



Scott Maclay

Jonesboro residents tell The Freedom Forum's Kerry Brock (onstage) how media coverage of the shootings affected their community.

Examining Jonesboro coverage provides lessons for press, public

BY ROBERT H. GILES

This report on how the press covered the schoolyard shootings in Jonesboro, Ark., is part of a multiyear examination of fairness in the news media by The Freedom Forum.

We call this initiative "Free Press/Fair Press." Its mission is to enhance our free press, to increase fairness in the news media and to improve public perception of fairness in the press. We began this project in 1997 with the premise that public standards for the news media are higher than ever, but some journalists may not understand that. Conversely, the mainstream news media have improved greatly, and the public may not be aware of that. Our examination of fairness is taking place in a number of ways with the purpose of improving understanding between the public and the press.

Three weeks after the tragedy at Westside Middle School, The Freedom Forum joined with *The Jonesboro Sun* and the College of Communications at Arkansas State University to invite residents of the community to talk about their perceptions of how the press covered this story.

This seemed to be a significant opportunity to hear from a community that was attempting to cope with a tragic event that also had been the focus of extraordinary national and international media coverage.

About 300 attended the "Speak Out." Many who came forward to share their thoughts had specific criticisms of the coverage: intrusive behavior by journalists armed with

microphones and cameras, invading the privacy of victims; reliance on children as news sources; and drawing quick conclusions about the character of life in a rural, Southern town — a perception that was deeply resented as a stereotype.

Others who spoke recognized the important role of the press in telling this story and in helping the community as it sought to cope with the tragedy. *The Jonesboro Sun* was praised repeatedly for the balance, the accuracy and the help that its coverage provided.

The intense and wide-ranging discussion that evening suggested a further examination of how the press covered this story. In the weeks that followed, The Freedom Forum sent a team of reporters to Jonesboro to follow up on the comments and stories heard that night. We tracked down reports of inappropriate

behavior by individual journalists. We interviewed victims and thoughtful observers of the news-gathering. We talked to journalists who covered the story, and to their editors. We assessed the coverage of *The Jonesboro Sun*, national print media and regional and national television news organizations.

Our purpose is to learn the lessons of the Westside Middle School story and to share them with journalists and the public, in the belief that from experiences such as this we can better understand the role and the responsibilities of a free and fair press.

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Robert H. Giles, a senior vice president of The Freedom Forum and executive director of the Media Studies Center, directs the "Free Press/Fair Press" project. His newspaper career began 40 years ago at the *Akron* (Ohio) *Beacon Journal*. Before joining The Freedom Forum in 1997, he was editor and publisher of *The Detroit News*. Both the *Beacon Journal* and the *News* won Pulitzer Prizes under his leadership. He is a past president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.