

The Media Are Ignoring My Candidacy!

That's what every candidate thinks. But just exactly how does the media decide who's worthy of coverage?

BY JOHN YEWELL

Candidates can never get enough press—the more they get free, the less they have to pay for. But the stuff that gets printed is invariably too negative about oneself and too positive about one's opponent. If you're a long shot, especially in a minor party, you're likely to be ignored altogether.

So complaints about press coverage are part of the perpetual spin of politics. This year's first cry of foul has been raised by Steve Young—not the football player, but the former dean of Hamline Law School and a Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate, who claims the *Star Tribune* done him wrong.

In a pre-precinct caucus series that ran February 28 through March 3, the newspaper published profiles of the Republican challengers to Paul Wellstone. The first three, averaging 25 column-inches with large photos, were of putative front-runners Rudy Boschwitz, Bert McKasy and Roy Terwilliger. The fourth installment rounded up the remaining candidates: Stillwater businessman Monti Moreno, former suburban newspaperman John Herman, and Young. Each got an average of seven inches with a passport-size photo.

Young, who has filed a complaint over the series with the Minnesota News Council, claims he deserved better and that the snub hurt his showing in the caucuses. In a March 30 commentary in the *Star Tribune* he attributes his treatment to "inside the Beltway" thinking—the Beltway in this case being the I-494/694 loop.

Young's case for greater respectability rests almost entirely on a *Pioneer Press* poll published January 21 that showed him running closer to Paul Wellstone (47 to 25 percent) than Roy Terwilliger (48 to 23), and only marginally worse than Bert McKasy (47 to 28). Boschwitz was closest, trailing Wellstone by 46 to 38 percent. In his commentary Young also claims that a *Star Tribune* poll published March 3 shows him "sec-

ond behind Rudy Boschwitz in name recognition and approval rating."

Young fails to mention that the results of that poll weren't available to *Star Tribune* editor Dennis McGrath when the profile series was planned, and that the gap between him and Boschwitz in both poll categories was 93 to 22 percent and 48 to 9 percent, respectively. The distance between Young and the third-, fourth- and fifth-place finishers in both name recognition and approval rating was within the poll's margin of error and therefore statistically insignificant.

It is not unheard of for candidates to overcome low name recognition and a lack of money to win. The man Young wants to replace, Paul Wellstone, is probably the best local example. But caucus success depends on people and telephones, not media exposure, and Young has only one full-time staff member, few volunteers and very little money.

"The reason we chose Boschwitz, McKasy and Terwilliger [for more in-depth profiles]," says McGrath, "is that those candidates have the most realistic chance—or any hope, really—of getting the endorsement or winning the primary." Young may fail to make the case for himself as a serious challenger, but he raises interesting questions about where editors and TV news producers draw the line on coverage.

For McGrath, the line gets drawn at the definition of "viability." It's a vantage point that some contend rations coverage based on an insider view of the process. Realistically, it's more often dictated by limited available on-air time and column inches. Informal canvassing of Republican activists, says McGrath, has revealed no significant support for Young. Other factors were also taken into account to judge Young's viability, but McGrath says he discounted the influence of polls.

"Poll numbers in 1990 at this stage of the race showed that Paul Wellstone wasn't on anyone's radar

screen. But we did profiles on him before the caucuses because we knew his support within the party was enormous." The example has an analogue in McKasy, who is not well-known but clearly has wide support within the party. A straw poll on the Senate race conducted during the Republican Party's annual convention last September, which McKasy won, gave Young less than 2 percent of the vote, far behind even Moreno.

"The role of the news media is to reflect the reality of the campaign," McGrath contends. "We try to determine who the viable candidates are—who has the support within the party, who's demonstrated their ability to get elected [such as Terwilliger],

who's raised money—and to make sure they are covered. To the extent possible you try to give a voice to the candidates who don't have a voice but are trying to become viable.

"We certainly have covered Young," stressed McGrath. "We have not ignored him." Even Young acknowledges that other papers have not given him as much coverage overall. But Young takes the line that small-party candidates have always taken, with some justification: that, in Young's words, "electability is a criterion that short-changes the voters" because it doesn't account for ideas.

"Almanac" producer Brendan Henehan suggests that the system

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works best when the "reflecting reality" approach yields as much as possible to the goal of providing equal access, especially early in the process. The problem, everyone admits, is that using a wide net is meaningless if the net doesn't get cast.

Kate Parry, *Pioneer Press* politics editor, says it's hard for the media to pay attention at a time when it's so much an insider's game and voters themselves aren't really paying attention.

"We have tried to write stories about caucuses in a way that says to readers, 'while you may not be tuned into this, there's a whole group of people who are, and they are largely going to determine who's left when you finally tune in.'"

The record on equal access vs. reflecting reality is spotty. Earlier this year, the *Pioneer Press* ran a series profiling the Republican presidential field, giving each candidate more or less equal coverage—including front page introductions. But last November the same paper gave St. Paul Mayor Norm Coleman front-page, above-the-fold treatment for the news-to-nobody story that he was thinking about running for governor.

Since then the paper has done nothing comparable for any of the dozen others "thinking" about running—not even Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman, who makes no secret of his candidacy.

Later in the process it's a different story, says Henehan, because air time is more precious and deciding who merits it is trickier. "If you have a Dean Barkley, that's where the discussion gets interesting," Barkley, who ran as an Independence Party candidate for the U.S. Senate in 1994, was never viable in the sense that he could win, but he earned a place at the table because he was likely to draw enough votes to affect the outcome.

Young is an interesting case, says Parry, because he falls somewhere in between the obvious leaders and the minor candidates. "The only names you hear out there right now are Boschwitz and McKasy," continues Parry. "Polls now are meaningless, and there's a limit to space. Does that mean you ignore other people? Where do you cut that off? Making that call is not a science, it's a craft. We certainly give it a lot of thought. It's not a careless thing."

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