

MINNESOTA NEWS COUNCIL

# Study: Race a subtle issue in coverage of coaches

No racism found, but other effects noted

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Was race an issue in the media's coverage of several recent coaching scandals in Minnesota?

A report commissioned by the Minnesota News Council indicates that perhaps it played a part — not overtly, but more in the way the questions and stories were framed.

Three main conclusions came out of the study: that there didn't seem to be a racial slant to news coverage in Minnesota; that newspaper coverage critical of white male coaches has less effect on their careers than it has on black coaches; and that news organizations should further explore how racial stereotypes are formed and what can be done to break them.

The study analyzed whether there was a difference in media coverage for two white coaches and two black coaches — all with personal and/or professional problems over the past two decades.

University of Michigan professor C. Keith Harrison said while he found no blatant racism in the 102 articles he analyzed, the weight of the negative coverage about two black coaches created unfairness because of the way white readers might interpret the stories.

There were far more stories written about the black coaches and more were considered "negative" — that is, they reinforced a stereotype. But Harrison acknowledged that part of the reason more stories were written was simply because the allegations were more serious against the two black coaches.

Former University of Minnesota men's basketball coach Clem Haskins left the school after a 1999 contract buyout followed a lengthy investigation into academic cheating among his players. Haskins, who is black, is no longer coaching. Minnesota Vikings coach Dennis Green, also black, has remained in his job despite allegations of sexual harassment and a lawsuit in which a woman claimed Green got her pregnant and then paid her to have an abortion. The lawsuit was dismissed.

Jim Dutcher, a white coach who preceded Haskins as the Gophers' basketball coach, resigned in 1986 after three of his players were arrested and charged with rape. Six years later, Dutcher was back as a TV analyst at Minnesota basketball games.

The other white coach, Doug Woog, was eased out of his job as the University of

Minnesota's men's hockey coach after allegedly paying a student athlete \$500 for tuition expenses. He was offered and accepted another job at the university.

"Obviously, reporters must tell the facts," the study said. "How they frame the facts is the key."

Harrison said writers should simply frame all the questions the same way — across ethnic and gender and class lines. For instance, it might be appropriate for the local papers to report on the black community's reaction to the Haskins situation, but then they also should survey the white community when a white coach comes under scrutiny, he said.

Walker Lundy, editor of the St. Paul Pioneer Press, said race rarely should have any role in sportswriting.

"I think sports is probably the most color-blind arena in society, both in terms of performance on the field and news coverage," he said. "If you win, folks love you and if you lose, folks don't."

He added that he believed the Pioneer Press' coverage of the cheating scandal under Haskins was "exemplary in every way, including the racial angle." The paper was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage.

Editors there discussed the issue before the first story was

written and decided race was not an issue in the story. Haskins' race was never mentioned in the paper until after leaders of the black community complained that news outlets had published or broadcast reports that would have been different if the coach were white.

As for the report's suggestion that black coaches have a more difficult time finding a job after critical newspaper coverage than white coaches, Lundy had a simple answer.

"Whether Clem Haskins would be employable wasn't something we thought about," he said. "We've got to worry about getting the facts straight."

Pam Fine, managing editor of the Star Tribune of Minneapolis, agreed. "I think no matter who we're writing about, we have to be sensitive to the implications of the fallout, but we're not responsible for how people react to their misdoings."

The study, "Reporting in Black and White: Coverage of Coaching Scandals in Minnesota," was among the topics of debate Wednesday evening at a forum, sponsored by the Minnesota News Council and paid for — as was the study — by a \$20,000 grant from the Ford Foundation.