IN THE NEWS

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CNN Adds Virtual Touch to Election Coverage

WASHINGTON—CNN offered its viewers a new and innovative "look" in the network's presentation of the Nov. 6 election returns. The event marked the first time the cable network's new 2,200-square foot Washington D.C. HD studio facility was used for election coverage, with the latest virtual studio, 3D graphics and touchscreen technologies all playing roles in making election night reporting a captivating experience for viewers.

"We just built a brand new studio in Washington that was designed and constructed for election night," said Sam Feist, CNN's Washington bureau chief and senior vice president. "It was built 'ground up' for election coverage, with data visualization and data presentation built in." (See "CNN Debuts New Washington Studio," p. 1, Sept. 5, 2012)

CNN received high marks for its coverage, which, while embracing the latest display tools, did not allow techno whizbang to dominate, but rather to operate as a useful adjunct in charting President Obama's second trek to the White House, and in reporting, analyzing and forecasting results of Senate and House races across the country.

"We were well thrilled with the way we were able to marry technology with news and analysis," said Feist. "The key is that we wanted to make sure any technology used by CNN adds value to the network's coverage."

And according to Nielsen cable viewing scores, this union of high tech and solid reporting worked. CNN edged out rival Fox in the 7:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. Nov. 6 timeslot by some 140,000 viewers (8.84 million vs. 8.7 million), with MSNBC trailing far behind at 4.6 million.

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This synthesized "overhead camera" view of Senate chamber seats provided CNN viewers with a unique perspective of election results.

MAGIC WALLS

CNN's Wolf Blitzer and Anderson Cooper anchored the event, with the net's chief national correspondent, John King, presiding before both of CNN's "Magic Walls" (82-inch touchscreen displays) and pulling up the latest tallies at the tap of a fingertip.

A virtual studio set placed Tom Foreman, the cable network's correspondent, within the "U.S. Senate chamber," and allowed viewers to graphically observe a shifting balance of power as virtual "overhead camera" shots depicted red and blue changes in the occupancy of Senate seats. Similarly, the technology put at Foreman's feet 3D models of both Capitol Hill and a U.S. map with state outlines filled-in, colored, and growing in height above the map to represent voting results.

Feist observed that due to the shift in the way people watch television now—as opposed to four years ago—much greater emphasis had to be placed on election night graphics preparation and execution.

"So many viewers have HD now that this element is more important than in years past," said Feist. "We synced two 4K Vizrt machines together to produce graphics for our CineMassive wall. This required ultra high-quality graphics generators and engines to achieve the resolution we needed due to the size of the wall."

Eleven cameras were used in the Washington studio on election night: three on pedestals, three with Steadicam rigs, a jib-mounted unit, three handhelds and a robotically operated system. Feist noted that at times, dozens of persons were needed in the control room to handle the election night coverage.

—*James E. O'Neal*