

Identification of minor suspects trickles out

Decision often influenced by what other news outlets did

While *The New York Times* was the first among major news organizations to identify the Jonesboro shooting suspects, it was not alone. *The Jonesboro Sun* published the boys' names and photos the same day. Local television station KAIT also identified them on March 25.

Many news organizations have a policy of not identifying minors in juvenile crime reports. But exceptions are made and decisions often can be influenced by what other members of the news media do. Among those responding to a survey about identifying the Jonesboro suspects, many acknowledged that a factor in their decision was that other news organizations already had identified the boys. The responses, with the date and/or time (EST) of identification in parentheses:

"Bill Keller, managing editor of The New York Times, said that he made the decision to print the names in Wednesday's issue (March 25) in about five minutes. He said the call was unusually easy because so many people had seen the crime, because most people in Jonesboro knew the suspects' identities, and because exploring the suspects' backgrounds was an important part of understanding the story."

— from a story by **Mike Allen** in *The New York Times*, March 27, 1998

The New York Times (March 25)

Why: "Our policy with respect to juveniles is to be very cautious and to talk about it. ... We're in the publishing business. To my mind, the burden of argument is on those who say, 'Don't publish.' "

— **Bill Keller**, managing editor (from story quoted at left)

The Associated Press (March 25, 8:09 a.m.)

Why: "We have no blanket rule against identifying juvenile suspects. Our policy is to follow local law and where not prohibited, weigh each case to determine, among other considerations: Are the identifications important for news purposes? Have the identifications been confirmed? Have the identifications already been widely disseminated in the community?"

— **Tori Smith**, corporate communications

Star Tribune, Minneapolis (March 25)

Why: "When adolescents commit heinous crimes such as murder, the accountability must be there."

— **Tim J. McGuire**, editor

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (March 26)

Why: "Our general policy is not to publish names of minors. However, given the heinousness of the crime and the fact that their names had already been reported in the national media, we felt we could no longer protect their anonymity."

— **Bob Lutgen**, spokesman

The Commercial Appeal, Memphis, Tenn. (March 26)

Why: "Our policy is to print the names of minors who commit serious adult crimes, unless there is a compelling reason not to, but we do so only after they have been officially charged by a law enforcement agency."

— **Charles Bernsen**, metro editor

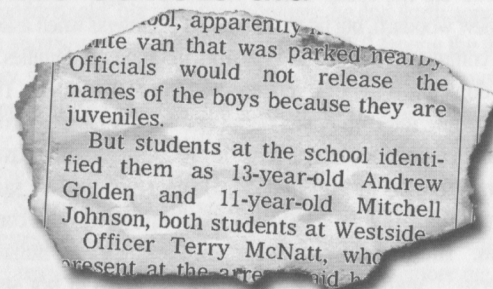
USA TODAY (March 26)

Why: "We decided we would use the names of the boys if they were formally accused of the shootings. On the 24th, the police did not identify them and they were not arraigned. ... On the 25th, the boys were arraigned. We printed the names on the 26th."

— **Dave Mazzarella**, editor

The Washington Post (March 26)

Why: "[The Post] decided to identify the Jonesboro boys because their names and photographs were published in



From *The New York Times*, March 25. Note that the ages of the suspects are transposed.

their hometown paper and in many other newspapers around the country, and were broadcast by the major television networks."

— From a story March 26 in *The Washington Post*

The Sacramento Bee (March 29)

Why: "We have [a] rule — but it's not set in concrete — that we do not name juveniles until they are adjudicated as adults. It was a tough decision, but in this case, when the father of Mitchell Johnson went on television and talked to the newspapers ... it was very difficult not to identify his son. At that stage we decided we would go ahead. I'm not sure it was the right decision. When you have a policy you really should live by it as closely as you possibly can or it really doesn't mean anything."

— **Gregory Favre**, executive editor

ABC (March 25, 7 a.m.)

Why: "ABC chooses to release the names of minors accused of crimes on a case-by-case basis. In [this] case ABC released the names after relatives of the suspects made statements to the press."

— **Eileen Murphy**, director of public relations

CBS (March 25, 7 a.m.)

Why: "Usually, CBS News does not identify minors allegedly involved in crimes. In this case, however, the boys had been identified by other news outlets, including their hometown newspaper, by the time we were to go on the air."

— **Sandra M. Genelius**, communications director

NBC (March 25, 6:30 p.m.)

Why: "It is customary for NBC News not to identify minors who are suspects in a crime. We made an exception because there were compelling reasons, i.e., the boys had been identified by numerous other media outlets and relatives had made statements to the press."

— **Barbara Levin**, director of communications

CNN (March 25, 8 p.m.)

Why: "CNN chose to formally air the names of the juvenile suspects in a scheduled newscast after reports by numerous other news organizations. Also, the suspects' names had been used during live press briefings by police and other officials that were aired on CNN."

— **Andy Mitchell**, CNN spokesman