

Media Blitz Raises Coverage Questions

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The media invasion of Littleton, Colo., intensified yesterday as hundreds of journalists descended on the scene of the nation's latest school-shooting tragedy, a story that instantly overshadowed the war in Yugoslavia.



Columbine High School students console each other Wednesday in a park near the school shared by the news media and mourners. (AP)

Peter Jennings, Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather, Katie Couric and Charles Gibson were among those parachuting in for live broadcasts. The massacre, which left 15 people dead, was the sole topic on a two-hour "Dateline NBC" and on ABC's "20/20" last night. Ted Koppel plans a "Nightline" town meeting tonight in Jonesboro, Ark., site of a school shooting last year, and CBS will devote "48 Hours" to the story.

But questions about the mega-coverage emerged as quickly as a parking lot near Columbine High School filled up with hundreds of media cars and satellite trucks.

Some journalists and viewers criticized KUSA-TV, the Denver NBC affiliate whose feed was picked up Tuesday by MSNBC and CNN, for inviting students trapped in the school to call the station on their cell phones. "It was a risky decision on their part," said John Moody, a Fox News vice president. "There was a real security risk that could have backfired on them."

KUSA news director Patty Dennis said the station put only one student on the air because "he had information nobody else had." She said the station, which later retracted the invitation, was trying to put students in touch with police.

Journalists scrambled yesterday to interview students, parents, medical personnel and assorted experts about what a Fox logo called "Terror in the Rockies." MSNBC talked to a man billed as a "Generation Y Teen Expert." Fox News Channel interviewed Gabe Thomas, a victim in a school shooting in Oregon last year, who was asked: "What makes a teenager crack?"

NBC's Couric spoke with a Littleton student who read a farewell letter she wrote her parents when she thought she would die. Politicians and experts were also asked about gun control, a debate that generally gets inflamed in the wake of such tragedies.

The size of the media contingent – CNN sent 70 staffers, NBC and ABC, 50 apiece – carried echoes of the tragedy in Jonesboro, where journalists were widely resented. "It was as if the media made a deep hurt far more painful," said Kerry Brock of the Freedom Forum's Media Studies Center, who moderated a 1998 town meeting in Jonesboro.

"For parents who were suffering, the portrayal of their town as a southern hick town where everyone was carrying guns around and making them available to young children was upsetting. The suggestion that the culture of Jonesboro was to blame for the tragedy was to the people who live there outrageous on the part of the media."

Earl Casey, senior vice president at CNN, said he has told his troops: "We don't camp out on the lawns of victims' families. We don't jam microphones under grieving families' noses. We're trying to learn from past instances, particularly school shootings."

"The demands of a national story like this versus the ability of a little town to respond inevitably creates resentment and feelings of intrusion," Moody said.

Erik Sorenson, an MSNBC vice president, said he pulled some promos with overly dramatic music.

"There is a ghoulishness factor to any event like this," he said. "But I can't tell you how many people I've talked to who relate extremely emotionally to what's going on here."

While reporters must respect those who want privacy, he said, "there is an almost strange need on the part of some participants to share their stories very publicly." Television, said Sorenson, "has in a weird way become our community."

Journalists also expressed concern about copycat crimes. "In these kinds of situations, you want to be careful that the way you cover the story doesn't encourage others," said ABC spokeswoman Eileen Murphy.

While the massacre generated banner headlines everywhere, the Chicago Sun-Times kept the story off the front page. Editor in Chief Nigel Wade told Reuters he didn't want to "terrify children," and the paper, which took the same approach after the Oregon shooting last year, said publicity surrounding such attacks "could be contributing to the phenomenon."