

Throwback to another close election: Florida editor reflects on the difference between 2000 and 2020

Everyone

knows the famous line. It's screamed on TV and in the movies by breathless editors who have news that will change the world.

"Stop the presses!"

We

felt that drama 20 years ago in the Miami Herald newsroom. Bush vs. Gore. Election Night 2000. Florida.

But

first, we had to stop the trucks. They were about to hit the road with stacks of newspapers shouting "Gore wins" in the early editions bound for distant reaches of the state. The news changed, and the headline needed to change. So it became BUSH WINS IT.

A

few hours later, as the final edition deadline passed, we learned Bush didn't win it. Not yet anyway.

Now

we had to stop the presses.

I bolted from my desk to make sure the foreman got the word. I arrived breathless, from the whiplash of running the copy desk and running down three flights of stairs from newsroom to pressroom. I approached the press boss as the floor-to-ceiling machines rumbled. I had news that would change the world.

We quickly replaced the page with a new headline, NOT OVER YET. We could have used that one for this election, 20 years later.





Back

then, it was butterfly ballots, hanging chads, days of counting, a legal assault.

Now,

it's COVID-19, mail-in ballots, days of counting, a legal assault.

For

journalists like me working behind the scenes, 2020 may sound all-too familiar.

But it isn't. The pace and expectations are far different now in our newsroom.

Except

for that mad dash to the pressroom, the 2000 election seemed to unfold in slow motion. The story plot moved glacially each day. Reporters arrived and camped out at the canvassing boards to monitor the counting. Day after day, week after week. The reporting was done on a newspaper schedule, with stories filed toward the end of the day, just in time to make the final edition. No Twitter jolts to worry about. No continually updating homepage. Digital was an afterthought in 2000, with the online team stashed away somewhere, maybe on another floor, scraping stories from the newspaper pages to post in the dead of night.

Fast-forward

to this year's campaign and election.

Reporters

and editors need to keep a finger on the "post" button 24/7, all while getting bombarded with conflicting information and disinformation. This is no slow-melting glacier. It's more like Niagara Falls, with tweets flying like missiles.

While

we prepared for possible unrest on the streets, assigning journalists to a quick-response team just in case, we also have been told to take it slow. Our editor reminds us to be careful with how we handle what we're hearing. That takes reporting, not just reacting.

All the while, deadline is ... well, deadline is right now. And the focus isn't on that one big headline at the end of the day. It's on the many headlines on stories and blogs posted online through the day and into the night, headlines that must grab the attention of Google searches and social scrollers.

COVID

has complicated things, of course. We can't be everywhere we need to be. A

local race in the Florida Keys, for instance, was so close that it needed to

undergo a recount. But because of coronavirus restrictions, we couldn't be in

the same room as the elections staff and canvassing board. The supervisor set

up a TV, chairs and table outside the front doors, everything under a portable

tent, to protect observers from the daily dousing in South Florida. And on

Election Night, we didn't only send reporters to precincts to cover in-person

voters, but also to mail drop-off boxes to capture those avoiding the inside of

polling places.

Unlike

2000, Florida is not at the forefront of the counting drama this year. The

state was called for Trump on Election Night. Most local races had clear

winners and losers. Ballots didn't get lost and machines didn't break down.

There were no confusing ballot designs or hanging chads, those bits of

cardboard that didn't get punched all the way through 20 years ago. Floridians

now fill in bubbles with a pen, just like a high school test

taker, with
ballots fed into machines for scanning.

Yet
not everything is different. Readers are still turning to us
to make sense of
elections. With that comes thoughtful analysis of what is
happening. In Miami,
for instance, we took a step back from all the noise to look
at why President
Trump did as well as he did in Miami and across Florida.
Another story
explained how Joe Biden helped Democrats win the county
mayor's race, resetting
local politics. Those are stories typically not aired on local
TV or cable news.

While
the uptempo pace has changed for us, our purpose has not.
Reporters are still
digging, analyzing and breaking news. But just like that long-
ago newspaper
headline that almost got out of our building, one wrong move
can destroy our
credibility. There's pressure to be fast and first. We can no
longer wait until
the end of the day to publish a story. But we also need to tap
the brakes as we
check and confirm. It's hard. It's tiring. It's crucial.

There
will be no running into the pressroom this year for a "Stop
the
Presses" moment. We no longer have our own pressroom, and my
priority
these days is digital.

But

I'll always savor the chance of saying that iconic line. It sure beats,
"Delete the tweet."

Jeff Kleinman is the day editor at the Miami Herald. In 2000, he was copy desk chief.