

# Sun's editor sets the tone for coverage: Consider 'everybody in Jonesboro' a victim

BY ROBERT J. HAIMAN

When several hundred Jonesboro residents gathered April 13 to offer their perceptions of media performance following the tragedy that had struck their small city 21 days earlier, we heard something we had not expected to hear:

The people of Jonesboro were overwhelmingly complimentary of the way *The Jonesboro Sun* had covered the story. In this time of criticism of the news media, this just doesn't happen much — and certainly not when the coverage being praised was of a horrendous shooting that left four local children and a teacher dead, 10 children wounded, two of their fellow students charged with hitting them with rifle fire, and the entire city traumatized.

At the same time, the citizens had many complaints about the way the national and international media had covered the story. Intrigued, we wanted to find out why the *Sun* was so widely praised and the out-of-town media scorned. The Freedom Forum read and analyzed the newspapers published by the *Sun* in the 21 days after the incident. We examined every page, studied every headline and photo, and read every line of copy.

## The bottom line

The *Sun* covered the story unblinkingly, in the best journalistic sense of that word. Its coverage not only was thorough and fair but a virtual model of how a small news staff can roll into a major breaking story and cover it with accuracy, balance, completeness and detachment. Moreover, the *Sun* news team not only achieved that on the first day; it maintained cruising speed for the next 20 days.

Even more impressive, it did it in a way that not only fully informed readers — shielding them from none of the details of the event — but that also helped the community deal with its grief and slowly begin to heal itself.

To accomplish that would be a worthy challenge for a staff of 100 or more. But the entire *Jonesboro Sun* news staff comprises 16 reporters and editors, three photographers, four sports staffers plus some part-time students and two society reporters. How this small staff in a sparsely populated corner of Arkansas managed to do this is a story that is not only commendable for Jonesboro. It also can be instructive for all who care about doing the job right.

The story begins with the *Sun*'s remarkable leader, John W. Troutt Jr. At 68, Troutt is editor, publisher, chief executive officer and owner. He presides over a newspaper that has grown from a circulation of 7,500 when he started working for his father and uncle in 1954 to 28,000 daily and 31,000 on

Sunday. It dominates its market in the fifth-largest city in the state and obviously is profitable. At this stage of life, many owners of small-city newspapers would be easing toward retirement and thinking about spending more time on the golf course.

Not John Troutt. Two nights a week, the tall, soft-spoken Arkansan schedules himself into the "night slot," where he puts out the newspaper. He reads all of the copy, dummies all of the pages, writes all of the headlines and stays until the newspaper goes to press at midnight. Why would he do that? "Well, I want to stay in touch with the night staff," he says, "but the real truth is that news is what I like to do." He also writes all of the editorials.

Troutt was in New Mexico on March 24 when the shooting began at Westside Middle School in the community of Bono, a 10-minute drive from downtown Jonesboro. Directing coverage of the story fell to the *Sun*'s two associate editors, Larry Fugate and Mike Overall, both of whom have worked for Troutt for about 30 years. They seem to know his mind even when he is not speaking. It was Fugate and Overall who organized the coverage. In the next 10 hours, the staff generated eight full pages of exemplary stories and photos

Troutt cut short his Santa Fe vacation and flew home. For the next

week he, Fugate, Overall and their staff worked 18 hours a day covering a story that attracted the attention of the national and international media but that, for them, was all-consuming local.

Troutt almost never gives orders; it's not his leadership style. But on this day he made a news policy decision. He told the staff: "This is a shooting story and so it has a cops-and-shooters aspect to it. But the victims are not just the 15 people who were shot. Everybody — not just the people who were hit by the bullets — is in pain. ... The victims are the entire community ... and we are going to focus our coverage on the victims. We are going to cover the two shooters, too, and thoroughly ... but we are going to maximize our coverage of the victims, because that's everybody in Jonesboro."

He also reminded them of the only policy he's ever articulated for the news staff of the *Sun*: "Do it right."

On that first day, Overall was working and Fugate was scheduled to be off. (They have equal authority and one or the other is in charge each day.) When the story broke, Overall was at lunch. "So," Fugate said, "one of the sports guys ran over to the news desk and took charge until Overall returned." Fugate, called at home, went to the school and organized the coverage there.

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— John W. Troutt Jr.,  
editor, *The Jonesboro Sun*

**Robert J. Haiman**, a

Freedom Forum senior fellow and one of several Freedom Forum representatives who monitored comments at a Jonesboro forum about media coverage of the shootings, subsequently analyzed the work of *The Jonesboro Sun*. From 1983-1997, Haiman was president of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Fla. He worked 25 years at the *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times*, rising to the position of executive editor, and is a past president of the Associated Press Managing Editors.