



# Election-night news to co-star latest technology

By Edward C. Baig and Jon Swartz, USA TODAY

NEW YORK — It's election night, and CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer is in New York talking to an Obama campaign strategist in Chicago.

But instead of the split screen or window TV viewers might typically see during live remote interviews, the Obama spokesperson will be projected as a three-dimensional hologram, making it appear as if he or she is in the Manhattan studio with Blitzer. The network plans to conduct similar holographic interviews with representatives from the McCain campaign in Phoenix.

"Everyone is doing something virtual this election year," says CNN Senior Vice President David Bohrman, the guy who pushed the technology. But Bohrman believes CNN is going where no network has gone before by employing Hollywood-style effects. "Virtual elements in a real set look so much better than a real person in a virtual set," he says.

Election night is like the Summer Olympics and Super Bowl for network news divisions, and each is carting out eye-popping technical toys to draw viewers.

"For the big game, you see all the bells and whistles. The real challenge this year is new stuff that will travel easily on multiplatforms," says Andrew Tyndall, publisher of TyndallReport.com, which monitors television network news. "Not only must this look good on TV, but on portable devices like cellphones."

## Shooting someone who isn't there

There are plenty of reasons for the gimmicks: This year's race has been intensely followed, and is expected to draw tens of millions of voters — and viewers — on Nov. 4. Significantly more people are expected to watch Tuesday night's results than in 2004, when about 64 million viewed election-night results on network and cable TV, according to Nielsen.

USA TODAY got an exclusive peek at the holographic technology, which CNN hopes to unveil prior to the election on *The Situation Room* with Wolf Blitzer. CNN is still fine-tuning the technology. "It's so complicated," Bohrman says. "The crew is basically shooting someone that isn't there."

CNN will have 44 cameras and 20 computers in each remote location to capture 360-degree imaging data of the person being interviewed. Images are processed and projected by computers and cameras in New York. There'll also be plasma TVs in Chicago and Phoenix that will let the people being interviewed see Blitzer and other CNN correspondents. Bohrman says the network can project two different views from each city so Blitzer can appear to be in the studio with two holograms.

Bohrman won't disclose the cost, but says, "We're on our budget for election night."

The movie studios have used similar technology as far back as *Star Wars*, says Bohrman, who has dreamed about the prospects for a decade. But until recently, the networks have lacked the computing horsepower.

Bohrman flew to Israel the day after the vice presidential debate

to enlist the help of two tech companies — Vizrt, which works on state-of-the-art virtual studios; and SportVu, a developer of a real-time camera tracking system used in live sporting events.

CNN correspondent John King, who is closely associated with the network's Magic Wall, which shows detailed election results, says broadcasters have to be careful with new technology.

"Is it really part of telling a story or some sort of eye candy to make people go wow? We have to add information and context."

## What others are doing:

- Fox News has built three new HD studios for Tuesday night's broadcast so it can make better use of the additional TV real estate with updated county results, comparative numbers from previous elections and poll-closing times. A giant wall with touch-screen technology will provide electoral map results.

"We've been planning for this night for two years," says Jay Wallace, vice president of news editorial product at Fox News.

- ABC's digital maps make their debut, letting correspondents look at up-to-the-minute votes by county, and compare votes as far back as 1960. Also, a double ticker line at the bottom of TV screens will display current popular and electoral totals for Barack Obama and John McCain. Beneath that will be results for Senate and gubernatorial races, says ABC News Creative Director Hal Aronow-Theil. For HD viewers, ABC is providing more information on the left margin of the TV screen.

- NBC spent the past year designing two studios that make the most of visual technology. One features intricate exit-polling information that digitally appears on a wall. The other studio lets political director Chuck Todd analyze presidential results by region, state and county. "We finally figured a way around using pie charts," jokes Phil Alongi, executive producer of election night for NBC News and its cable channel, MSNBC.

NBC, too, plans to make use of a bigger HD screen size with detailed results from the presidential, congressional and gubernatorial races. And it has partnered with social-networking giant MySpace on Decision08, an online section that includes video, news feeds and blogs from NBC News.

- CBS News will analyze national and state exit-poll data, using state-of-the-art technology to display vote-counting and demographic data.

Touch-screen technology will allow anchor Katie Couric to drill down on state and county results for all races, including propositions. "It is very fast technology using real-time data," says Frank Governale, vice president of operations for CBS News.

- Comedy Central, a go-to cable channel for political news for many young people, is teaming with a social-networking site. The TV home of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert is using the services of Meebo to host chat rooms for users to share their political views.

Among CNN's other innovations on election night are a virtual Capitol Building used to illustrate the changing balance of power in Congress. But the most promising election winner is the hologram. "Either this is an evolution in the way we do live interviews on television," Bohrman says, "or it's a nice try."