unlike the Web sites of major newspapers, they did not have to worry about the mix of local versus national information.

While there were differences in organization, information, and design, generally the TV Web sites were among the richest and easiest to navigate.

One hint was that by the end of the night the Drudge Report largely consisted of links to several of them.

In practice, the sites served different functions depending on whether they represented a broadcast network—which were not on the air for a large chunk of the night—or the cable channel—whose TV programs could match the Web for speed. For the broadcast networks, the Web sites were their place for deeper and continued coverage. And for all of the sites, the strength of the online operations was their ability to allow the user to customize data and go deep inside the numbers/issues/demographics of a big race once the results were rolling in. On CNN TV, Wolf Blitzer at one point said that while Virginia's senate race was close, he had no idea which precincts had reported in. Yet online users to various sites would have been linked to the Virginia Board of Election where they could see actual county-by-county vote tallies and easily know more than Wolf did.

One area that several sites tried to set up with more uneven results was staff-produced blogs. Potentially, these up-to-the-minute reports from correspondents and producers could be richer at purveying important inside information than much of the punditry that fills the airwaves on TV. Sometimes they did. But there seems no clear sense of what a reportorial blog online really means at this point.

Another feature with potential, but which probably needs enriching, are public discussion boards. In an era when focus groups on TV can seem familiar and staged, exit polls reduce the public to an abstraction, and pundits carry so much air time, the discussion boards online can offer a stronger sense of the public mood than the handful of emails that might be read on the air by a Jack Cafferty in response to whatever question he has asked. But it is not yet clear how to realize that potential.

For all the considerable strengths, however, the television Web sites still probably represent a work in progress, particularly on a night when the important and expensive editorial talent is still expected to stand in front of a camera, not a computer screen. Some of the TV sites were slow to update results, to change photos, and to generally provide fresh insights. Most were slower than their TV siblings in calling races. And it's still up to the users to decide how much time and energy to spend searching a site for the

information they really want. In some cases, the PEJ monitors had trouble figuring out how the site functioned.

### ***Fox News.com***

The “You Decide 2006” site was blue and flashy, relatively easy to navigate, but also somewhat cluttered, according to our coders. It took some time to distinguish the various sections and figure out what was being updated. And there wasn’t a lot of fresh information being regularly posted.

The election page was anchored by the top center graphic called “Balance of Power,” which tallied the races. There was a drop down menu that allowed the user to choose a state, each of which had a separate Web page with all the races and candidates listed. A “Personal Race Tracker” opened in a separate window in which the user could add up to 10 races and track the results as they came in. But you needed to have the “Race Tracker” window open or to go to the individual state page to see live results. Another main election graphic was a rollover map called “What’s up for grabs in Nov. 7, 2006 elections.”

There were no podcasts, RSS, email alert options or election videos.. And some of the projections of Election Day winners were being made on the cable channel a good deal ahead of when they showed up online. Democrat Sheldon Whitehouse’s unseating of Lincoln Chafee in Rhode Island was announced on the Fox New Channel some minutes before being posted online. Another example was Bob Casey’s Pennsylvania win over Republican Senator Rick Santorum.

As elsewhere, a number of the early afternoon stories focused on glitches and problems in the voting, a story that evaporated into a non-issue as the day went on. A 7:50 p.m. story on Wall Street rooting for gridlocked government was old news. But once many of the polls started closing at 8 p.m., that kind of overview was quickly rendered obsolete by the battle for control of Congress.

### ***CNN.com***

In the early part of the day, the CNN site “America Votes 2006” had a very clean conventional homepage look. Of course, that was before the action heated up and when the top story on the site was both stale and prescient: “Analysts: Discontent over Iraq may favor Dems.”

The site was set up to allow users to look at the election in a number of ways—Issues, Senate, House, Governor, Ballot Measures, Campaign Headquarters, and Election Exchange. There was a race tracker—in this case “Track Your Races”—that created a page for the user to follow selected contests. The Election Exchange was another stab at interactivity, with surfers invited to post “videos, photos, comments and more.”

Another feature, Campaign Headquarters, which invited readers to “go behind the scenes with the politicians and the correspondents who cover them”, was basically a public relations plug for CNN, but tastefully, it was pushed toward the bottom of the page.

One handy item, posted shortly after 7 pm, was analyst Jeff Greenfield’s hour-by-hour guide of what to watch for on election night ranging from Hillary Clinton’s margin of victory in New York (was it big enough to “make a case for herself in ‘08”) to how well the exit polls worked this time out.

Once the votes starting coming in, CNN’s site was frequently updated with new stories—usually just amending the previous story a bit to reflect the newest results. In addition to the main page, there was an easy to use link to each House of Congress and how all elections were progressing. It was easy to navigate and offered many different ways of looking at the data. Steady “Breaking News” alerts, usually revealing new projections and often posted inside a bright yellow banner, provided a sense of immediacy and energy to the site.

A “Story Highlights” box which accompanied new stories was an easy way of keeping users informed of the context of results. So when, at about 9:45 p.m., the site reported that Democrats had picked up three key House seats in Kentucky and Indiana, it reminded readers that “exit polls show national issues key in House races” and “Democrats need gain of 15 seats to take control.”

### ***MSNBC.com***

The site was relatively easy to navigate. There were large photos on the top of the page that reflected the major campaign story. A blog from the NBC News political unit called First Read was also available. And the site was set up to search quickly either by headlines, video, key races or discussion board.

Most of the headlines were text-based stories that came from the wire, MNSBC or such MSNBC partners as the Washington Post and Newsweek—with a few video clips added to the mix. The video collection was culled from several sources including “Hardball” with Chris Matthews, “Meet the Press” with Tim Russert and what appeared to be video from MSNBC and NBC News reporters.

A “Key Races” map allowed you to move your mouse over a thumb tack icon and get a snapshot of a district, the candidates, projections from Charlie Cook, and links to full candidate profiles as well as more information on the state in play and its demographics. Another feature of note was a discussion board on the campaign that seemed to attract some lively action.

During the course of election day MSNBC’s blog, First Read, offered a lot of hyperlocal, highly focused coverage, whether it was a report on the election day weather in Tennessee or a judicial ruling in Denver about whether to keep the polls open longer. A lot of this material came from NBC reporters who had trouble making it on that

network's air. And it lent a sense that this site was really the place to go on Nov. 7 for hard core political junkies who wanted access to the fuller resources of the MSNBC/NBC team.

As the day went on, the narrative changed from FBI concerns about possible voter fraud in Virginia to taking the pulse of the nation ("Election Results unlikely to soothe angry voters") to the stewardship of the two major architects of the Democratic strategy ("Emanuel and Schumer at the helm") to actual projections ("Two Senate races already decided.").

### ***CBS News.com***

For the broadcast networks whose airtime was limited on election night, the Web sites really were a crucial way to try and extend the brand on Election Day—as was the case with "CBS News Campaign 06."

The layout of the page placed a lead story, such as "Reports of Problems Pepper Election Day," prominently in the front center channel of the page, with several connected links, including a chance to look at attack ads. The right sidebar of the page had links to opinion writers and CBS News polls and there were also links to podcasts, RSS, email alerts and wireless alerts. The interactive Campaign 2006 link provided a rundown of each state's races when you clicked that state on a U.S. map. The site posted exit polls (once the real polls closed) and the vote tally as precincts reported in.

In addition, the site invited public commentary, which ranged this night from the thoughtful to the absurd.

Like a number of sites, CBS's started sluggishly with the early coverage focused issues like turnout, fraud and problems at the polls. (The media were clearly geared up for the latter to be a major story.) These stories appeared in the form of short, one-to-two minute video clips and narratives.

A little after 6 p.m., the site posted what proved to be a very effective live race tracker continuously updating elections that had been projected. One logistical problem was that there was not enough space devoted to the feature, requiring the user to do a lot of scrolling to process all the races that had been projected.

On the afternoon of Nov. 7, with the real action yet to come, the site gave attention to such stories as "Poll Worker Allegedly Chokes Voter." But with the network off the air until 10 p.m. (except for brief updates), it was the first place that CBS could such crucial results as Ben Cardin's Senate win in Maryland (shortly after 9:15) and Sheldon Whitehouse's Rhode Island victory over incumbent GOP Senator Lincoln Chafee (shortly after 9:30).

### ***ABC News.com***



ABC News's "Vote 2006" site was an appealing light blue and easy to navigate. The election page was anchored by a center section with a slideshow-type presentation of five main stories. Two of those were links to their own features—a state-by-state fact sheet and a map that began live updating of results. A Vote 2006 Scorecard was another live feature.

There was plenty of synergy between the site and the network with cross promotion of ABC anchors and streaming video of live coverage on "ABC News Now." (Early in the day, that largely included an interview with lead ABC anchor Charlie Gibson and promos of the upcoming election coverage.)

The Note, the network's edgy political blog, was not updated after the morning. But a staff blog called Political Radar was updated during the evening, though infrequently. If you wanted to know what the president was having for dinner, this was the place for you.

The site did not offer RSS or podcasts or election-related email alerts, but there was an email option for people to report any troubles they had at their polling places.

In some ways, the Web site supplemented the network by making calls in some crucial races—Democrat Robert Menendez hanging on to his seat in New Jersey and Robert Casey unseating Republican Rick Santorum in Pennsylvania—between 8 and 9 o'clock when the ABC crew was in its prime time down time. Conversely, once Gibson and company got back on the air after 9:30, the site seemed to lag behind the network when it came to making projections.

The weather in Tennessee was a big story both in cable and online early in the day. But the ABC site may have had the best angle on that story when at around 6 p.m., it posted a quote from Democratic Senator Charles Schumer explaining that although it was raining hard in the eastern Republican part of the Volunteer State, the skies were literally brighter in the Democratic strongholds in the western part of the state.

### **The Blogosphere**

After emerging as a force in the 2004 presidential election—and showing up some mainstream media mistakes on election night—bloggers were raring to go Nov. 7.

They were anticipating several issues. There was the impact of the Iraq war, anticipated ballot box debacles related to new technology, absentee mania and early allegations of voter fraud. Add to that, of course, were problems in the Exit Poll to watch for—and early exit poll leaks to publish. CNN had even "hired" a handful of bloggers to gather in one place for the night. If you have seen your new rival, CNN reasoned, hire them to come to your party.

So what role did the bloggers play?

Less than might have been anticipated. There was unexpected calm at most polling places. The exit poll didn't leak. The blow dried TV thugs didn't blow any calls. There weren't even too many ghastly rhetorical gaffes to talk about by anchors or their MSM guests.

Beyond personal musings, the bloggers on the night were caught shy of material. Doing little in the way of original reporting, strapped to their keyboards, the strengths of the blogs—being a clearing house for leaks, monitoring gaps and errors in the mainstream press, and annotating the offerings elsewhere online—did not come to the fore this night.

We monitored six top-rated, self-contained blogs: Instapundit, Daily Kos, Andrew Sullivan's Daily Dish and Wonkette, and the Huffington Post (offering several blogs) and Drudge Report, (in addition to those on network and cable Web sites) from 2 p.m. through 11:30 p.m. EST. In addition, we monitored four political Web sites, described in the next section.

### *Daily Kos*

The **Daily Kos**, ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> in popularity by Technorati and run by 36 year-old Markos Moulitsas Zúniga out of Berkeley, Calif. would spend much of the day sharing information he learned from the mainstream press, and lacing it with some of his own opinions. For those who wanted to follow the election via internet, it would amount to a pretty straightforward and up-to-the-minute rundown of results.

In the early afternoon Kos was railing about voting machines. “. . . not only do they damage the integrity of our democracy, but they give losing campaigns an excuse to grandstand . . .”

By early evening, he was sharing what he had learned from trolling the Web, mainly the MSM. Headlined “House Update or “Senate Races Thread followed by a number. The posts were long lists of the called races along with whether it was a pick-up or hold. Within these, Kos linked to separate pages on his blog for key races by region and by house. The race tallies were updated every few minutes throughout the night. Users, though, had to put faith in Kos because these margins appeared with no sourcing information whatsoever.

Some of these were also fairly stream of consciousness. “Woo hoo! Hall wins NY-19” at 9:58 PST, and “MO is looking great, and MT is looking good.”

And there was plenty that was just self-referential. “Say hello to Sen. Claire McCaskill!” And as the day comes to a close, Kos ends with, “I'm seeing double. Literally. Long, long night.”

In the end, it was news, second hand and unattributed, but filtered through the very genuine consciousness of an excited liberal.

## ***Wonkette***

Wonkette, the self-styled “D.C. Gossip Page” now edited by Alex Pareene, is often more concerned with offering wit and sarcasm than news. It would set out this day to collect exit poll leaks, word of voter fraud and machine breakdowns. As time wore on, it would become increasingly frustrated they didn’t materialize.

“Send Us Leaked Exit Poll Reports!,” it would call out at 2 p.m. EST “You will see and hear the secret information, and you must *send it to Wonkette*. Send your info from a Yahoo or Gmail account. You don’t want to get killed!” and then, “We want your best disenfranchisement stories! There’s already to ‘ol name-switching going on, but that’s standard fare by now . . .”

As it waited, Wonkette filled in with comedic headlines: “Don Sherwood Nearly Strangles Voting Machine: Our favorite mistress-strangling Pennsylvania congressman went to his polling place today and, like most old people, had no idea how to cast his vote. . . .”

By early evening, Wonkette, was getting frankly pretty ticked off that no one was leaking it any exit poll data. Well, “You \*\*\*\*\* didn’t send us any stolen exit polls. We even went on “Talk of the Nation” with Arrianna to specifically demand exit poll leaks. And what do we get?”

At around 7 p.m., it offered a list of race margins but prefaced it with the qualifier: “We have no \*\*\*\*\* idea if this is accurate, our guess is “not very.” And later “In Case You’re Foolish Enough to Check us for ‘Real’ News.”

At 10 p.m., Wonkette managed to find a mistake on the Fox Web site. “FNC [Fox News] just projected that Bob Casey [D] has defeated incumbent George Allen for the Virginia Senate seat. In addition, our sources tell us that Jeb Bush just won reelection to the Senate from North Dakota. They’re drunker ‘en we are!”

Wonkette ended the day with “CBS Relying on Data Way More Accurate Than Exit Polls.” And with photos of two HI winners wearing leis, confirms “The candidate with leis *always* win. Charlie Cook said that. Also, big gold chains.”

## ***Instapundit***

Glenn Reynolds, the conservative Tennessee law professor who manages Instapundit, has a more serious minded agenda than several bloggers monitored. He was invited to the CNN blog party but had had to decline because of family obligations. (CNN supplied him with a “mac-mini-based Webcam” so he could join remotely but technical mishaps at CNN made that impossible.)

Blogging from his own home, Reynolds spent the early afternoon hours letting his readers know where he thought they could go for good, alternative information

throughout the night. Pajamas Media has “loads of election coverage,” he posted at 3:05 and at 3:32 p.m., N.Z. Bear “has set up an election results tracking page that very cool,” and “John Fund offers an hour-by-hour guide.”

Thus early on, at least, Instapundit was less a destination than a traffic advisor.

By 5 p.m., Reynolds had posted links to Bill Bradley’s report from Schwarzenegger headquarters, the Wall Street Journal’s round up of the blogs, blogging at U.S. News, reader’s posts, new data at RealClearPolitics, “Malkin on Fox on the blogosphere,” and “a round up of bloggers predictions, from Wizbang.” Reynolds did a little commentary himself, such as the post at 9:05 criticizing Bill Kristol’s diagrams on Fox News, but mostly stuck to his role as information filter.

“No matter who wins tonight, Nick Gillespie tells Richard Minter that America will probably lose;” he would post around 10 p.m. “Mark Steyn is liveblogging the elections;” “Over at milblogs, Greyhawk is blogging the Iraq-war record of candidates . . .”

Reynolds, incidentally, never was able to make a virtual presence on CNN because of their technical problems. Nor was he able to watch any of Pipeline, and his personal issues with it are part of the post. “I think the problem’s on their end,” he writes.

Just after midnight EST, Reynolds posted Jim Lindgren’s projection of a Webb victory in Virginia and then wrapped up the night with a link to observations on the night from National Review Online blogger John Podhoretz:

Happy or suicidal with tonight's results, something colossal and profoundly important has happened in the United States beginning in 2000 — the re-engagement of the American people with politics. We have had four enormously consequential elections in a row now in which voters have cast their ballots in numbers that we were told we'd never see in our lifetimes. I don't see how you can view this as anything but a wondrous development for the United States.

### *Andrew Sullivan*

On The Daily Dish, Andrew Sullivan, the iconoclastic self-described conservative this night would offer readers personal insights or juicy tidbits when possible—primarily through reports from mainstream media. But early on, he seemed more interested in sharing his feelings about taking in the day.

He began the afternoon with a long excerpt from Leonard Cohen’s song “Democracy,” (as well as a Utube video of Don Henley singing it) which “captures all my hopes for today.” That was followed at 4:07 P.M. by “The Quote of the Day III” from Thomas Merton’s book, *Contemplative Prayer*.

Around 7 p.m., Sullivan was linking readers to an exit poll story from ABCNews.com at 6:48 EST and one about the mood of voters from the AP at 6:56. The first race figures

come in at 7:03 from the New York Observer's blog, The Politicker, with the apt qualifier "Early exit polls are the least reliable. But if they pan out, it's a bloodbath."

At 8:27: "I Just heard Michael Barone say about Indiana that (from memory): "The Republican turnout machine may have worked very well but some of their voters may not have voted Republican.' . . . Wouldn't it be heavenly if Karl Rove turned out large numbers of voters who went on to vote Democratic or Independent?"

By 10, Sullivan and other readers celebrated the Santorum defeat with such guest posts as "'Man, Santorum looks like he really needs some meth to throw away'" and "'As much as I loathe Rich Santorum's positions, it is heartbreaking to watch his teenage son cry behind him during the concession speech.'"

### ***The Drudge Report***

And what of Matt Drudge, the now senior conservative Web source for leaks and rumors, who has the ability to dramatically drive traffic to any site to which he links?

Drudge this night served primarily as a quick reference portal for those who wanted links to stories or sites that would give them information about the day, but he offered nothing that citizens could not have accessed on their own from the mainstream press, and less in the way of links to news than they might have gotten from aggregators.

At 6:30 he posted two links to preliminary exit poll data. At 7 p.m. he linked to CNN and MSNBC projections. At 7:30 there was a good find—Rolling Allen and Webb results with link to the Virginia board of elections to learn more. Unfortunately, though, the link was slow and by 8 pm., perhaps because he was driving so much traffic there, he had to pull it down. After that, he stuck to posting totals from that race, and links to cable.

Beyond that, Drudge linked to the latest AP story from political reporter David Espo, but this was far less than one might have gotten from a site such as Yahoo or Google.

In short, Drudge's skill at trolling the Web, finding good stuff and linking to it efficiently for people, appears to be pressured on an evening when many sites with more resources and flexibility at creating specialized pages are focused on the same task.

The lone wolf nature of some of these blogs may be at some disadvantage when everyone is looking in the same palace, at the same thing, especially on a night when the official results are the story.

### ***Huffington Post***

If most blogs are one person's view of the world, The Huffington Post, a liberal California-based site, is a kind of celebrity election night cocktail party.

The site has two components—a home page of news aggregated from wire services and a separate page of blogs from various contributors.

The news home page—which would open the afternoon with a story about Bush’s legacy, pieces on voting machine problems, predictions by Bob Novak and video linking George Allen’s senate campaign to voter intimidation—remained fairly static throughout the evening. Much of it, such as a link to a blog post about conservative Laura Ingraham telling voters to tie up the Democratic voting help lines—was designed to monitor or embarrass conservatives.

The blog page, filled with contributions from well-known mostly but not exclusively liberal voices, would be a combination of things that ranged from the nasty to the more creative. Much of it seemed marked by haste.

From 2 p.m. to 5 p.m., there was little activity. When it did come more to life, at 5:30 EST—earlier than most other blogs—visitors could grab some preliminary Senate exit poll margins, pulled “(With a Grain of Salt)” from swingstateproject.com along with a color-coded map of poll closing times across the country. That was followed by a long post from Carl Pope, the Executive Director of the Sierra Club, about Richard Pombo’s re-election campaign for the House seat in Pleasanton, C.A. and the Sierra Club’s efforts there, as well as voting debacles in Ohio and New Mexico. Pope signed off with, “My final plea: Remember your great aunt in Nevada? The one who always means to vote but is a bit forgetful? Give her a call to remind her.”

The heaviest blogging of the night came from animation writer and producer Bob Cesca who wrote in inside lingo that was at times much harsher and personal than anything one might find in the far more polite MSM. At 8:40 p.m. EST: Let’s Play ‘Find a Job for Katherine Harris’

- Here’s some ideas to get the ball rolling:
- Curvy Ikea shelf: The Bujob
- Dyson Vacuum Suck Tester
- Fire Heath Ledger – Harris IS the new Joker
- Prison Inmate
- Presidnt Bush’s pit stain custodian
- Hannity Fluffer

Huffington herself weighed in with “However the night goes, one thing you’re definitely not going to want to miss: Katherine Harris’s concession speech. We predict it will become an instant YouTube classic. . . .”

At 10 p.m., Author Danielle Crittenden, another frequent contributor that night, scripted most posts as memos from Tony Snow to President Bush. Typical were such remarks as “Did someone change the channel up there from Fox to MSNBC? I understand your concern right now (and am sorry it’s past your bedtime!) . . . .”

Huffington's posts veered wildly with her different personas. Sometimes she sounded like a nasty gossip columnist. "On CNN, the rotund Bill Bennett and the Gaunt James Carville are looking like the political punditry equivalent of Laurel and Hardy – or the Before and After pics of a gastric bypass surgery ad."

At other times, she was a political insider, such as when she posted about her congratulatory phone conversation with Sherrod Brown. She told him, she reported, "how great it is to have an economic populist who both understands what's the matter with Kansas and is unambiguously against the war in Iraq. . ."

### **Public Broadcasting and Online**

True to its reputation and playing to its strengths, public broadcasting outlets provided a balanced diet of election night news and incorporated a lot more outside voices into their coverage than many media platforms. Those sources ranged from the Memphis Commercial Appeal staffer who discussed the Tennessee Senate race on the PBS NewsHour to the Maryland voter who complained about a faulty election machine on WAMU's call-in show.

On balance, the kind of depth brought to some of the battleground background reporting on PBS, the live pieces capturing the atmosphere from candidate headquarters on WAMU and quality of Robert Smith's blog on the NPR Web site were refreshing alternatives on a night when some television outlets suffered from too much commentary and not enough basic reporting.

Conversely, public broadcasting probably wasn't the destination of choice for those focused on the electoral horserace or wanting a nod and a wink about what the exit poll results portended. It didn't deliver the kind of high-metabolism coverage that often marks election nights on other media. Even the NPR Web site wasn't geared for the task of delivering instantly updated information for those anxiously awaiting the latest numbers.

### **PBS NewsHour coverage**

Not surprisingly, the NewsHour hosted by Jim Lehrer was not the place to be on election night if you were looking for insider punditry or fevered speculation about whether or not Congress would change hands on Nov. 7. There was little of that "we can't wait to call winners" undercurrent to its sober election eve broadcast.

But true to its nature as the long-form version of the daily television newscast, the program included a combination of reported pieces and interviews (it is not afraid to interview journalists from other media outlets, for example), a wide-ranging look at a number of Election Day issues, and even some historical context.

The newscast paid considerable attention to the question of voter fraud and possible problems in the voting booth, covering it in the first few minutes and then returning to the subject about a half-hour later during an interview with someone from electiononline.org, an election reform organization. There was a package on voter turnout that included Gwen Ifill reporting from Philadelphia on how both parties had tried to get their partisans to the polls. Ifill then updated that, in an interview with Lehrer, by chronicling the high turnout in battleground states like Virginia and Connecticut.

Back in the studio, panelists Ramesh Ponnuru and Mark Shields were left to handle the NewsHour's very civilized version of the kind of partisan bickering that is a staple of much of television's coverage of politics. They also put the issue of voting irregularities into a historical framework by recounting how close and controversial the results in the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon race were. The program closed out its political coverage with a piece on election humor that included everyone from Stephen Colbert to the Capitol Steps.

While the show did not emphasize the horserace aspect of the election it didn't completely ignore it either. A Margaret Warner story in the middle of the newscast reported on the exit poll data revealing the electorate's unhappy mood and suggesting a good night for Democrats. But it also warned that exit polls are no substitute for actual voting results.

### **NPR/WAMU (FM) in Washington, D.C.**

The heart of the election night programming on this Washington area NPR outlet was a three-hour call-in/talk show—from 8 to 11 pm—hosted by Kojo Nnamdi with three primary guests—David Hawkings, Jonathan Broder, and Jim Asendio.

The show relied on national reports from NPR, local campaigns being covered by WAMU correspondents, Nnamdi's conversation with his guests, and of course, the input from the callers themselves.

But most of the focus was on the local races – Virginia and Maryland – which turned out to be a fortuitous given the competitive senatorial and gubernatorial races in Maryland and the Virginia Senate cliffhanger which ultimately determined which party controlled that body. Shortly after 9 p.m., a report from Jim Webb headquarters described a “celebratory feeling in the air,” a prescient piece of news that wouldn't prove truly accurate until George Allen conceded two days later.

The tone was casual and intelligent, especially between Nnamdi and his three chief analysts, with roughly 20 percent of the airtime was devoted to listener call-ins. For all of the media outlets who used their online platforms to invite citizen emails, there's still something more compelling and authentic about a citizen speaking on the air. And although problems in the voting booths were not a big part of the Election Day story, it was fascinating to listen to one caller describe waiting two hours at a Maryland facility



with only eight machines and to hear a Bethesda recount the experience of having the machine switch her Democratic vote to Republican. (She was allowed, with the help of a poll worker, to change that vote.)

Shortly after 10 o'clock a Pakistani-American and first time voter called to discuss how important the ability to cast a ballot was for him. Then assuming the role of amateur media critic he blasted television saying it does a "disservice" to Americans. On an election night where television didn't particularly distinguish itself, it was the kind of comment that resonated on talk radio.

### **National Public Radio online**

There was a variety of content posted early in the day on the special election 2006 site including audio versions of past programming, analysis pieces by Daniel Schorr and Cokie Roberts, and election-related podcasts. NPR Political editor Ken Rudin also had the courage to post his overall prediction ("Dems Take House, GOP Keep Senate" was only 50% right) as well as his race-by-race calls.

There were also a dozen wide-ranging election related stories—covering everything from the impact of Iraq on the campaign to predicted Election Day surprises—that had links to audio versions as well as transcripts that could be purchased. In addition, there was an RSS feed for election coverage.

The site got off to a sluggish start on Election Day, but at around 6 o'clock, it introduced a well-written blog by correspondent Robert Smith that was updated roughly every 15 minutes and which made for good reading with posts such as "Psst? Want to See an Exit Poll?" (not posted until 7:26 p.m.) and "Red Meat for a Blue Candidate."

The site also had an updated interactive election map (with a handy icon for "change of party") although it seemed to lag a bit in making projections in key races, making it not the best place to be for the up-to-the-minute electoral scorecard. This was a venue that offered more value in the quality of its analysis and reporting than through the instant delivery of fresh information.

### **Political Web sites**

#### **Magazine Web sites**

In addition to blogs, users could also move to more traditional confines online that were no less opinionated—the Web sites of traditional opinion journals such as the National Review on the right, or the Nation on the left. How have venerable print publications that once focused on interpreting the news a week or more later transitioned to the age of instantaneous analysis on election night?

For the most part, these are not places for instantaneous information. They do not have the depth of either newspaper or TV sites. The National Review functions a bit like a blogging salon online, which might be a welcome environment for someone who wanted to get a rhetorical fix and get a sense of the conservative talking points that night. The Nation probably lags behind its conservative cousin in that regard. Whether this comes at the sacrifice of some greater deliberation is a question worth more consideration. One wonders whether some larger collaborative effort—an opinion magazine collective, one for conservatives and another for liberals, might be more satisfying, deeper and compete as a true destination for such breaking news events.

### *The National Review Online*

The Web site of the conservative National Review, the magazine William F. Buckley launched in 1955, had a special elections page on this night. The page was filled almost entirely with original content by National Review staff or columnists. There were some new articles (At around 2 p.m. the latest update was an hour and half old), but most of what someone settling in for an election afternoon and evening would find were links to archived pieces about the upcoming election.

The page's new content day-to-day was drawn from 10 different Weblogs the site calls "Blog Row." Some are subject-based (i.e. Bench Memos about legal rulings). Others highlight well-known commentators (i.e. David Frum). Two were specific to the elections—dubbed The Corner and The Sixers. To an outsider, however, it was hard to distinguish the difference between the two. They were both updated frequently over the course of the night, with posts from a number of different contributors, most of which were on-staff. The only real difference seemed to be which staffer contributed to which blog.

The content was primarily musings about the significance of the night, some of them fairly transitory in nature. Consider John J. Miller's remarks at 9:15: "I'm remembering that six years ago, Allen was a big favorite to beat incumbent Democrat Chuck Robb and, indeed, he won. But the margin was closer than many people expected, just four points. I'm thinking that maybe this guy has trouble finishing his races."

Other postings were more harshly personal, such as contributor Katherine Jean Lopez at 9:28: "Shame on Pennsylvania. With Mark Dayton retiring and Lincoln Chafee defeated there was an opening for the Most Clueless Senator and Pennsylvania had to fill it?"

This was an environment for junkies, akin to sitting in a bar or a living room watching the returns come in with political junkies. But this was not an attempt to be a utility or resource for people trying to keep track of things. There were references to called races and who was up or down at the moment but no overall round-up or tally.

### *The Nation Online:*

On the liberal side of the spectrum stands *The Nation*, the venerable self-styled progressive weekly long edited by Victor Navasky and now in the hands, like the *National Review*, of a new generation.

Its Web site, [thenation.com](http://thenation.com), would offer a combination of staff material and outside links, material from the magazine and staff-produced blogs. This is not a high tech site. There were no video or RSS options or other ways for users to participate. This is a text based environment on election night, faster than the magazine, but not trying to exploit the high technology multi-media nature of the Web.

While the middle column contained the biggest headlines, it did not always offer the most recent news. Many times, these stories were a day or two old. The daily content seems to come primarily from the staff-blogs, though these are far from continuous conversations.

On Election Day, most of the updates were more about moving content around on the site than providing new information.

At 2:30, for example, a piece by Katrina Vanden Heuvel on Advertising Wars appeared in the blog section, but at 4:30 it was moved to the main column on the front-page under an Election06 header.

There were a few information links offered, such as a link at 8:18 to races called on [MSNBC.com](http://MSNBC.com). Another link, this one to [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com), promised “state-by-state election results,” but if users clicked there, the link turned out to be dead.

In the end, the Nation was less of a living room for transitory musings about the evening than *National Review*. Nor, like its ideological opposite, was it a destination for news of the hour (or even of the day). But it was a place to go for pre- and post-election analysis from the left perspective.

### **Political Web Sites**

If the Web is populated by aggregators, bloggers, opinion journals, a new trend is specialty sites dedicated to politics. These are a kind of niche media, for people who can't seem to get enough from the traditional press.

In the last two election cycles, a number of political Web sites have emerged for people who want each latest poll, and candidate comparisons, issues, details on district voting patterns, historical analogies or even an inventory of every poll in every race and every pundit prediction. These are more specialized, deeper and more of an archive than anything mainstream media or their sibling Web sites are approaching, even in an election season.

Come election night, however, these sights were eerily empty. Citizens almost got a sense that these were a one person show and that person was in line at the polling station.

We examined two such sites, Campaign Network, jointly run by C-Span and Congressional Quarterly magazine; and Townhall.com, a conservative political site.

The one-night verdict is that these sites, which can be so rich over the months that a campaign is building as a source for detail, opinion, archival material and more, are out of their element on election night. Neither site prevailed in comparison with other places, as a source for data and results, for nuance, or flat out blogger personality.

### ***Campaign Network***

A site jointly run by C-Span and Congressional Quarterly magazine, campaignnetwork.com was about as slow moving as the C-Span camera angle. Heading into the night, users could get a lot of information about the upcoming elections. There was an interactive map about the races up for grabs, C-Span videos of candidate debates as well as videos of candidate ads, and CQ analysis stories like “Voting Problems, Tight races could delay Voting elections” and “Battleground Dispatches for Nov 7-election day.” There were some AP headlines at the bottom of the screen but the bulk of the content originated in-house.

As the night heated up, though, the site failed to even get warm. (Often it seemed like only occasionally was there someone there to strike a match.) There were a few updates (7 in all from 6 until 10) but they were so odd and sometimes inconsequential—someone just called in with this rumor, or this outlet is reporting this random partial election result. The 6:30 update was snippets of what a reporter had heard. The updates seemed random and often trivial, not tied together and frankly just not interesting. At 7:30 the reporter informed any visitors that polls had closed in NC, OH and W.V. It was unclear what the purpose of this feature really was.

What was more remarkable was that despite the void, the site managed to crash twice. The CQ headline from early in the day instructed users to “Stay Logged on to CQ politics.com on Election Night and Day.”

### ***Townhall.com***

The Conservative political site, Townhall.com, offered a blog that was a bit more active, but only a bit, and action here did not necessarily equal news. Blogger Dean Barnett gave us more information about his own views, announcing the Santorum defeat to be, a “bloody blow.” He later shared: “In perhaps the final piece of good news we’ll have tonight, my pepperoni pizza was delicious and Frank J’s cat will get what it has coming.”

The other main blogger, Mary Katherine, started the night at the CNN “party” but at 9:20 told us there were technical problems so now she was at home “catching up.” Her posts, often attempted to give folks some numbers or at least link to them, but her solitary efforts were tended to understandably somewhat scattered, and at times proved inaccurate. At 9:56, for instance, she wrote: “Talent Lead Widening in Missouri . . . Katie sees 51-45. Nice.” And, the inside page called “Campaign and Elections” promoted as

offering the latest updates in opinion, blogs, news, partners and audio was nothing more than a crudely designed list of columns.

## **Conclusion**

The media environment has probably changed in attitude more than it has in action. News organizations recognize that the Internet—with all its potential—is the future. But most of the sites we monitored have only partly developed beyond adding somewhat to what their parent organizations originally provided. It is as if each news organization has a kind of DNA derived from their original business and history, and you can see that in their online operations. The newspaper sites continue to put most of their effort, seemingly, on the next day's newspaper. The aggregators are collecting, but they are less sure how to distribute. The bloggers remain, to a significant degree, outsiders looking in.

Viewers of TV news specials, meanwhile, will see programs still largely built on a model developed 40 years ago—though with more limited resources.

In the end, it would be hard to identify the ideal election night destination. The TV Web sites may come closest at this point, despite frustrations, in part because they make best use of the exit poll data that the networks are involved in funding. That also makes the TV Web site vulnerable. They worked this night because the exit poll did not misdirect people the way it did in some earlier election cycles.

The fact that the polling data is such a resource to these sites—allowing users to dig deep, according to their interests and knowledge—suggests that the exit poll may become more important—not less—as the Internet only grows in importance. That is only one lesson derived from reviewing the media landscape in Election Night 2006.

The other, more broadly, is that there is a long way to go.

## **Methodology**

### *The Universe*

To conduct a meaningful assessment of the national news media content available to the public on election night, we studied a wide range of media outlets and programs available during that time. Eight distinct categories of news outlets were studied: online aggregators, Newspaper Web sites, network news Web sites, blogs, political Web sites, radio, broadcast television and cable television.

Overall, 32 different news outlets were captured and monitored.

**Online Aggregators:** We included the three top-rated news aggregators

- Yahoo!, Google News, AOL

**Blogs:** We included six of the top-rated stand-alone news blogs, according to Technorati:

- Instapundit, Daily Kos, Andrew Sullivan’s Daily Dish, Wonkette, Drudge Report, Huffington Post

**Network News-based Web sites:** We included all of national TV and radio Web sites—which is six in all, those of the three broadcast networks, the three cable networks (NBC and MSNBC are combined) and NPR

- CNN.com, MSNBC.com, Foxnews.com, ABCNews.com, CBSNews.com, npr.com, MSNBC.com, NPR.org

**Newspaper-based Web sites:** The top two newspaper-based Web sites were included as well as the Web site of the largest west-coast paper and the site of a local paper with a tight Senate race:

- NYTimes.com, Washingtonpost.com, LATimes.com, Pilotonline.com (the site of the Virginia Pilot)

**Political Web sites:** Web sites of two political news magazines, and one liberal and one conservative political Web sites.

- National Review Online, The Nation Online, Campaignnetwork.org, Townhall.com

#### **Radio**

- NPR, coded through the local affiliate, WAMU

**Broadcast Television:** All four network news outlets were included: (monitor 6:30 -7:30, 8-10 check top and bottom of the hour, 10:00 – 11:00)

- ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS

**Cable Television** All three cable television channels.

- Fox News Channel, CNN, MSNBC

#### *Monitoring*

Election coverage of the 32 outlets was monitored at the Project by a team of 14 researchers. The outlets were monitored in real-time, for the following time frames on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2006. Note: all times are Eastern Standard.

- Web-based outlets were monitored every 20 minutes from 2 pm. Through 11 PM EST.
- Broadcast Network programs at three different times: During their regular evening newscast, at the top and bottom of the hour from 8 – 10 p.m., continuously during their special report from 10 – 11 p.m. In addition to live monitoring, the programs were captured and saved on DVD.
- Cable channels were monitored continuously from 6 – 11 p.m. In addition to live monitoring, the programs were captured and saved on DVD.
- NPR was monitored from 6 – 11 p.m. via a local member station, WAMU.

### *Monitoring Procedures*

Researchers were assigned specific news outlets to monitor continuously during the designated time frames. Monitoring was conducted in three forms for all Web-based outlets.

First, researchers began by capturing (and saving) the election home page and writing a detailed site description of the layout and features of the site.

Second, researchers refreshed their site every 20 minutes and coding at each download for specific indicators. Those indicators included:

- Time of posting (and whether things were time stamped)
- Content Originator: staff, wire, outside contributor
- Topic
- Lead Source: identifying the first source in the posting
- Nature of Posting: Was it largely factual, analytical or opinion. Opinion was defined as interpretation that was unattributed to any source. Analysis was interpretation that was explicitly attributed to some reporting, or other basis.

Third, researchers kept an electronic “diary” of the night, writing down items of note, quotes, odd incidents, etc.

- Broadcast and cable outlets were monitored via steps two and three.
- Coding and diary notes were verified via the captured content.