

How Twin Cities' Media Paved Ventura's Way to the State Capitol

An Essay

On election eve, Nov. 3, Raelin Story, a local KSTP reporter, interviewed Roger Moe, Herbert "Skip" Humphrey III's running mate. At that time 4 percent of the precincts had reported in, and Mr. Humphrey was winning, with 35 percent of the vote, former professional wrestler Jesse "The Body" Ventura with 33 percent, and St. Paul mayor Norm Coleman with 31 percent. In speaking of the "Ventura factor," Mr. Moe said, "I really think you folks [broadcast and print journalists] let him [Ventura] off the hook. You let him get a free ride, the press did, and nobody knows anything about him. He wasn't pinned down on any of his issues — not like Norm Coleman and Skip Humphrey were. So, I think he's been treated with kid gloves. . . ."

By 8 a.m. the next morning, I had received e-mail messages from colleagues in South Africa, California, Chicago, Florida, Boston, and New York. Everyone asked the same questions: "Jesse Ventura? Governor? How could this happen in, of all places, Minnesota?" I've thought many times during the past two months about their questions, and the reasons why nearly 40 percent of my state's voting public went with Mr. Ventura. And I'm hard-pressed not to blame — at least in part — the messenger.

Clearly, the reasons that he is now our governor are varied and complex. Most political pundits agree that the public was fed up with politics as usual, neither the IR or DFL parties fielded their best candidates, Mr. Ventura was invited to participate in state-wide debates, Messrs. Coleman and Humphrey were decidedly lackluster as campaigners, and Mr. Ventura was successful at luring first-time voters with catchy, one-liner responses to complex questions and issues. Still, I propose that the Twin Cities media dropped the political ball by giving Mr. Ventura insufficient coverage and scrutiny, thus helping to pave his way to the governorship.

Before Mr. Ventura surged in the polls a few weeks before the election, the broadcast and print media viewed him as it would an amusing sideshow at the State Fair. Once he reached 20 percent in the polls, however, and he was seen as a "viable" candidate, he received similar coverage to that given to the two major party candidates, even though he was still depicted in some stories to be little more than a political freak with no real chance of winning the election.

By covering him in the run-up to the election as they did Mr. Humphrey and Mr. Coleman, the Twin Cities media gave Mr. Ventura's candidacy a huge boost. Mr. Humphrey, as the State's attorney general and the person who masterminded the state's high-profile battle with the tobacco companies for the past few years, had received extensive media coverage for some 16 years. No one in Minnesota had to be reminded of his lineage. Mr. Coleman, for his part, had received extensive coverage for most of the 90s as St. Paul's flamboyant, let's-make-a-deal mayor — a man who was elected as a Democrat, became a Republican, and was reelected.

I would propose that the local media had a responsibility to cover Mr. Ventura so thoroughly that by election eve voters would know him as well as they did his two challengers. In other words, once his candidacy was seen as "viable," they should have covered him much more than they did Messrs. Humphrey and Coleman. By deciding not to cover him so extensively, they did a real disservice — and, indeed, were unfair — to the IR and DFL candidates, by giving Mr. Ventura what amounted to a "free ride."

Mr. Ventura was the first serious statewide candidate that had been fielded by Ross Perot's Reform Party; something that made Mr. Ventura's candidacy newsworthy. And, indeed, the media have a responsibility to examine in detail any serious political candidate. The more unknown or unusual that candidate is, the more serious that responsibility is if that candidate has a viable chance of winning.

There is clear precedence for the media deciding to cover a person or an issue extensively. A few years ago The New Orleans *Times-Picayune* decided to cover former Klan leader David Duke's race for governor of Louisiana as it would be a hurricane, considering that his election would be detrimental to both the state and the nation. By most accounts, the paper's extensive news coverage was balanced and fair. The editorials were pointedly against Mr. Duke.

And the Twin Cities two major newspapers covered the tobacco industry from 1994 to the tobacco litigation in 1998 as it would be a pernicious pestilence, without any semblance of balance or objectivity. In particular, both the *Star-Tribune* and the *Pioneer Press* displayed an anti-tobacco bias in their news stories. All of which begs the question: 'Why do the local media consider it appropriate to cover an industry in a non-objective fashion, but to cover in run-of-the-mill fashion a former professional wrestler who is surging in the polls and whose only political experience is as a part-time suburban mayor?

Clearly, when the media have determined that something or someone is a perceived evil or a potential problem, the rules change. The question is whether the local media should have considered it potentially dangerous — or, at the very least, quite worrisome — that an entertaining political neophyte could become governor. During the fall campaign Mr. Ventura said he favored legalizing prostitution, deferred to his running mate on most complex issues of education, and frequently admitted he had no idea of what to do about the state's economy. It's not an elitist stretch to suggest that such an "agenda" could be detrimental to the wellbeing of a state.

What might the media have done? In addition to covering Mr. Ventura much more extensively than they did his two challengers, they might have:

- Doggedly questioned him about his ideas on economics.
- Not taken "I don't know" answers, but probed to find out why he didn't know, whether he thought he should know, when he expected to know, etc.
- Created investigative teams of top reporters to find out more of Mr. Ventura's past, to interview his many past associates over the years, and to create a truly comprehensive profile of the candidate.
- Repeatedly reported on his lack of education policies.
- Much more extensively written about him in their editorial and opinion pages.

The Twin Cities are fortunate to have some excellent journalists, a number of whom have won acclaim for investigative journalism ranging from the local Premack Award to the Pulitzer Prize. Clearly, the local media could have done a spectacular job of covering Mr. Ventura had that been its decision.

Would the outcome have been any different had the local media strenuously covered Mr. Ventura? Would such coverage have mattered to the 37 percent of voters who voted for "Ventura" on election night? Possibly not, but having given Mr. Ventura only "softball" coverage, we'll never really know for sure whether serious, prolonged coverage would have made a difference. And that a Ventura governorship may eventually be better than many predicted is hardly justification for having avoided tough, pointed coverage of candidate Ventura.

I've noticed that the coverage of Mr. Ventura has become more serious and investigative in nature since his election. I can't help wondering what the point is of now exploring his views, instead of examining them before the election. A colleague of mine who worked at the *Times-Picayune* during the time when Mr.

Duke was elected a state legislator, compares such after-the-win coverage to learning to drive after you've already crashed.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not equating Mr. Ventura's political ignorance with Mr. Duke's racist past. I am saying, though, that when a person who has made a living faking athleticism suddenly becomes a political contender, it's time for the media to carefully examine the person to let the voters know who he is, what his policies might be, and what the consequences might be were he elected.

The media might respond that it would be unfair to Mr. Ventura to cover him more strenuously in the last few weeks before the election than it did his two major challengers. But by not covering his candidacy more strenuously, the media were unfair to the voters of the state, who deserved to know more about the person for whom many of them ultimately voted.

— William A. Babcock
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