

East Texas town unfairly branded as racist after 1998 hate crime, study finds

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As the Sept. 21 execution date looms for a man convicted for his role in chaining and dragging a black man to his death, attention again will be focused on the small East Texas town of Jasper, vilified worldwide as racist after the 1998 murder.

But a study done over a 13-year period by researchers Cassy Burleson, Ph.D., and Mia Moody, Ph.D., in Baylor University's department of journalism and media arts, shows that the [reputation](#) of Jasper — population of about 8,000 — was fueled largely by stereotyping of the town by major global media. In contrast, the community's weekly newspaper — The Jasper Newsboy — had a head start in understanding the city's true politics and culture, which helped other journalists report the event more realistically soon after the coverage began. But the change came too late, the study found. An article about Baylor researchers' study of how media globally handled coverage will be published in November in the [Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas](#).

By the time major media began to portray the tragedy as an exception to the rule in Jasper, the damage had been done — and continues to affect the city's reputation and cultural and political climate today, the researchers said. Three Jasper men were convicted of the hate crime against James Byrd Jr., who was beaten, chained by his ankles to a pickup truck and hauled for miles, leaving body parts scattered along the road.

Lawrence Russell Brewer is on Texas' Death Row and scheduled to die Sept. 21. Also sentenced to die is John William King, whose case is on appeal, while Shawn Berry, who was recruited by the other men — parolees — was sentenced to life in prison.

"The small town paid a high price for a hate crime three people committed," the researchers wrote in their article, "Through a glass darkly: A comparison of Jasper Newsboy coverage with elite publications during the James Byrd Jr. Murder."

For their research, Moody and Burleson — under the auspices of Baylor's Institute for Oral History — compared and contrasted coverage by The New York Times, USA Today, the Houston Chronicle and the Los Angeles Times with that of the Jasper paper. They also interviewed 15 African-American and Caucasian residents, among them Byrd's sisters, former and current mayors, a former Newsboy publisher/editor and a former sheriff.

The accounts published the first few days after the murder clearly portrayed Jasper as a racist community. Throughout history, Moody and Burleson wrote, media often have depicted Texas residents as "traditional, self-righteous, simple-minded, violent and racist on the one hand; and possessing a love for God, land and family on the other."

In keeping with that, "out-of-town scribes scalded Jasper's image under the media's magnifying glass, a glass made darker by reporters looking for a Gothic novel, revealing only a blurred outline of the truth," Burleson and Moody wrote.

But later reports in 1998 portrayed the city as a victim of stereotyping. Major media changed their perspective after townspeople turned away the Ku Klux Klan, which tried to use the situation to gather support, and after Byrd's family turned away offers by the Black Panthers to seek

revenge, the researchers said. Local leaders pleaded that the community not be branded as racist because of the actions of a violent few.

From the beginning, the Newsboy— knowledgeable about the town's political climate, leadership and race relations — positively portrayed Jasper, which did not fit the bill as racist, the researchers said. Among its black leaders were several elected officials, a hospital administrator and the chair of the chamber of commerce.

The Jasper newspaper served as an information clearinghouse for out-of-town reporters seeking background about the town and individuals to interview, the researchers wrote.

Over time, by blending civic journalism with crisis communication, the Newsboy — ranked by the Texas Press Association as the top community weekly for general excellence in 2010 — has aided the town somewhat in refuting its image as racist, the researchers wrote.

"But Jasper still hasn't restored its image and has had a recent controversy regarding reverse discrimination in the news," Burleson said.

The town's predominantly black city council recently opted for a black police chief, whom many townspeople argue is less qualified than white applicants. Sixteen applicants have filed reverse discrimination suits.

Moody and Burleson plan to continue interviews with Jasper residents.

"We want to preserve multiple viewpoints as a path to the truth of this story — for posterity and so it will never happen again," Burleson said.

Provided by Baylor University

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