

Spin cycle: round and round in the search for meaning

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Almost from the moment the bullets stopped flying outside Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Ark., the explanations and analysis began whizzing by.

It was guns. It was the violent culture of the South. It was the violent culture of American media. It was bad parenting. It was the breakdown of the family caused by liberal politics or economic stress. It was violence against women. It was lax juvenile justice laws.

There was much that was true and valid in the instantaneous groping for meaning that followed the horrendous shooting incident in which two young boys are accused of killing four girls and one teacher, and wounding 10 others. But to many students of American culture, there can be something sadly diminished, and ultimately misleading, in the ritualized rush to instant judgment — or the rush to instant spin and advocacy — that now follows each cataclysmic lurch of the news cycle. And it is worth asking amid the flood of questions that the shootings leave in their wake whether the babble of interpreters provides insight or just sows more confusion and cynicism.

"Not only in the media but in the so-called helping services — the shrinks and social workers and counselors and the proliferation of support groups — we now have a mob of meaning makers and interpreters of why things happen," said Larry Rasmussen, a professor of social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York. "There was a time when the religious community was the locus for that, but now it happens all over the place. The question is whether that provides more clarity or whether something serious is lost amid all the verbiage."

There is, no doubt, something entirely natural and even valuable in the anguished analysis that events like the Jonesboro shootings set in motion.

In some ways, it helps fill an intrinsic need for coherence and meaning in the face of unfathomable events. In his book "News Values" (University of Chicago Press, 1996), Jack Fuller, the former publisher of the Chicago Tribune who is president of the Tribune Publishing Company, argues that at a time of information overload, making sense of events, rather than just report-

ing them, is an increasingly critical part of the journalistic franchise.

"It can be an invitation to be banal or insufferably preachy, but done well, people need to have some context, need to make sense of an event," Mr. Fuller said. "The more profoundly resonant the event, the more people need to fit it somehow into an emotional or moral context."

But the profound resonance of the Jonesboro shootings has not always lent itself to equally profound responses. Antigun groups leaped on the incident as an occasion for activism and spin. "Our children's teddy bears are subject to more regulation than are the firearms causing this public health epidemic," said a spokesman for an antigun group sponsoring a day of protest May 2 on behalf of the 50,000 young victims of gun violence over the last 10 years.

On one of the television shows endlessly dissecting the event, Oliver L. North, the former Iran-Contra figure-turned-politician-turned-radio-personality, said it was "unconscionable" for gun-control advocates to try to make political hay out of the tragedy. Then he substituted his own spin, saying that as a life member of the N.R.A. and as someone who grew up "with a .22 rifle in one hand and a fishing rod in the other," the tragedy proved that the responsibility for raising kids rests with parents, not Federal, state or local governments.

It is a reminder how much of what passes for analysis is really little more than advocacy.

"Instead of just going there and yanking on the heart strings, we've now got armies of pundits ready to hold forth on a moment's notice with various simplistic notions of what just went down," said Mark Crispin Miller, who teaches courses on the media at New York University. "We don't use the word 'propaganda' much anymore, but the constant heavy drone of knowing voices out there is largely a chorus of propagandists talking at us."

The Long View

And while the Arkansas shootings struck many as an entirely appropriate vehicle for examining important issues, particularly gun use and violence, many of the pat explanations fell flat.

The South may in fact have more guns than the rest of the nation. But given that the legacy of guns and violence dates from colonial times, that does little to explain the recent rash of shootings in Jonesboro or Pearl, Miss., or Paducah, Ky.

And just as House Speaker Newt Gingrich drew much criticism with his pronouncements that

Susan Smith killing her children in South Carolina or a gruesome killing in Chicago a few months later were arguments for electing Republicans, many observers said the search for quick meanings in complicated events can get in the way of the search for deeper ones.

"One thing religion has, which is not very popular in the media, is the long view of history," said Donald W. Shriver, president emeritus of Union Theological Seminary, who teaches a course on religion and the media at Columbia University. "Jews, Christians and Muslims rely on documents 2,000 and 3,000 years old, not on today's headlines. I wish news people were able more often to raise serious questions about the long-range meaning of events without trying to answer them. That would be a better contribution to moral and religious reflection than premature moralizing."

Others say that in the rush to instant judgment, it's not just the answers that fall short, it's also the questions.

It's Noisy Out There

June Jordan, a professor of African-American studies at the University of California at Berkeley, notes that the overall frame for the coverage in Jonesboro — How could it happen in a nice small town like this? — differs sharply from similar inner-city tragedies, where the context is often the inherent depravity of the urban environment and its inhabitants.

"So much of what we hear through the media, comes through such a racialized prism," Professor Jordan said.

Mr. Fuller and many journalists argue that the noise level of contemporary society is so high and the quantity of information so heavy that the question is not whether those in the media and elsewhere should struggle to make sense of it, but how well they do it.

"We need to make sense of things, but that doesn't give you a license to be simple minded or leap to cosmic conclusions based on virtually nonexistent facts," Mr. Fuller said. "The way to do this properly, and the way it's done by people who do it best, is to take a situation as it is, complete with the elements of uncertainty, and deal with it on that level. It's not to make sweeping generalizations based on trivial pieces."

It may well be that people are perfectly capable of sifting out what is spin and what is more important and seeing an episode like Jonesboro both as an occasion for valid — even essential — arguments about gun control and a case with broader dilemmas beyond knowing.