

TV coverage of shootings rated 'average to quite good'

BY ED TURNER

In covering the Jonesboro shootings, television scored few major hits, but it didn't commit any major blunders. The nightly newscasts were thorough, if lacking real depth; the morning talk shows provided informed, interesting guests; the magazine shows generally were disappointing. The local and regional late-night coverage, while less sophisticated and polished, was nonetheless solid in almost all respects.

The network evening newscasts did not delve deeply into the broader issues of gun control, parental responsibility, school responsibility and authority. The reports on those topics were adequate, though the stories were formulaic.

NBC allotted the most time to the story and its coverage seemed the broadest — in part because the deft use of its "In Depth" segments gave the impression that the viewer was receiving something additional. NBC also was the most aggressive, even if some of its stories were somewhat off the mark.

On the morning talk shows, we were treated to pretty standard fare. The "touchy-feely" school of journalism was working overtime in many cases here — and that's not necessarily negative. The national audience is curious and concerned about the survivors, and in that regard such coverage serves a purpose.

But as with the network newscasts, there was too little tackling of the major issues. Katie Couric's interview on the "Today" show with Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee was neither out of bounds nor in bad taste, and Arkansans who thought otherwise were being defensive. In the handling of families and students, Couric's technique was sensitive; in her treatment of a politician, a more aggressive approach was appropriate.

Among the coverage offered by the networks' magazine shows, two pieces stand out in an otherwise lackluster field. ABC's "PrimeTime Live" on March 25 was by far the best single piece of work on the story of any screened. It featured the longest-to-date interview with the grandfather of one of the suspects and a grabber of a piece from Diane Sawyer interviewing juvenile killers, which was fascinating viewing. But it also was thorough and added knowledge. It was smart, meaningful journalism. John Quinones' interview with a suspect's mother on ABC's "20/20" on March 27 also was a worthy piece of work.

In Jonesboro, the relatively small staff of television station KAIT produced solid reports on what happened. The reports often were long on emotion, but they did not embarrass, mislead or inflame. In a sense, the station served as a place where the community could grieve and the newscasts undoubtedly were appreciated for their sensitive tone. On the flip side, the station came up short on breaking new developments and exploring the larger issues. Not until late in the story did it address the "how" and "why." But in all fairness, a story of this

magnitude simply may have been too much of an assignment for a small affiliate.

The stations in Little Rock (KATV) and Memphis, Tenn., (WMC) made a full commitment to the story. Their reporting was fair without being alarming. Here, too, the emotional side was played high, but the regional stations made smart use of network footage to help explain the more difficult "issues" stories. Locally produced material was solid, not sensational or sensationalized. The coverage was competent.

In sum, the quality of the television journalism in the Jonesboro story — locally, regionally and nationally — ranged from average to quite good. Reporting generally was competent, controlled and, when it needed to be, compassionate. Among the networks, ABC gets the trophy for its body of work. NBC was interesting with an edge. CBS was quite ordinary.

At times the coverage at every level was awash with pathos and bathos; that probably is the pattern of contemporary television journalism. But on a story like this, a moderate to high level of emotion is to be expected — and that is not necessarily bad for a community, a region or even a nation. Like KAIT in Jonesboro, the networks may have opened up a place of grieving to accommodate a national audience. Is that journalism? Insofar as human emotions are part of any tragedy, yes.

Despite the fact that a breaking story like this one can be a veritable quagmire for objectivity, nothing in the coverage reviewed here raised the red flag of bias. Much of it was more superficial than illuminating, but overall it was fair.

Starting on the next page is a daily summary of news programs and an analysis of each day's broadcast for the first four days of coverage (March 24-27). The Jonesboro story was the lead story on the network nightly newscasts all four nights.

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RECORD TV COVERAGE

Coverage of the Jonesboro shootings was unprecedented for nightly newscasts on ABC, CBS and NBC. According to The Tyndall Report's database of network newscasts for the past 11 years, Jonesboro received 68 minutes of air time in its first five weekdays of coverage, topping such stories as the slaying of O.J. Simpson's wife and her friend.

