

POPULAR APPEAL —USA

Preface

The US presidential election is one of the biggest events in TV news. So after their rolling coverage of the primaries, how are the broadcasters ramping up for the final Clinton vs Trump showdown in November?

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After all the drama that's been going full throttle since last year, we're now nearing the business end of the US elections. And when it comes to the final throes, the cable news channels and networks are locked in rampant competition to win the ratings war. With four years to dream up fresh concepts, it's all about cranking up something new and exciting for the audience – anything to stop them from switching channels. So expect plenty of bright lights, an ever-changing ticker of real-time infographics and plenty of telegenic presenters to keep our attention (and that's before we've even got to the advertising bonanza). From public broadcaster to Spanish-language titan, we've got all the bases covered when it comes to the US general election and its broadcast media. — (M)

Election coverage in numbers

- 1960** Year of first TV presidential debate in the US (Kennedy vs Nixon)
- 4** Presidential debates in 2016
- 16.9** Millions who watched Fox's Republican debate in March
- 19.8** Millions who watched the second night of the 2016 Republican National Convention in July
- 24.7** Millions who watched the second night of the 2016 Democratic National Convention in July
- 46.2** Millions who watched Mitt Romney and Barack Obama debate on 3 October 2012, the most watched debate in history
- 66** Estimated millions watching 2012's election coverage
- 12.1** Millions of viewers of NBC's 2012 election night, making it the most watched channel

US ELECTION SERIES



REPORT

US election coverage

01.

Star appeal: Megyn Kelly

Fox was widely viewed as having asked the best questions during the party nominations bun fight – and the undoubted star to emerge from its coverage was Megyn Kelly. She will be front and centre again for Fox's election-night extravaganza on 8 November and will co-anchor *Election Night* with Bret Baier from New York. Fox will also be debuting a new multimedia studio that night – so watch out for gizmos galore.

02.



Juggling act: Mark McKinnon

Political adviser Mark McKinnon had a light-bulb moment about a decade ago. He wanted to make a TV series showing the candid behind-the-scenes moments from the lead-up to the November vote. But the TV bosses didn't bite; they thought it was too ambitious. Skip forward to today and cable channel Showtime has taken a punt. The result, according to McKinnon, "looks different from anything seen in politics before".

The Circus: Inside the Greatest Political Show on Earth is a weekly "real-

time" documentary that has been airing every Sunday night since the primaries – bar a short break over the summer – and is set to continue until a week after the general election. McKinnon co-presents with *Bloomberg Politics*' Mark Halperin and John Helleman and there are plenty of fast cuts to give it a fresh feel – somewhere between a traditional political documentary and a reality TV show. But it's the access that is fascinating: stolen moments from cafés or hotel rooms whereby viewers get to see what McKinnon calls the "humanity" of candidates. "People are tired of being lied to so we wanted to

produce something that felt authentic."

The Circus has a team of some 60 editors. It can often be against-the-clock work looping back footage to the editing room, working out the storyline and getting everything ready for Sunday, especially if a key story breaks the day before. As for election night? The team will probably be shooting behind the scenes of *Election Night with Stephen Colbert* on Showtime. And there are more tricks to come – possibly a spin-off show that chronicle the first 100 days of the new president – or even an election in another country. Stay tuned.

03.



Heightened senses: CNN

When it comes to pulling out all the stops, no organisation does it quite like CNN. This cycle has seen the cable news channel boost its political coverage for the Trump-Clinton showdown, earmarking \$50m (€44m) more cash than 2012 and adding 45 journalists to its politics unit. But it's perhaps CNN's virtual studio that is getting the most attention; it's been in use since 2012 but was ramped up for this year's elections with an increased focus on augmented reality.

According to Tom Foreman, a correspondent at the virtual studio – based in Washington and made up of five producers – augmented reality is being used to take the studio “into the real world” as presenters interact with 3D imagery. Foreman says

that the technology, used in sports commentary, is new to current affairs and CNN is pioneering the “live” model: “65 per cent of the public comprises visual learners. People understand things a lot more if they can see them.” And while the studio may be all about visuals, Foreman argues that there needs to be a function to the graphics instead of simply using them for the sake of it.

The studio is ambitious, building a detailed 3D House of Representatives and Senate, running imagery through 19 computers and using up to 24 cameras. And they intend to keep experimenting, gradually mastering the complex system. As for election night? It's about rendering scenes in which real-time data can appear. “We're rendering in two or three hours what would have previously taken a week.”

Reality check: NBC News

NBC News will create an interactive virtual-reality version of Democracy Plaza, the outdoor epicentre of the election on the plaza at New York's Rockefeller Center. NBC News will partner with AltSpaceVR to make the experience available on VR devices and desktop computers. Its sister channel MSNBC has also been getting in on the act: it has debuted a new graphic wall in one of its studios, featuring a whopping 45 sq m of video surface at 12K ultra-HD resolution – meaning you really can see politicians, warts and all.

04.



05.



Dream team: Univision

All eyes are on key voter demographics this year. The Latino vote is getting the most attention – unsurprisingly given Donald Trump's derogatory remarks about Mexicans. And with the influx of Puerto Ricans fleeing the economic woes of their Caribbean island set to shift the balance in key states, the vote is more important than ever.

The task of informing that electorate is spearheaded by Univision and its star presenter: Mexican-American Jorge Ramos, famously evicted from a Donald Trump press

conference last year after telling the Republican hopeful that he couldn't deport 11 million people.

Ramos's show *Noticiero Univision* – and others such as the morning show *Despierta América* – will focus on core Latin issues, with digital elements added for the latter stages of the election. They include *The Electoral Soap* – a *telenovela*-style recap of events – and *Hispanic Vote Forecast*, which monitors the voting intentions of this key demographic. Most interesting of all is *Dreamers in 3D*, animated stories told by America's undocumented youth. Any guesses who the presenters might want to see win?

06.



War footing: rival networks

At no time is the alternately competitive and collegial instinct of the US press as evident as on the day of a presidential election. The networks, along with the Associated Press, are partners in the National Election Pool, a consortium that does the difficult and expensive work of surveying voters as they cast ballots. This exit-poll data feeds into each network's “decision desk”, staffed largely by academics hired for the occasion, who are quarantined to keep any news from leaking before polls close.

In 1980 NBC crowned Ronald Reagan at 17.15 Pacific Time, angering politicians who felt that the early declaration had discouraged West Coast citizens from turning out. Ever since then, the networks have agreed not to announce the outcome until everyone (at least on the US mainland) has had a chance to vote.

As soon as polls close, however, the rivalrous instincts reveal themselves.

The decision desks rush to help presenters beyond the purgatory of “too early to call” and “too close to call”. (There is a distinction between them, although it is one that is lost on most viewers.) The goal facing all the networks is to be the first to call each battleground state, an ephemeral advantage that is usually noticed by few viewers beyond those who work in the political-media sector itself.

The only occasions when the “winners” of this contest are remembered are when they are wrong – as was the case twice in the 2000 election.

At 19.50 Eastern Time, NBC became the first to call Florida for Al Gore, an announcement it had to retract only hours later. At 02.16 Fox News called the state for George W Bush – and other networks followed. By 04.00 they had all retracted both their initial prediction and its correction – the only way left to distinguish themselves was by the language of their explanation. “We don't just have egg on our face,” NBC anchor Tom Brokaw said. “We have an omelette.” — SPI

The full picture: PBS

PBS *NewsHour* – the flagship news show on the public broadcaster – has been investing heavily in 360-degree video over the past couple of months and plans to make it a major part of strategy around the general election, both out in the field and from the show's studios in Arlington, Virginia. According to the show's director of digital, Travis Daub, PBS is using set-ups with three different consumer-level cameras capable of capturing the environment in the round: the Theta S, the Kodak Pixpro SP360 4K and several configurations of GoPros in six camera mounts.

“The Kodak Pixpro 4k two-camera rig is a great option that treads the line between production speed and quality,” says Daub. “The camera rig is simple to deploy and operate, creating better footage than the Theta S.” At the moment it's a question of trial and error, working out what works best for specific purposes.

Already used for the Democratic and Republican conventions, each of the 360-degree cameras has different attributes. PBS used the Theta S after the Orlando mass shooting on 12 June, for example, and was able to post a video soon after the event due to its fast turnaround time.

07.

