

When It Comes to Headlines, Winning Really is Everything

by Jason A. Martin

When newspaper and wire journalists select their sources, they help to determine which people or organizations receive more frequent and extensive public exposure in the print media. These decisions are often analyzed through media visibility studies. Most visibility research has focused on which lawmakers received greater coverage and what variables might predict increased media attention.¹ However, there appears to be little if any research focused on other professions that are desirous of news coverage. Media visibility studies that have not dealt with politics have primarily focused on differences in coverage based on age, gender, ethnicity or race.²

This study investigates the source selection and visibility of a specific publicity-seeking group—major-college football coaches. Their occupation is marked by contractual obligations to meet with the media and public and by their own self-motivations to seek out news coverage to assist in recruiting and fund-raising efforts.³ This study examines whether print journalists have developed patterns of coverage consistent with their own professional news values or reliant on factors that

are not necessarily newsworthy.

Major-college football coaches (defined as the 120 coaches in the National Collegiate Athletic Association football bowl subdivision) are a unique group. Poll data indicate that football reigns as the overwhelming favorite choice as an American spectator sport and leisure activity.⁴ And coaches are distinguished in their reliance on news coverage to foster nationwide rankings and to assist them in recruiting efforts to ensure their professional success. Few other professions require regularly scheduled press conferences with media multiple times per week as do college football coaches. College football coaches also benefit from a phalanx of media-relations staffers who arrange interviews and coordinate speaking appearances and promotional materials for them.⁵ The potential benefits of increased visibility and the potential pitfalls of shirking media coverage certainly provide enormous incentive for coaches to engage media audiences.

Yet the media also may select or emphasize coverage and play a role in which sources are visible. Previous studies have focused on the sophistication of media source choice and shown

that coverage improves when media have better awareness and context about how they cover topics and when they make attempts to question why they repeatedly use certain sources.⁶ A better understanding of why certain individuals are more visible in the media could contribute to more reflection about journalists' sourcing practices.

Literature Review

Previous studies have found support for an interaction of internal and external factors on selected sources. A content analysis by Weaver and Wilhoit of sources selected across four Congresses found support for predictions that seniority, committee assignment and activity explained visibility.⁷ Miller conducted a similar study of Congress that found that, even when a legislator actively sought publicity, he or she was limited by the nature of his or her constituency and by the topics in the news.⁸

This study's independent variables were influenced by the work of Matthews, who found that senators' visibility was related to a combination of personal and external factors.⁹ Weaver and Wilhoit based their study on Matthews' measures and provided the precedent for adaptation and experimentation with such variables.¹⁰ Therefore, independent variables were selected that mirrored those previous studies of political leaders wherever possible (e.g., seniority for both senators and coaches) or translated relative measures of success (e.g., committee assignment vs. winning percentage and bowl appearances).

Lazarsfeld and Merton found that

media confer prestige and enhance authority of certain individuals through legitimizing their status,¹¹ and Klapper noted that media can transform personalities into charismatic symbols to which the public responds.¹² Gans established that news is dominated by the "knowns" or people who already are prominent.¹³ Roscho indicated that "big names" made the news more often because they tended to have more information than did "lesser names" and also because the "big names" usually created action that concerned more people.¹⁴ Hess found that among this well-known and well-used group of news sources, personality traits and eccentric characters were the most likely to distinguish themselves and make an impact on the media covering them.¹⁵ Those results were confirmed by Streitmatter, who showed that extroverted presidents received as much as two to three times the coverage of their introverted counterparts.¹⁶

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were based on many of the conclusions of Matthews and the studies of political media visibility that followed his work. These hypotheses examine both internal and external visibility factors. Prestige has been shown to be a reliable predictor of visibility.¹⁷ Coaches of teams in the weekly top 25 rankings receive increased exposure in national newspaper and wire round-ups of game action, plus they benefit from an increased number of preview stories. Also coaches engaged in higher profile games receive more newspaper and wire feature coverage during the week

preceding the game. Likewise, it stands to reason that a new coach entering a school with a winning tradition is likely to receive more exposure than one at a school that has historically struggled.

H1:

Coaches with the most experience as head coaches have significantly greater visibility than do their lower seniority colleagues.

H2:

Coaches with higher career individual winning percentages have significantly greater visibility than do their less successful colleagues.

H3:

Coaches with more career bowl appearances have significantly greater visibility than do their less successful colleagues.

H4:

Coaches whose teams were more often ranked in the final Associated Press top 25 in the past decade were significantly more visible than were their less successful colleagues.

H5:

Coaches at schools with higher winning percentages in the past decade have significantly greater visibility than do coaches at schools with lower winning percentages.

H6:

Coaches at schools that have made the most bowl appearances in the past decade have significantly greater visibility than do coaches at schools that

have made fewer appearances.

H7:

Coaches at schools that have finished in the final Associated Press top 25 rankings the most during the past decade, regardless of whether the coach was working at the school during those years, have significantly greater visibility than do coaches at schools that have been ranked lower.

H8:

Coaches at schools with greater enrollment have significantly greater visibility than do coaches at smaller-enrollment programs.

H9:

Coaches in states with larger populations have significantly greater visibility than do coaches in states with smaller populations.

H10:

Coaches at schools affiliated with the strongest conferences have significantly greater visibility than do coaches in weaker conferences.

H11:

Coaches at schools with a greater historical record of success as measured in all-time victories, winning percentage and bowl appearances will have significantly greater visibility than will those at schools that have historically performed more poorly.

Method

This quantitative content analysis measured the visibility of major college

football coaches during the 2005 season in the Associated Press and *USA Today*. The unit of analysis was a single story, and the total number of mentions for each coach served as the dependent variable. This measure did not account for valence, nor the length or breadth of each mention. The author coded 17,093 articles from the Lexis-Nexis electronic database for dates between Aug. 1, 2005 and Jan. 10, 2006, a period that covered the length of the season. National publications were selected to control for local or regional biases in coverage. This method for measuring the dependent variable was patterned after Weaver and Wilhoit's study of U.S. senators' media visibility.¹⁸

Due to a very high correlation between the two news sources (.78), the category of total mentions was used as the main dependent variable that accounted for combined mentions in the AP and *USA Today*.

Statistical data for independent variables about the schools and coaches were retrieved from the *ESPN College Football Encyclopedia*.¹⁹ School enrollments were recorded using data supplied on each school's official Web site. State populations were acquired using U.S. census data. "Conference strength" was measured using the mean of five online services that ranked the variable for the 2005 college football season.²⁰

Results

The sample produced 17,093 articles covering football coaches with a mean of 143.6 mentions per coach. The visibility measure was extremely scattered from a high of 686 (Joe Paterno,

Penn State) to a low of seven (Rickey Bustle, Louisiana-Lafayette).

The length of time the coach had been employed as a college head coach yielded a significant correlation with total mentions (.30) and confirmed H1.

The coach's individual career winning percentage showed a significant correlation with total mentions at .47, confirming H2. An explanation for the relative weakness compared to other variables might be that coaches can achieve impressive win-loss records in the less regarded conferences but still remain relatively obscure to national media.

The coach's number of bowl appearances produced a significant correlation with total mentions (.59), supporting H3. Bowl appearances may be a more precise measurement of a coach's success than winning percentage because there are a limited number of postseason games. Also, participation in a bowl lengthens a team's season and creates more opportunities for coverage. This variable also reflected an elite level of experience in the sense that it measured success coupled with seniority.

The number of times a coach led his team to a ranking in the final Associated Press top 25 poll correlated strongly (.63) with total mentions and was statistically significant, confirming H4. When a team is ranked in the AP top 25, newspapers and wires are more inclined to provide coverage in pre-view stories, game coverage, features and follow-ups. The top 25 is an even more elite measure than postseason appearances because more than are 60 teams can advance The winning

percentage of the school's teams in the past decade, regardless of the coach, correlated with total mentions (.48), supporting H5.

The number of postseason bowl appearances by the school produced a significant correlation (.56), supporting H6. This result reinforces the findings for H3 that postseason bowl appearances are a strong predictor of a coach's print media exposure.

The number of times a school was ranked in the final Associated Press top 25 produced a significant correlation (.67), which supports H7 and also the findings for H4 that the AP top 25 ranking is a strong predictor of visibility. School enrollment also produced a significant correlation with total mentions (.37), supporting H8. However, the population of the state where the school was located did not correlate with visibility (.03). This hypothesis was not supported. Too many exceptions can be found in which a school in a lightly populated state receives extensive media coverage.

Conference strength correlated in a significant manner with visibility (.57), confirming H10. The long-standing success of many of these teams, which results in greater awareness of them as brand names, predicts that they receive the bulk of the national media coverage.

Findings confirmed H11 that a school's historical success correlates with its coach's media visibility, regardless of whether that coach helped establish that success. A school's all-time total of bowl appearances (.68), all-time bowl victory total (.66), all-time victories (.57) and all-time winning percentage (.53) all produced significant

correlations.

The four independent variables with the strongest correlations with media mentions were chosen for further examination: school's top 25 finishes, all-time victory total, conference strength and coach's bowl appearances. The ratio of one internal or personal variable to three external or school-centered variables also was used intentionally to be representative of the ratio of all independent variables.

First, total mentions were compared to AP top 25 finishes in the past decade. Coaches with very high visibility made up almost 61 percent of the coaches at schools with the most top 25 finishes in the past decade. Of the 28 coaches in the highest category of top-25 finishes, 61 percent were in the highest media mention category. Conversely, of the coaches in the lowest visibility quartile, nearly half (42.6 percent) were employed at schools that did not finish in the AP top 25 even once in the past decade. None of the 29 coaches in the lowest visibility quartile did better than did the moderate grouping for top 25 finishes, and only one coach who was employed at a school that did not make any final AP top 25 polls in the past decade was in the group with the most media mentions.

Second, mentions were compared to all-time victories. Again, the majority of coaches in the very high all-time victories quartile (58.6 percent) also were in the very high media mention quartile. When combined with the next-highest quartile, the percentage of coaches in the most media mentions quartile grew to 81.9 percent.

Third, total mentions were com-

pared to conference strength. Again, the highest percentage of coaches from the very high conference strength quartile (48.6 percent) was found in the very high media mention quartile. Also, coaches from the weakest group of conferences tended to be drastically more likely to be in the very low visibility quartile (79.3 percent). No coach in the weakest group of conferences was in the highest visibility quartile. And no coach from the strongest group of conferences was in the lowest visibility quartile.

In the final cross-tabulation, mentions were compared to each coach's career bowl appearances. The highest concentration of coaches again clustered toward the extremes. Coaches with the most bowl appearances were most likely to have the very high media mentions (48.5 percent). Coaches who had never made a bowl appearance were most likely to be in the very low group of media mentions (46.4 percent). If a coach had never made a bowl appearance, he did not appear in the highest visibility quartile.

Finally, linear regression analyzed how visibility is predicted from the four selected independent variables. Together, these four predicted about 60 percent of the variance in the measure of media mentions. The single strongest predictor of media mentions was the coach's career total of bowl appearances ($\beta = .32, p < .0001$). The tolerance level of .683 suggests this variable was the most independent of all the predictors.

Discussion

These findings reveal that his-

torical factors largely beyond a coach's control contribute to his visibility in national newspaper and wire services. For the most part, it matters not what the coach has accomplished by himself, but where he coaches. Coaches at traditional powers are much more likely to receive increased media exposure because of the histories and affiliations of those types of schools.

A coach's bowl appearances proved to be the statistically strongest predictor of national newspaper and wire visibility. This result means that entrenched coaches who have ascended to legendary status can count on a wealth of media attention on an annual basis regardless of immediate performance. Also, bowl appearances were the strongest of the internal factors predicting media visibility, outpacing pure winning percentage. These results mean that the longer view of looking at a coach's historical record beyond just the past decade is a more reliable predictor of media coverage. Proven coaches over many years are more likely to receive coverage than are newly successful coaches.

The statistical strength of a school's AP top 25 finishes in the past decade also indicates a certain prescribed elite level of achievement necessary to receive the greatest amount of national print media coverage. Teams that benefit from annual top 25 rankings receive significantly more coverage throughout the season.

The final two strongest media coverage predictors were all-time victories for the school and conference strength. These results reinforce the idea that how programs were established and developed may determine how heav-

ily the media cover them and how the public perceives their importance.

In total, these results point to patterns of newspaper and wire journalists' habits of source selection. Sports journalists with a national audience hypothetically are free from local coverage obligations and biases, and, therefore, frequently select their sources based on criteria based on professional news values. However, these results indicate that journalists may make decisions based on outdated achievement instead of more recent success, which is likely to be a better indicator of the real news value of the coach and team.

The strength of the historical variables compared to the weaker impact of recent results also indicates that journalists may be falling into interviewing patterns that are not reflective of the changing college football reality. These source selection decisions should be further analyzed because of the implications of disproportionate, and perhaps unwarranted, media coverage. It might be worthwhile for newspaper and wire reporters to pay closer attention to how they select their sources and which news values support their decisions.

Additionally, this study highlights several appealing areas for potential further investigation. More sophisticated measures of visibility and source selection that are able to take into account individuals' personalities and personal characteristics would add another dimension of interest and could offer more robust data for analysis. Such projects would require content analyses of the media's descriptions of coaches and perhaps

several in-depth interviews necessary with reporters with whom the coaches interact as sources. However, the idea of developing a measure ranking the charisma of coaches and correlating those measures with media visibility would be potentially very beneficial to a better understanding of journalistic practice. A systematic analysis of personality traits of sources would be useful, as would interviews with media members to determine a functional measure of "quotability," a trait of providing interesting copy that certainly influences reporters selection of which coaches to make more visible.

Notes

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20. An index was compiled using rankings from *USA Today*, *Seattle Times*, Teamrankings.com, Colley's and Nolan.

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