

After Jonesboro: lessons for the media

The story of Jonesboro reminds us that news affects everyone — journalists, government officials and the public. When examined through the prism of fairness, the media's performance in Jonesboro can provide lessons for everyone as well. While some of these lessons are specific to the basics of good journalism, they all, if followed, can contribute to greater understanding between the press and the public.

For editors and news directors:

- Set the tone for coverage by establishing guidelines and expectations.
- Be wary of unsubstantiated information. Anything not observed by a reporter should be scrupulously attributed.
- Avoid demonizing or glorifying suspects or victims.
- Correct errors promptly and prominently in full detail.
- Set standards for the personal and professional behavior of the journalists covering the story: Obey the law, don't trespass on private property, respect the privacy of those involved.
- Know when the story is over and when to get it off Page One.
- Appreciate the value of veteran journalists who know the community and who have built relationships over the years based on trust.

For reporters and photographers:

- Remember that when a disaster or violent tragedy occurs, coverage should reflect the fact that the entire community may feel victimized, not just those directly affected.
- Understand that readers and viewers are better able to handle the grim details when they are reported in a larger context of sympathetic and extensive coverage that embraces the experience of the entire community.
- Don't hype an already powerful story or tell it in florid language.
- Avoid drawing quick conclusions, making unsubstantiated assumptions or creating stereotypes.
- Never misrepresent yourself or engage in deception to get the story.
- Report on what went right, what worked when government and the public responded to a major, newsworthy event.

For television journalists in particular:

- Consider pooling staff and resources to minimize the appearance of a media mob.

For all:

- Remember that trust is the bedrock in the relationship between the press and the community. It enables public officials to deal openly with the press by providing information that allows the story to be told quickly, completely and accurately. Trust also helps the community understand the purpose, needs and duties of the press.