

Tragedy has lasting effect on TV news

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You're not alone: Even people in the TV news business are dreading this week's television coverage of the Columbine anniversary.

Local TV newsrooms are engaged in internal debates about how to handle the milestone. A year ago, they relied on gut reaction; for the anniversary they have the chance to think, plan and debate. How much of the footage from April 20 should be rebroadcast? Is it necessary to show it at all? No one wants to re-traumatize viewers, but doesn't journalistic responsibility demand a recounting of the facts, with accompanying images?

One year later, Columbine has an enduring effect on electronic journalism in Denver. Most notably, it has inspired continuing ethical arguments over how to treat the story in both words and pictures.

"We're better today than we were a year ago," said KCNC News Director Angie Kucharski.

Her competitors echo that sentiment. All say they are more likely to have ethical discussions now than before Columbine, weighing the journalistic merits of a story and the public interest. All say they are more conscious of the power and responsibility that come with new technology, like cell phones and powerful cameras on helicopters. True, they should have been aware of their power and responsibility before. Yet all are proud of their coverage of Columbine.

The airwaves will be flooded with memories leading up to April 20 as the media reflexively kick into replay mode. But how different will the hometown coverage be from the worldwide reports?

Pressure from Columbine families has been growing. A press conference was held in an effort by the families to direct the tone of coverage and head off hounding by the media. To some, even aerial pictures of the building from that day are too painful to see again. The networks won't listen to editorial demands, but will local stations be persuaded to retell the story with specific requests in mind?

Post-Columbine, the local media "worked very hard to preserve their relationships with the community," Channel 4's Kucharski said.

"Every station in town has forged wonderful relationships with the families," said Channel 7 News Director Diane Mulligan. Yet, "there has been more pressure exerted on the stations here than anywhere I've ever seen. ... The intent in this newsroom from the beginning was to be extremely responsible and to listen to the community. We made choices that day, minute by minute. There are now people who feel comfortable limiting what we do. We have to be careful."

The national media are, of course, less invested in the local community and less likely to tiptoe around local sensitivities. Local stations are more likely to bow to pressure from Columbine families to soften their reports and focus more on healing than on the events of last April 20. The "National Enquirer TV"-like shows are, as usual, the least accountable and the most sensational, lacking in terms of both ethics and etiquette.

Tom Brokaw, in Denver last week for a televised forum on guns, acknowledged the difficulty of re-traumatizing victims with media attention.

"It's a dilemma," the NBC News anchor said. "I try to put myself in the shoes and in the hearts of the parents. I fully understand why they don't want it dredged up again." But the event has continuing national significance.

"Columbine was, in a way, a wakeup call that went well beyond the place of guns in society. I know lots of parents who got lot closer to their kids after Columbine."

Those who don't want it "dredged up," certain Columbine families interested in controlling how local stations handle the anniversary, have been quite vocal.

"I appreciate the dialogue," said KCNC's Kucharski. However, "we would be remiss in not providing some coverage at this important milestone." Her station has re broadcast footage from the day of the Columbine siege "only a handful of times."

"It's a very fine line to walk," KMGH's Mulligan said. "We err on the side of being conservative, and that's a good thing. But we have to be careful to protect journalistic integrity."

KUSA offered the most criticized coverage of the breaking story. Channel 9 put student cell-phone callers on the air while the school was under attack, revealed SWAT team positions and allowed a prank caller to get through to the airwaves. The tragedy might have been even worse if the gunmen had used the information beamed by TV to track the whereabouts of students or SWAT teams.

Other Denver stations have been criticized for overprotecting viewers. KMGH cut away from the sight of Patrick Ireland escaping from the library window ("I had the L.A. freeway incident in mind," the news director recalled, referring to a suicide broadcast on live TV). And KCNC refrained from airing video footage taken in the Columbine cafeteria, broadcast on CBS stations elsewhere.

To their credit, local news personnel have met with families in off-the-record sessions to discuss the coverage. And they have been thanked by families whose privacy was respected. But the pressure to handle Columbine in prescribed ways continues. So does the secondguessing on what broadcasters call the most difficult story of their careers.

"I'd like to be able to tell you we've figured it out," Channel 9 News Director Patti Dennis said.

"I don't know that it would be perfect next time, either." Denver's news directors have spent considerable time reviewing their decisions regarding Columbine, personally and on panels before industry gatherings.

All say they learned lessons in the first 48 hours and in the following 12 months. Columbine was instructive, KUSA's Dennis said, because "no one had ever covered a hostage situation with 1,800 hostages. There had been nothing domestically that had that kind of volatility."

Barbara Cochran, president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association in Washington, D.C., believes Columbine represents a watershed in American journalism.

Because the story was so shocking, news people nationally watched it unfold and asked themselves how they would handle it. "Would I take that shot?" Cochran said. The news managers' first instinct is "Yes!"

"To withhold information goes against every journalistic instinct," Cochran said. "To not give in to that instinct to make everything available as you get it requires some thought about the consequences." In hindsight, there are things KUSA's Dennis would do differently.

"There were decisions we had to make in a nanosecond." If she had it to do over, Dennis said, she would "pull back on aerial coverage" and "tell viewers what you're doing, what you have and why you are or are not showing things." She also would have systems in place to check the authenticity of information flowing to the station.

"After Columbine, a few more flags went up," Dennis said.

In the Channel 4 newsroom, "it took us a while before we realized the scope and magnitude" of the story, KCNC's Kucharski said.

"Knowing what we know now, I'm more inclined to realize the importance of ... assessing what you know, taking time to make a good decision."

"We were lucky, we didn't make one editorial mistake," said Channel 7's Mulligan. "Not that we didn't learn anything." Specifically, she believes the video of kids streaming out of the school was overused last spring.

"Sometimes," Dennis said, "restraint is a good thing."

As an outgrowth of Columbine, a panel on how to create a disaster plan for newsrooms is scheduled for the RTNDA's convention this fall. "People do learn from each other's mistakes," RTNDA's Cochran said.

The news directors' group issued a set of guidelines shortly after Columbine, intended "for covering hostage-taking crises, police raids, prison uprisings or terrorist actions." Among the guidelines:

- "Always assume that the hostage taker, gunman or terrorist has access to the reporting." At Columbine, there were TVs throughout the school visible to the gunmen.

Channel 9 anchors asked student callers, live on the air, about their locations while the crisis was under way.

- "Avoid describing or showing any information that could divulge the tactics or positions of SWAT team members." Through words and pictures, Denver media outlets pinpointed SWAT team activity while the siege was in progress.
- "Keep news helicopters out of the area where the standoff is happening, as their noise can create communication problems for negotiators and their presence could scare a gunman to deadly action." The choppers were very much in evidence at Columbine, although at a distance.
- "Exercise care when interviewing family members or friends of those involved in standoff situations. Make sure the interview legitimately advances the story for the public and is not simply conducted for the shock value of the emotions conveyed." The second-guessing continues.

"Hopefully we'll all get through these next few days," Channel 4's Kucharski said. "We're all hoping they'll be relatively uneventful." As the anniversary approaches, the media's self-analysis is in full swing.

According to Channel 7's Mulligan, "we make decisions knowing in our hearts that no matter what we do, it's not going to be right for everybody."