

In Memoriam

Jeff Alderman, a pioneering news pollster in his two decades at ABC News, died November 15 in New York. He was 56 years old and had battled lymphoma for 13 years.

As ABC's director of polling, Alderman brought a newsman's approach to public opinion research. Trained as a reporter and editor at the Associated Press, he described himself as a newsman who did polls, not a pollster doing news. Public opinion was his beat, he would explain, and that's how he covered it.

His approach made polling more accessible and meaningful for a generation of news reporters and consumers. Alderman's questionnaires were clear, concise, direct and scrupulously unbiased. In poll analyses he eschewed academese and cut to the chase with lively, creative, even compelling news narratives.

The 1980 and 1982 elections produced "more mush than message," he reported once, and Senator Edward Kennedy's 1980 presidential campaign suffered from more than just "Chappaquiddickian doubts." In a major non-voter poll conducted with Harvard University in the summer of 1983, Alderman concluded that "the basic reasons why citizens fail to exercise their franchise are rooted deeply in circumstances that are impervious to quick and easy change.... They feel cut off from and unrelated to the system and therefore unobliged to it." Voting "is not on their list of personal responsibilities," he wrote. "For many citizens, not voting is as American as apple pie."

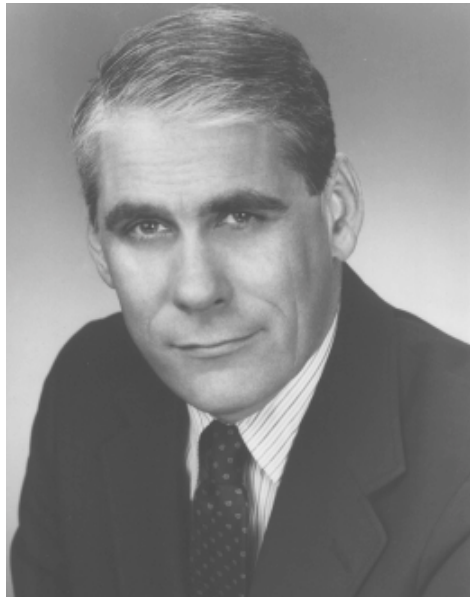
"He described himself as a newsman who did polls, not a pollster doing news."

His work ranged far beyond politics. In a March 1981 poll on race relations, Alderman reported, "There is despair and fear and even self-deprecation expressed by many blacks. And there is widespread indifference among whites to the problems blacks say they still have in getting ahead."

His work won him admirers among his fellow skeptical journalists, not an easy crowd to please. ABC News anchor Peter Jennings recalled after Alderman's death, "I don't think he, in his entire career here, ever got it wrong."

Though a newsman at heart, Alderman also innovated in the methodological and technological arenas, developing, expanding and improving a variety of news polling techniques and systems. Among his accomplishments, he

Jeff Alderman



ABC News

1942-1999

- Created the first ABC News exit poll in 1980 and directed subsequent exit polls for the network in every national election through 1988;

- Co-founded the ABC News/*Washington Post* poll in 1981 and the ABC News/*Money* magazine poll in 1985;

- Pioneered the network's use of overnight polls to cover breaking news; his first, on June 22, 1982, measured public reaction to the John Hinckley verdict;

- Developed ABC's election tracking polls, in which individual one-night samples are combined in a rolling average. ABC's first tracking poll, in the 1984 New Hampshire Democratic primary, caught Gary

Hart's surge in the final weekend and accurately predicted his upset victory over Walter Mondale;

- Created ABC's 50-state poll, also first done in 1984, in which state samples comprising 12,000 respondents were used to anticipate the electoral college vote; and

- Directed or participated in the design of computer systems, including early internal messaging systems, election modeling systems, a powerful data crosstabulation system, and a searchable polling archive that remains in daily use.

Alderman's sometimes gruff exterior concealed an impish sense of humor and a lifetime love of pranks and puns. He is survived by his wife, Joanne, and two daughters, Elizabeth and Merry.

—*Gary Langer, ABC News*

Contributions in Jeff's name may be sent to the Drama Club at the Williston-Northampton School, 19 Payson Ave., Easthampton, MA 01027.