

The Sun passes a test of fairness

To help gauge media fairness, a five-part formula may be helpful: accuracy + balance + completeness + detachment + ethics = fairness, or A+B+C+D+E=F. Applying this guideline to *The Jonesboro Sun*, here is how its coverage of the Westside Middle School compares.

ACCURACY: The coverage — at least for the 21 days of newspapers examined — was a model of accuracy. Only three errors of fact could be found. One was an early report that the two boys in custody were cousins. They are not and that was prominently corrected as soon as the newspaper discovered it was wrong. A second was an initial report that slain teacher Shannon Wright was pregnant, which she was not. That was clarified in a news story the following day. The third had to do with what police found in the van that had been stolen on the morning of the shootings. A first report said that in addition to the 10 weapons the boys had on or near them when arrested, others had been found in the van. That was not correct; there was additional ammunition in the van but no firearms. It appears the error actually was based on incorrect information released by a police source. The *Sun* corrected the record.

BALANCE: The *Sun's* attempt to give a fully balanced report — thorough on the details of the crime, fair to the accused — was obvious from the first day. Reporters appear to have been scrupulous in attributing to named sources everything they had not personally witnessed. The language of stories was not timid, but it was restrained. One reporter quoted a witness as saying "It looked like Beirut," but no such sweeping statements or florid metaphors were used by the journalists. A chief deputy used the word "ambush," but the reporter did not exploit it. Instead he used the deputy's full quote, which put the word in context.

The *Sun* was careful with unsubstantiated allegations, using language such as "It has been widely reported that students saw [a suspect] pull the fire alarm and then run out of the school building but police have not publicly confirmed that scenario." The only example of hyped or overripe language found was in a story on March 28 that described the boys in custody as "now considered to be the most infamous schoolyard

mass murderers in the United States."

Reporters interviewed many neighbors of the two suspects to learn more about them. An obvious effort was made to get quotes both from people who liked the boys and those who did not think so well of them. The result was a fair and balanced report with descriptions ranging from "polite boy" to "typical kid" to "rowdy kid" to "extremely hyperactive" to "troubled psychopath." As a picture began to emerge that one of the boys came from a troubled family, the newspaper also reported that the boy's stepfather had been a hero 25 years earlier when a school bus had crashed into a ravine and he had saved the lives of several fellow students. But Gretchen Woodard, mother of suspect Mitchell Johnson, said in an interview that the *Sun* didn't contact her to ask about negative characterizations of her son's behavior before they were printed. "For God's sake, if you're going to print something that are lies ... it hurts me. ... I don't know why *The Jonesboro Sun* chose to do it the way they did. They're real good at throwing accusations."

COMPLETENESS: The coverage was so voluminous it is difficult to imagine that anything of significance could have been omitted. There was a strong complaint from one reader — an Arkansas State University professor who had a daughter at Westside — that the newspaper had failed to report a potential aspect of the story. The professor said that it was not a coincidence that 14 of the 15 people struck by bullets and all five of those killed were females. The *Sun* staff said neither they nor police could find any evidence to support that view, although the newspaper could have reported the professor's theory and let the public decide its merits. There was no evidence that the newspaper made any effort to try to interview the suspects in jail, although their daily routines in confinement were reported regularly. Nor do we know from reading the newspaper whether the judge would have allowed such interviews.

Looking for angles possibly missed, The Freedom Forum examined Associated Press reports and *Time* and *Newsweek* issues dated April 6, 13 days after the shootings, and found no glaring holes in the *Sun's* coverage. The national magazines devoted much more space in their coverage to the issues of gun control and availability than the *Sun* did. The *Sun* did

relatively little staff reporting of the incident as having anything to do with the gun-control issue but did publish several state and national AP stories on the subject. Some might argue that the *Sun* could have done more on that aspect of the story. But perhaps that's a difference of perspective on the general issue of guns between journalists who live in New York City and journalists who live in semi-rural Arkansas.

DETACHMENT: This is probably the most difficult part of the formula against which to measure the performance of the *Sun*. To the extent that "detachment" means a nonaligned, unbiased effort to be fair to all sides and parties, the *Sun* gets high marks. To the extent that "detachment" means a complete, almost total arm's-length lack of interest in the effects of what gets published, the *Sun* itself probably would acknowledge that it did not fully measure up.

Editor John Troutt Jr. had made it plain that he wanted the newspaper to report thoroughly on the process of healing in the community. The evidence is clear that the staff followed his instruction without omitting other important aspects of the story. The *Sun's* coverage might well serve as a case study for both advocates and critics of the public/community/civic journalism movement.

ETHICS: All of the evidence indicates that *Sun* reporters behaved ethically while pursuing the story aggressively. They pressed hard for the news but also respected the privacy of victims. Although the first reporters and photographers arrived at the school when some of the dead and wounded were still on the ground, they respected police lines, did not interfere with the work of emergency personnel, and took no close-up photographs of personal agonies.

There are no reports of *Sun* cameras being shoved in anyone's face. No telephoto lenses reached into private homes. When some out-of-town journalists swarmed around shocked students coming out of grief counseling to rejoin their parents, *Sun* reporters did not join the swarm. Headlines, captions and text avoided inflammatory or sensational images, and the ethical issues such language suggests. The *Sun* did not pay or offer to pay for any exclusive access or material, nor did it agree to grant any requests to withhold anything from the newspaper.

A + B + C + D + E = F