

# The COLUMBINE SHOOTING: LIVE TELEVISION COVERAGE

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## Synopsis

There was a mass shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, April 20, 1999. It wasn't the typical story where the press shows up *after* the event occurs and reports what happened. With the Columbine tragedy, no one knew until the *next* day that 12 students, a teacher and the two killers were dead and that 20 more students were seriously injured, some paralyzed.

It was riveting drama for daytime television. Breathless high school students in fear of their lives. Mad assassins inside a school. Nearly 2,000 high school hostages. Frantic parents. A situation out of control.

Without any planning, Denver television stations jumped into emergency mode to take on the awesome responsibility of keeping viewers informed on a story that quickly gripped Denver and the nation.

The story would last for at least 10 days. But the first day was unquestionably the most intense. Covering Columbine for television would test every resource each station had. But no resource would be tested more than the ability to make snap decisions about what to air that first day under enormous pressure.

How should television journalists, outfitted with highly sophisticated equipment, cover one of the worst school shootings in history while the country is watching live? How should reporters handle interviewing rattled, sometimes hysterical teenage students? How should broadcasters handle cell phone calls from terrified students inside the school? Should they trust students they've never even spoken with? How can they control what shaken students say on live

television? What should be shown live? And what should not, under any circumstances, be shown?

"The most difficult decision that day was how much live to put on the air because the story was unfolding, said Diane Mulligan, KMGH news director since March 1998,"and because we didn't know all the facts or whether the shooters were in the school. The most important thing was being in the control room deciding what shots to put on the air because the carnage was fairly massive. "

## **The Narrative**

News director Patti Dennis walks in late to the 8:30 a.m. meeting at KUSA-TV in Denver on April 20, 1999. The room is full. Her executive producer fills her in. Looks like a slow news day. For no particular reason, Dennis looks around the room, and unwittingly gives her staff a heads up: "I don't know why but, oooh I feel spot news coming in my fingers," she says, wriggling them in the air.

She is right. Within three hours, the biggest story in Denver's broadcasting history is breaking.

Around 11:20 a.m., the newsroom police scanner crackles something about a kid at school with a gun. A reporter calls the Sheriff's department but it knows very little. "You already know more than I do," the media spokesman says, as he's dashing out the door for Columbine High School, a modern, suburban high school with 2,000 kids about a half-hour south of Denver.

Then the phones begin ringing. People are asking questions. What does the station know?

After a few more calls, it quickly becomes apparent to Dennis that this is real, frightening news. KUSA breaks into the "Leeza" show at 11:35 a.m., warning viewers there may be a "possible shooting" at Columbine High School and "grenades may be involved." There are no pictures; only a map of the school's location.

"At that point, we had limited information," says Dennis. "But we felt it was our responsibility to go on the air and say: 'This is what we know.' We were in and out within four minutes and back to `Leeza.'"

Denver's other two network-affiliate television stations, KCNC and KMGH, hear the same news over scanners. By 11:45 a.m., every

newsroom in Denver has lurched into "Big Story" mode. Adrenaline pumping, assignment editors begin ordering crews to the school, local hospitals, nearby neighborhoods. Reporters grab notebooks and maps; photographers reach for their gear; they all run for their cars.

"Breaking News" flashes across TV screens no matter which channel you flip to.

Telephones ring non-stop in every newsroom. What is happening? callers frantically ask. Can you tell us anything? Are children dead? Anxious parents of Columbine kids are calling, desperate for information. Students trapped inside the school call all three stations. Calls come too from teens who'd escaped the rampage of two angry teens toting guns and bombs, bombs that set off fire alarms and activate sprinkler systems inside the school.

Still, at noon, police, reporters, parents, Denver's citizens know little. Is it only two males? Are there others with weapons inside the sprawling school? Are they students? Is anyone dead? It will be hours before any one knows what has actually occurred.

"I've never had a story with the volume of people calling us to ask about or tell us what was happening," says Dennis, a 20-year KUSA veteran. At 11:55 a.m., KUSA pushes "Leeza," off the air and stays live for the next 10 hours. Its competitors follow shortly; first CBS affiliate KCNC at noon, then ABC-affiliate KMGH.

Around noon, with little information to offer viewers, KUSA decides to put Jonathan Ladd on the air live via telephone. When Ladd calls in and says he's a Columbine student, his call is shipped over to executive producer David Kaplar in the control room. Kaplar invokes the normal procedure with kids. What's your name? How old are you? Where are you? What have you seen? Would you be willing to tell us live on TV? Ladd agrees, and is switched over to co-anchors Kyle Dyer and Gary Shapiro. He tells KUSA anchors he heard an explosion. But that's all he knows.

At 12:04, KUSA tells viewers what little they know: at least two gunmen are involved, there are unconfirmed reports of injuries and bombs have gone off. At 12:15 p.m. KUSA puts another quickly screened student on the air live via telephone. His name is Bob Sapin and he says he's calling from his hiding place at school. For three minutes he talks. He's breathing hard; he sounds scared.

"They were all in black. They had submachine guns. I'm hiding behind the school in the bushes," he tells anchors Dyer and Shapiro.

"I'm praying to the Lord that they don't come out the back door." Dyer tries to reassure him that police are at the school. Co-anchor Shapiro advises Sapin to make his way over to the police S.W.A.T. teams.

At 12:45 p.m., Sapin calls back. "I saw two killers," he tells viewers. "They had black masks and black trench coats. Needless to say, I was scared." Sapin says he was in Mr. Connor's math class when the shooting began. "My math class ran," he says. "They got away. My curiosity got the best of me. I wanted to see if I could help in anyway. But when I saw the men from outside where I was hiding in the bushes, I was afraid. I chickened out."

"No, you didn't Bob," reassures Dyer. "Bob, I'm glad you got home safely."

By 1 p.m., KUSA puts another student with a cell phone inside the school on the air live. His last name is never mentioned. "I'm in a class room with locked doors," James tells anchors. "It's really noisy outside. I hear a lot of screaming. I'm all by myself." He didn't hear any gunshots, he admits, just a "bunch of threats."

Dyer steps in. "You need to get off the phone right now and call 911 immediately," she instructs.

At 1:09 p.m., James calls again saying telephone lines are jammed. He can't get through to police. "People are running up and down the hall yelling: 'They're inside the cafeteria,'" he says. "I'm just staying underneath the desk. I just hope they don't know where I am."

Dyer takes charge, promising to get James help. "Don't tell us where you are," she orders.

At 1:23 p.m., Jonathan Ladd is again live via telephone. "I've calmed down some," Ladd says. "One of my friends called his mother (from the school). She said he's hiding in the choir room."

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When seniors Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold began shooting at students inside Columbine High School that morning, every print and electronic news organization in and around Denver instantly leapt on the story, descending on the school near Littleton, Colorado by 12:30 p.m. Chaos prevailed. Reporters and photographers stood outside a yellow police tape, knowing virtually nothing and watching as events unfolded. For print journalists, while emotionally wrenching, it was not as logistically challenging as it was for television. Newspaper

reporters and photographers gathered facts, interviewed scores of people and at the day's end distilled them into a coherent account for the next day.

But for television journalists, it was an altogether different struggle. They arrived with cameras ready to broadcast live a potential hostage situation. Police S.W.A.T. teams and ambulances, sirens blaring, screamed in from all over the area. No one, including police, knew exactly what was happening inside the school. Were the killers still alive? Were they holding hostages? How many shooters were there? If they were alive, where were they? Was anyone dead? Inside the school, the noise from fire alarms and sprinkler systems, tripped by detonated bombs, added to the chaos.

Initially, students who escaped after the shooting gave police and reporters wildly varying accounts of the horrifying events inside the cafeteria and library. Some teens were eyewitnesses; others reported what they'd heard from friends. The truth was far from known. And what little police knew, they weren't sharing with the expanding crowd of journalists.

"There was so much information in the beginning and so much coming from different ways and different people that you didn't know what was right," said KUSA reporter Ginger Delgado. "So you were left to describe what you saw. Believe me there was a lot to talk about but you had to be very careful about what you said and how you attributed it."

For the three major Denver network stations, the pandemonium posed a tremendous problem. Going live at noon put pressure on each station to provide non-stop valuable information. But with scant details, what could they report? What shouldn't they report? Each person in the newsroom – producers, reporters, photojournalists and news directors – had to make split-second decisions on what to show and what to report to a nervous, captive audience of 1.5 million viewers in the Denver metropolitan area.

Dennis and the other two network news directors knew they could *not* afford to speculate on the air, or provide misleading or incorrect information. This story involved children whose safety was unknown. It required a far greater sensitivity. News directors also knew this story touched a lot of nerves in the newsroom. Staff members lived in or near Littleton. They knew friends whose kids attended Columbine or their own children went to school there or nearby. Or they had high-school age kids. If their own staffs were

personally affected by the story, the news directors knew the same would be true for viewers.

"In a breaking news story like Columbine, you are in shock," says Dennis. "It's happening in your community and you are trying to divorce yourself emotionally so you can keep your head on the job. Minute by minute, your instincts say to provide information as fast as you can. But, even waiting a minute or two can help you better clarify or filter breaking news."

But that didn't, maybe even couldn't, always happen.

At each of the three local network stations, KUSA-TV (NBC), KCNC-TV (CBS) and KMGH-TV (ABC), the decision to send every warm body to Littleton was a no-brainer. A school shooting. Possible injuries. Grenades. Maybe even dead students. Dennis, 48, and the mother of two, was in her office at Denver's largest television station (with 96 on staff) when she heard the assignment desk yell around 11:20 a.m.: "There's a kid at a school with a gun." Crews were dispatched within ten minutes. Dennis and other editors soon realized this wasn't the story they envisioned: Teen brings gun to school, adult wrestles teen to ground, gun is confiscated. No, this was BIG. Crews in the field on other stories were paged and told to get to Columbine. Fast.

"Because we are an instant medium, people were busy from the moment we realized it was a big story," recalled Dennis. KUSA's business reporter, Gregg Moss, was first on the scene, reporting via cell phone at 12:07 p.m. It would be 20 more minutes before a microwave satellite truck was in place and KUSA could start beaming live video.

Then students began calling in. Cell phones, said Dennis, played a new and dynamic role in coverage. Shortly after noon, a student saying he was in the school called KUSA. He was transferred to Kaplar in the control room. Kaplar asked his name, age, where he was, what he'd seen and if he'd be willing to tell viewers live on television.

Sure, agreed "student" Bob Sapin.

Sapin's voice was heard live on KUSA twice: at 12:15 p.m. and 12:45 p.m. Months later, a journalism magazine would tell Dennis that Sapin's calls were a prank. He wasn't hiding in bushes behind the school; Sapin (his real name) had called from Utah, where he's a 25-year-old unemployed snowboarder. CNN, the New York Times, the

Associated Press, Boston Herald, Houston Chronicle and San Francisco Chronicle used part or all of Sapin's telephone interviews, according to Brill's Content.

Dennis acknowledges the station erred in putting Sapin on the air. "It was one of those decisions we could have made smarter," said Dennis. "Now, I would have talked to him, debriefed him, taped him and thought about it. At that moment, though, every journalist I know who had an eyewitness – someone saying this is not what I heard but what I actually saw – would air him.... But you have to weigh that against the public's need to know now. The key word is now. (Sapin's) insider information was answering questions but we could have waited."

Dennis and Kaplar also allowed Columbine student Jonathan Ladd to tell viewers live that his friend was "hiding in the choir room." Law enforcement officers were particularly critical of this 1:23 p.m. interview since it was still unknown where the killers were or whether they were alive.

#### Day One at KUSA:

At about 11:50 a.m., Dennis and her executive producer, David Kaplar, headed for the control room, where live feeds from the field could be monitored and restrained if necessary.

"The first time I saw the stretchers, I got the message to my field crews: 'No tight shots.' Parents don't know. I don't want to see any faces. It's not appropriate. Too many parents were wondering what's happening. I don't think it's right to show anyone injured seriously. That compromises their privacy."

KUSA photojournalist Brad Houston and reporter Ginger Delgado teamed up at the makeshift triage site on lawns in a residential cul de sac. Delgado and other TV reporters initially spoke live via telephones to anchors, describing the confusion: Unharmed students frantically looking for friends and family, ambulances and paramedics converging, police trying to direct an out-of-control situation and scores pushing to get near the high school to watch.

When Delgado arrived, she felt overwhelmed. "I'd never seen anything like it," recalled Delgado, who had joined KUSA three years before. "Kids were crying. Bleeding. Screaming. They were in complete shock. The majority had blood spattered on their clothing. I

turned to the photographer and asked, 'What do you shoot first?' I was frazzled. Nobody really knew what was going on."

The pair immediately wrestled with how best to interview kids and how to tastefully shoot the gory scene before them.

"Cruisers would pull up with bloody kids spilling out," said Delgado. "I needed to talk to some kids to see what they saw or heard. But you didn't know how to approach them. I tried to be really sensitive and understanding. I meticulously approached the kids asking nicely: 'Do you mind if I ask you some questions?' Surprisingly, most of them agreed. Most of the kids were willing to go on camera and say what had happened. Most of the kids at the triage site had been close to the scene."

Because interviewing juveniles is often tricky, television reporters usually pre-interview them before putting them on TV. "It's one way of weeding out kids that might say something that you will regret letting get on the air," says Delgado.

But things were happening too fast for pre-interviews. Delgado spoke to students while Houston shot the scene and transmitted video back to KUSA's control room for Dennis to decide what could be aired. Dennis had an option because Houston decided to shoot footage two different ways.

"When we pulled up, I saw kids lying on the grass. I saw blood on the driveway," said Houston. "I went to the truck, pulled out my tripod and knew that I had to stay back from the people. I stayed away from the families and victims. What was important to me as a member of the community was to stay away from becoming a part of the story and just capture what was happening – as opposed to putting my camera on my shoulder and walking into it."

Since neither Houston nor Delgado knew what had happened or whether anyone was dead, Houston made sure viewers couldn't see faces well enough to identify teens. But he also shot footage showing the kids' faces. If it wasn't aired the first day, it might work in the next few days when emotions weren't so raw. "I knew we didn't want to show victims on the air when their parents didn't know," says Houston. "I did the same thing with blood. I shot the scene with blood and with no blood. We didn't put the blood shots on locally at first. But unfortunately, it went out on a live feed and then it's fair game."

Since CNN partners with KUSA, CNN ran Houston's graphic, bloody triage scenes off the live feed. Houston also saw his work on MTV, "E"



and the networks, even though he played no role in the distribution. Once cable and broadcast network stations got footage shot by local camera operators, it was fed for the world to watch live, or at least to see the same gruesome scene over and over and over.

"When we feed it raw, it's out of our hands," said Manny Sotelo Jr., KUSA director of photography. "I can say, 'Please don't use the bloody stuff.' But I'm sure there was someone at CNN in Atlanta to override that. The only way bloody stuff is not going to get on the air is for us to not send it. Or if Brad had taken the time to edit that tape and edit the blood and gory stuff. Then they wouldn't have had that. But there was no time that day."

Days later, KUSA made another mistake on air. The station ran a yearbook photo of Eric Harris. Only it wasn't Harris. It was a fellow student named Ryan Snyder. Neither he nor his family was amused. The station quickly apologized and attempted to prevent repeating the mistake, but it failed. KUSA's parent partner, NBC, already had the footage. NBC ran the incorrect photo on "Dateline" on Friday, April 23, and the photo was put on KUSA's web site. "Journalists from all over the globe wanted to partner with us and use our tapes," said Dennis. "Tapes were duplicated and the mistake was sent around the world."

Despite internal memos and a picture of the "wrong" Harris posted around the newsroom with a bold sign: "DO NOT USE THIS PHOTOGRAPH," KUSA rebroadcast the "Snyder as Harris" photo again over the weekend. The station wound up running *eight* corrections about the photo. "Using a yearbook put together by students as a reference can be dangerous," said Dennis. "Our photographer used the photo based on the reference in the back of the book. It was wrong. We spent the entire weekend calling, making sure we blocked out the wrong photo. We did a lot of work to try to mitigate one image that didn't belong on a very sensitive story."

#### The First Day At KCNC's Channel 4

KCNC's news director Angie Kucharski had started working at the CBS-affiliate only two weeks before Columbine erupted. She'd held only one staff meeting and was still checking the newsroom picture photo board to match names with faces. She didn't even know where Littleton was but she knew a random shooting inside a high school

was a Big Story. "At some very basic level, spot news is spot news. You instinctively move into a spot news mode," said Kucharski, who came from WBNS-TV in Columbus, Ohio.

"I was in my office (on April 20) and I started getting the sense of a buzz in the newsroom," recalled Kucharski, who has been a newsroom manager for ten years. "I couldn't really help the assignment desk because I didn't really know the area. I acted more as a coach and support than hands-on. I had a newsroom of very talented veterans. When I started realizing their talent, their compassion and ability, I decided to leave it to them. I don't know everything but sometimes being a good leader is knowing when to get out of the way."

KCNC general manager Marv Rockford, an 18-year veteran including a stint as news director, became a valuable resource for Kucharski. She too headed for the control room after crews were dispatched. Every decision, says Kucharski, was weighed in terms of "safety issues, sensitivity to parents and families and informing the public. 'Were the pictures and sound compatible with community values?' is something we kept asking ourselves. There's not an expectation with most TV stations in Denver that you will see dead bodies on the air."

As each station went live, information started flying. Intense pressure was put on managers to make instant decisions on incoming phone calls offering details. At 12:03 p.m., KCNC put a student on the air whom one anchor said they'd call "Jenine." Jenine was crying hysterically and difficult to decipher.

"They started shooting people," Jenine gasped during a three-minute on-air call. "At first, I didn't think it was real. Then we saw blood. We saw these two kids. They were white. Eric Harris and we didn't know the other one's name. But they had black trench coats on. They were shooting people and throwing grenades. We saw three people get shot. They were just shooting. They didn't care who they were shooting."

All-day coverage was just beginning, and KCNC had already named an alleged murderer – Eric Harris – on the air, without confirmation. What if Jenine was wrong and had confused Eric Harris with the real killers? As the day continued, details eked out – often from overwrought students and parents. But reporters were careful to try to prevent students from speculating or repeating third-hand information. KCNC reporter Mike Fierberg went live at 12:25 p.m. with two female students. Before they said a word, Fierberg spat out: "We don't want you to tell us rumors or conjectures. I just want to know

what you saw. Not what you heard." It was one way local TV reporters tried to try to control what was said over the air.

At 12:53 p.m., Fierberg volunteered this information — the kind of information that drives police and FBI agents crazy. He told viewers that a SWAT group had entered the school. "They were fired at," reported Fierberg, "and the SWAT team did indeed return the fire." When local stations started reporting SWAT team's maneuvers live, the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department asked them to stop. To not show live helicopter coverage or talk about where the SWAT team was entering the school because it might tip off the gunmen. At 1:00 p.m., police still didn't know that Harris and Klebold had earlier killed themselves with their own guns.

"We did talk to one parent how has been in contact with his kid who called on a cell phone," reported Fierberg. "A student and others locked themselves in one of the rooms. We won't tell you which room."

Overall, the three stations tried to respect the Sheriff's request. By 2 p.m., television journalists were taking more care to speculate less and trying to not disclose details that might endanger police or students still trapped inside Columbine High.

"We don't want to give away too much in case the gunmen are watching," explained KCNC anchor Kattie Kiefer.

Live television poses several problems for hostage negotiators. It can jeopardize the officers' lives if a station broadcasts SWAT team movements as they occur. It can provide information that authorities might prefer the hostage-taker or gunmen didn't know, such as whether people are dead because of his actions. And live television can provoke a hostage-taker if a neighbor or family member is interviewed and says cruel or disparaging things about him.

"Eighty-seven percent of these people are emotionally driven, and have no clear, logical goal," said Noesner.

What motivated Harris and Klebold will never be fully known. A self-made videotape made public eight months after the shooting reveals the boys' level of self-loathing and their hate for popular, athletic or minority classmates. Police learned the pair were dead somewhere between 2:30 p.m. and 3:00 p.m., according to Steve Davis of Jefferson County's Sheriff Department, so live coverage wasn't a danger in this case. But the news media didn't know that until 4 p.m., when the Sheriff held a press conference publicizing that Klebold and

Harris had killed themselves. Every decision KCNC and other stations made before 4 p.m. was based on not knowing if the gunmen were dead.

At 2 p.m., KCNC went live with a hysterical, sobbing student Bree Pasquale, cq still covered with blood. "Every one around me got shot," said Pasquale, gulping for air. "I pleaded for him not to shoot me. So he shot another girl. It was all because people were mean to him last year. There are at least 10 people dead." Some say KCNC exploited Pasquale, showing the world her pain when she was still stunned by what she'd seen. Others argue the world needed to see pure raw emotion to fully comprehend the senseless massacre.

KUSA's Ginger Delgado interviewed Pasquale around 12:30 p.m. as Pasquale stumbled alone dazed after police liberated her and other students from the school. "The big decision was that she was so hysterical that you almost felt frightened," recalled Delgado. "She was so in shock and trying to describe what she had seen. Her voice was shaking so badly and she was crying so much. I tried hard to maintain my composure but it was hard." Rather than air Pasquale live before anyone knew of deaths, KUSA held the interview, running it at 4:32 p.m. – about a half-hour after the Sheriff told reporters 23 were wounded and there were "possibly 25 fatalities." After Pasquale's interview was sent out on a feed, NBC and CNN, among others, broadcast it repeatedly until it was seared into the nation's memory.

By 3 p.m., each station already knew kids were dead but none broadcast the details until the Sheriff's Department made it official. A viewer paying close attention to KCNC coverage could have gotten the news earlier albeit inadvertently. At 2:51 p.m., a KCNC camera caught a "gasp" shot of police dragging an obviously dead body from school. Within in seconds, the station cut away, prompting reporter Paul Day to say: "I'm very reluctant to characterize what that was."

Anchor Amy Spolar too was stunned "We need to go back to that picture," Spolar said aloud. But the station never did.

"I'm sure I could find a lot of mistakes and questionable judgment calls in what we did and things I would have done differently," said Kucharski. "But you do the best you can. We are humans having to make journalistic decisions second by second. There is no magical handbook."

## DAY ONE AT KMGH-TV

On the morning of April 20, Mulligan and planning director Gail O'Brien were driving to Boulder, Colorado for the Jon Benet Ramsey story. Any day, a jury investigating the death of Jon Benet would return. The public had a morbid fascination with Ramsey after the 6-year-old beauty pageant contestant turned up dead Christmas morning 1997. Mulligan and O'Brien needed to scope out the logistics and decide how to handle the story. The public was addicted to the Ramsey story and Mulligan wanted her third-ranked station to excel on this one.

Halfway there, O'Brien's pager beeped. Mulligan pulled over. They called in. A school shooting didn't sound at the time like a big deal. But since O'Brien handles daily coverage, Mulligan drove back to Denver. She dropped O'Brien off and turned her car again toward Boulder. While driving, Mulligan flipped on her radio and heard that bombs were exploding at a local high school. Again, she turned around and headed to KMGH's newsroom (KMGH is an ABC Affiliate). She called the assignment desk telling them to send an "All Page." It means staffers must drop what they're doing and call or come to the newsroom. It's rarely used.

"I'm an assignment editor by trade," confesses Mulligan, "and I really wanted to be on the desk. But Gail is really good at moving people, and after we got most people out, I had to begin dealing with the networks. It was just nuts. Every station wanted our video."

Right away, KMGH ran into trouble. Its microwave truck got to the scene almost as quickly as police. By the time the first Channel 7 crew arrived, police had secured the scene and refused to let KMGH crews past the yellow tape to reach their truck and begin live coverage. As a result, KMGH was last on the air.

"We did a lot of reporter cell phone calls and helicopter video until we could get other microwave trucks there," says Mulligan. "We were last from the ground, but first from the air." Her station received many cell phone calls from students saying they were inside the school. "We did not put any cell phone calls on the air," she says. "We're clean."

KMGH also attempted to talk about its coverage as the day progressed. Anchor Bertha Lynn explained about 2:30 p.m. that footage viewers were about to see of students fleeing the school had been shot earlier. The station was airing it *after* it knew the students were safe. "You may on occasion see video of people being given cover by SWAT teams holding up weapons," said Lynn, when no one knew if killers were alive. "One of those will show about a dozen

students running for cover with SWAT team members. This happened about two hours after the initial shooting."

Taping the drama and showing it later was an approach each network station employed to varying degrees. Police generally would prefer that television stations tape-delay coverage during a crisis situation.

But no TV station considers itself an arm of law enforcement. KMGH acted independently when it decided at 2:38 p.m. to go live with its helicopter zooming in on the school library. It was a decision the station would later have to defend.

"Look, you can see a bloody student in the window," says anchor Lynn.

The camera catches an armored vehicle as it's moving toward the library window. SWAT team members, crouched behind it, are inching toward the school. The vehicle stops under the second-story window where a bewildered student, his left arm dangling unnaturally, appears ready to jump. "That poor person," says Lynn.

Officers reach up and pull student Patrick Ireland down. Just as he's about to slam into the truck, Mulligan orders her producer to cut away. The outcome isn't shown. Is Ireland dead? Is he critically injured?

Minutes before, Mulligan had been sitting in her office talking with the general manager. After spending the first hours in the control room, things appeared to have calmed down. "I looked up at my television and saw Bertha say: 'You can see a bloody student,' and I ran to the control room," said Mulligan.

"My thought was: 'I don't know if he's dead. Who is watching? I don't want to see the body hit the truck. It would have been just too much,'" she continued. "You have to decide what's appropriate for viewers at that time. You know friends and family are watching and that they are getting their information as it happens."

O'Brien, a mother of three and a grandmother, thinks her station was right to cut away. "If you are good in this business," says O'Brien, "you go a lot by your gut. I used to call it the 'splattering theory.' We get all the footage of the guy falling from the building top until he splatters on the ground. What do you show? Young people say, 'Show it all.' But if you have a conscience about you, you always are

aware you shouldn't show it all. If it was hard for me to watch, then I don't want viewers to watch."

Nothing was said within the next half hour on Channel 7 about Patrick Ireland's fate. Later the country would learn that three bullets shot into his head left Ireland, then-16, paralyzed on his right side.

Each station handled the Ireland footage differently. KCNC showed the Ireland footage in its entirety. But not live. The station aired the dramatic footage at 5:26 p.m., after the school was no longer under siege. KCNC reporter Paul Day and photojournalist Bill Masure had talked their way into a nearby home and had a good vantage from the third floor to capture Ireland's climactic rescue. They used an old rattan hammock as a blind to keep police from spotting them, according to a "News Photographer" magazine story in August 1999. But they weren't near a microwave truck and couldn't have gone live, says Masure.

KCNC went further than KMGH and showed Ireland crashing onto the top of the truck. However, Ireland feebly tried to sit up, and the world then knew he had, at least, survived the fall. (After extensive physical therapy, Ireland, 17, with one bullet still lodged in his brain, walks with a limp.) KCNC repeated the shot at 6:02 p.m. and that image also, courtesy of KCNC or KMGH, became part of the nation's collective memory of Columbine. At one point, ABC's "20/20" replayed the Ireland footage four times within 20 minutes.

"No one else had the Ireland footage live," says Mulligan. "We got a lot of coverage in Time, Newsweek, Broadcast magazine. When I saw the Patrick Ireland visual. I knew we had won. But in this type of situation competition takes a back seat and ethics become the biggest thing you deal with. This station has been No.3 for 20 years. We are a year into our rebuild and only six months into having a new revamped product on air. An event of this nature can change the direction of the station. It can change how viewers can see you. You start covering the story, you get people watching and then you have to think of ethics and sensitivity."

Mulligan says she was criticized by some colleagues for being too sensitive. "I had a news director from Los Angeles say to me: 'What the hell were you doing breaking away from that shot,'" says Mulligan. "Why would you cut away then?"

She was also criticized for running the Ireland story at all. By airing it as it happened, the station, said critics, potentially endangered the lives of Ireland and his rescuers. KMGH also aired live pictures of

about a dozen students running from the school and piling into police cars at 2:43 p.m.

"I don't think there was enough thought put into showing the escape routes of the students while the situation played out," says Bob Steele. "If the gunmen were still alive, and they had rifles and they saw the students running from the building on TV and knew the escape route, they could have shot at students and law enforcement. The same thing with Patrick Ireland falling out of the window. Showing that live made him and the SWAT team highly vulnerable. KMGH pulled away but not early enough, in my opinion. And they did it more, it seems, to not offend the viewers as opposed to giving away a vulnerable position. Certainly (KUSA) putting the phone calls on the air live was very dangerous too."

But KUSA too decided to show live students dashing out of the school, "fleeing for safety," according to KUSA's helicopter reporter Tony Lamonica, who narrated the rescue. Cops are running for cover behind cars, Lamonica, the station's weather reporter, told viewers. "We are going to pull the camera a little bit back. We don't want to tip the gunmen off to where the police are."

Throughout the day, each station learned names of some students murdered by Klebold and Harris. Students who'd been in the cafeteria or library, told reporters' names of friends or acquaintances killed in front of them. But none of the three stations broadcast victim names the first day.

"We knew kids were dead at about 2 p.m.," recalls Mulligan. "But we didn't know if the shooters were dead or how many more students were inside. So we didn't report it. If you report people are dead and there are hostage negotiations going on, that may be something police don't want out there. We wanted the police to report any deaths. We could take no chances on being wrong about kids dying."

Mulligan added that within the first week, KMGH uncovered a list of eight kids' names who police believed were in some way connected to the murders. But the station decided to hold the names. "Not knowing what exactly they did," said Mulligan, "we knew if we put their names on the air it could really hurt them."

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By Day One's close, every reporter, photographer, manager and assistant, involved in Columbine coverage left work emotionally and physically spent. KUSA's Ginger Delgado worked 16 hours, getting to her apartment at 1:00 a.m. She wasn't alone. Most everyone worked that long, going home only to sleep and return before 9 a.m. the next morning.

"I literally walked in my apartment, slammed the door and started crying and couldn't stop," says Delgado. "It was the images that were haunting me and the people I talked to. The somberness. You couldn't help but feel the pain and sorrow even though I didn't even know anyone involved."

KMGH's Mulligan slept in her office the first night. An aide drove to her house for clean clothes. "I have never had a story that impacted me like this," says Mulligan. "We were all crying at some point in the newsroom. It was so unbelievable. The magnanimity of it just went on and on. It lasted for 10 days. "

An adrenaline rush kept journalists going the first few days, but not the entire ten. By Day Three and Four, some were asking to be taken off the story. Twelve kids gunned down for no reason. A popular teacher murdered as he tried to shield students. It was just too painfully intense covering grieving families, funerals, distraught students and witnessing an endless river of tears. Psychologists were brought to newsrooms for people to be able to vent their emotions. "We didn't have tears the first few days," recalls KCNC's Kucharski. "They came after three days, a week. Don't underestimate how horribly shaken people are to see bloody bodies and crying parents." Months later, KCNC anchor Bill Stuart would publicly admit he was being treated for depression after covering the Columbine massacre.

Taking care of the staff with food, warm jackets, heaters in station tents (on Day Two it snowed) and even hugs, became a critical assignment for the three news directors. "Something I was not prepared for at all," admits Mulligan, "was the impact on the newsroom. You have to take care of the people in the field. My general manager and I went to Starbucks to get thermoses of coffee and cookies for my people in the field and gave people hugs."

### The National Media Descend

By Day Two, a Wednesday, the national media had fully descended. Network crews had begun arriving Tuesday afternoon. Quickly every satellite truck within an 8 to 12 hour drive from Denver was rented, according to Manny Sotelo Jr., KUSA's director of photography.

Overnight, television crews increased from about 20 on the scene to 100 or 150, says one local photojournalist.

"For the national electronic media, coverage of the ongoing story at Columbine High School is just beginning," television columnist Dusty Saunders in Denver's Rocky Mountain News warned readers. "Get used to it, Colorado."

Wednesday morning Denver television audiences awoke to NBC Today Show host Katie Couric broadcasting live from Columbine High School. CNN, Fox News and the networks each flew in scores of people. So did major newspapers such as the Washington Post, New York Times and Los Angeles Times. Journalists from Japan, England and France came to capture a piece of the horrendous tragedy. Even smaller papers such as the New Orleans Times Picayune and Cleveland Plain Dealer sent reporters. It quickly became a sea of wall-to-wall media.

"I went to Clement Park and felt sickened and upset," says KUSA photojournalist Eric Kehe. "When I turned on my camera, suddenly about 20 cameras showed up behind me. If I swung another direction and started taking pictures, everyone would see what I was doing and swarm those people."

KUSA's Brad Houston found the out-of-town media scene equally disturbing. "From the moment, we realized how big a story this was and the magnitude of it," adds Houston, "we started thinking how to cover the story sensitively without intruding on people's grief. If somebody doesn't want to talk, somebody else will. We didn't have to badger people. But not everybody took that tact."

At first, it appeared those connected to Columbine warmed to the attention. But that didn't last. As desperate producers and reporters heckled and begged for interviews with families, police, neighbors and camera-shy students, the community grew angry. "Some members of the national media were chasing food workers at the school down to their cars," says O'Brien. "A lot of times, our guys said, it was the national media stalking people, and so they told them: 'Hey, we have to live here. Cut it out.'"

KMGH's managers decided *not* to bombard the victims' families. They refused to bang on doors or pester families with phone calls – although certainly other journalists went that route. "We tried to get in the back door by calling friends of the families to see if they were willing to talk," says O'Brien. "We used PR people a lot. We made requests to interview the families. We tried to reach them through

their churches and funeral homes. But we would not camp out on a family's lawn. We tried to reach the Klebold and Harris families through their lawyers. Part of it is, that's just the ethic of Denver."

Pestering families at a time of obvious intense grief turned Denver's citizens collectively against the media, say many local journalists. The onslaught alone of hundreds of journalists overwhelmed residents. After a time, the local community lumped national, local, and foreign journalists into one evil group to focus its anger on.

"The scary thing is this is our community," says KUSA photojournalist Eric Kehe. "Our neighbors. Our friends. We pray at the same church, our kids go to the same schools. We are going to be very sensitive on how we approach people. But when the national media come in, they are there to just get their stories. They don't have to consider how do they treat people. We are left to mend the fences."

But it wasn't just the nationals invading Littleton that caused tension between hometown journalists and those parachuting in. Resentments grew when it became clear law enforcement sources and certain families of dead students preferred to talk with the national media. Given a choice between speaking to Katie Couric or a local reporter, most choose Couric. "What really got to me," says KUSA's Delgado, "was when the national media started breaking details of the investigation and we couldn't get anything. When the nationals descend, they bring in hundreds of people. Our lowly station (the largest in the market with a total staff of 96. NBC sent about 70 people) doesn't have the manpower to get what we couldn't get. You just can't compete with the networks. You have to rely on sources and contacts you've developed as a local reporter. That's when sources you've cultivated are crucial."

Two weeks later, most in the national press had gone, and local journalists were left to mop up both emotionally and physically after the media invasion. Denver journalists were left to ferret out details on the criminal investigation as well as report on the community's recovery. Six months after the shootings, KUSA's Kehe went to Columbine High School three separate times to cover "healing," stories. It was far more upsetting than he expected — and not because it was emotionally charged.

During one school visit, Kehe returned to find someone had written "News Blows," and "Media Sucks" on his KUSA-marked car. At another visit, as Kehe drove up to the school, students began heckling him: "What the f - - - are you doing here. Go the f - - - home."

"Six months later, we are still paying the price for the national media hustling people and intruding in their privacy," says Kehe. "There are a lot of angry people out there who weren't treated well by the media. I do know the way I did my job and how I treated people and I didn't deserve it. It's the locals left behind who have to pay the price and it will take a long time."

Getting past the national tragedy visited on the Denver suburbs will take a long time. It'll be years before Columbine recedes into history. Again and again, as with any major heart-breaking story, the tragedy returns to the national spotlight when certain events transpire: Columbine football championships, graduation, an injured student's first steps, a mother's book about her daughter's death, a mother's suicide, and anniversaries. The First. The Fifth. The Tenth and so on. Each time, Denver television stations will face the agonizing task of how to report the news and minimize harm to all those victimized by two highly troubled teenage boys.

"We got through the return to school in the fall," said KCNC news director Kucharski. "But it makes my stomach go into knots to think of the one-year anniversary and how we'll cover that."