

Print media get high marks for coverage but fall short giving 'meaning' to tragedy

BY LAWRENCE T. MCGILL

Both the strengths and weaknesses of national and regional print media were on display in their coverage of the Westside Middle School shootings. When they stuck to reporting, they were at their best. When they tried to make meaning out of the tragedy, with one notable exception, they came up short.

In particular, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* provided exceptionally thorough and thoughtful reporting. It clearly recognized that there was a strong need for those closest to the story to come to grips with its impact on all aspects of the community. The newspaper's extensive coverage showed how vital a role the news media can play in the process of grieving and community maintenance when tragedy strikes.

At the national level, *The New York Times*, *Time* and *Newsweek* provided both detailed coverage and restrained analysis of the shootings. *USA TODAY* and *U.S. News & World Report*, though, fell victim to the malady that afflicted many news organizations in the wake of the incident, namely, the urge to speculate uninformedly on the larger social "causes" of school violence. It is not difficult to understand how the manner in which those publications invoked the notion of "a Southern culture of guns and violence" could have been interpreted as media unfairness.

The New York Times demonstrated the greatest facility in relating (and more important, showing the lack of relationship between) sociological statistics and the Jonesboro story. *Newsweek* and *Time* were no less eager than the other publications to pursue the "why" angle to the story, but they knew to pull back when their analyses began to get speculative. Each showed sound sociological and journalistic instincts in turning their focus back to the specifics of the other school shootings that had preceded Jonesboro, rather than groping for vague generalizations to explain what, to all appearances, seemed to be shaping up as a trend in school violence.

Certainly there is a need to make meaning out of events like these, and the news media are not to be faulted for attempting to do so. But few reporters have the tools necessary to carry off a coherent analysis of sociological data and trends, especially within 24 hours of an event like this. Instead, the place to ask "why" (and all the newspapers used this avenue very effectively) was on the editorial page. Here the newspapers raised the inevitable questions that must be raised when tragedies occur. But they didn't force answers to those questions. It was enough that they were raised.

March 25 First day after the shootings

Jonesboro was the lead story on Page One in both the national newspapers (*The New York Times* and *USA TODAY*) and the regional newspapers (the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* in Little Rock and *The Commercial Appeal* in

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Memphis, Tenn.). All four headlines agreed on the facts of the incident — five were dead in a schoolyard shooting; the suspects were two schoolboys.

Both *The New York Times* and *USA TODAY* featured front-page photos of gurneys being wheeled away from Westside Middle School. The *Times* showed officials removing the body of a dead girl; *USA TODAY* showed rescue personnel rushing an injured victim to an ambulance. Photos of the dead victims found their way into all four newspapers.

But beyond the headlines and heartrending photographs, coverage of the tragedy diverged considerably across the newspapers in both scope and level of detail.

In both of the national newspapers, the coverage was confined to a single story on the front page, with one or two related stories on an inside page. *USA TODAY* ran a story on the devastating psychological impact of the shootings on the school children at Westside Middle School on Page 3A, along with a speculative article ruminating on the causes of such a tragedy: "Society more violent; so are its children."

The New York Times had one secondary article, which in effect cautioned readers to avoid jumping to conclusions about trends in school violence in the wake of what was quickly coming to be known as the "Jonesboro shootings." That article, headlined "Study Finds No Big Rise in School Crime," noted that during the 1996-97 school year, there

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examined and analyzed the coverage of the Jonesboro shootings in two national newspapers, two regional newspapers and three news-magazines. McGill is director of research at The Freedom Forum Media Studies Center. He previously was manager of news audience research at NBC and a media specialist for Total Research Corp. He has taught at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University and has published numerous articles and reports about the media.