

Covering The Big One

Responding to major events is a critical challenge for news organizations. Here's how the Denver Post reacted to the shootings at Columbine High School.

By Alicia C. Shepard

Alicia C. Shepard is a former AJR senior writer and NPR ombudsman.

IT'S A PHENOMENON THAT'S become all too familiar: A deeply troubled teenage boy--or boys--storms a school, firing rounds of bullets into a crowded area, wounding and killing classmates. The stunning news--"Shots Fired in School"--bubbles over a police scanner or flashes across the screen of a silent newsroom television. Everything comes to a halt. Suddenly, no matter what time of day, the daily budget for the next day's paper is history. The big story has fallen into the lap of the local newspaper.

School violence erupted most recently at 8 a.m. on Thursday, May 20, at a high school in Conyers, Georgia, 25 miles from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution's newsroom. A 15-year-old boy, brandishing two guns, opened fire at Heritage High School, wounding six classmates. The deadline had passed for the early edition of the afternoon Journal. The presses were set to start at 9 a.m. But that day, they were delayed to allow publication of a staff-written story. The deadline for the final, normally 10:30 a.m., was pushed back nearly two hours.

"For our final edition, we had a main story that ran over 40 inches, two sidebars and a map," says Herb Steely, the Journal's assistant managing editor. "We had two people there at the school before 9 o'clock and a couple of people working the phones. We were on top of things very quickly."

How well a newspaper covers major breaking news depends on how quickly it moves into action, how efficiently it mobilizes its staff, how well it knows the range of talents of its reporters, photographers and editors.

Who will be in charge? Who is the best writer to take feeds from reporters in the field and mold them into a coherent, compelling account? Who'd be ideal for putting together a weekend reconstruction? Who are the best reporters at getting people to talk? How should the graphics department be engaged? What about photo?

"At what point do you shut down features and draft sports?" asks Gene Roberts, a former New York Times managing editor and now a journalism professor at the University of Maryland. "If you haven't thought about it, and you don't act in the first hour, some events are going to pass you by. If it hasn't

crossed your mind--who is good at writing stories under pressure?--you are in trouble. When the big moment happens, you either have a plan or you are fumbling with the best story that ever happens. My belief is that every good editor should think about how they'd cover that once-in-a-lifetime story." When a nuclear accident occurred at Pennsylvania's Three Mile Island in 1979, Roberts, then the Philadelphia Inquirer's executive editor, "essentially emptied out an entire newsroom" to cover the story, recalls James M. Naughton, then a top editor at the paper.

Past experience with a big story--a deadly hurricane, a massive earthquake, a riot, a shooting spree--makes a huge difference. It gives the staff knowledge to fall back on. That was the case at the Denver Post, which moved into action April 20 after two high school seniors killed a teacher and 12 students at Columbine High School 13 miles southwest of Denver. The two then killed themselves in the culmination of the worst school massacre in history.

Twenty-three others were injured in the gunfire.

"From a journalist's perspective, this is a story a lot of people have been waiting for a long time to cover," says Evan Dreyer, a Post assistant city editor. "It is the big story. Yet it's indescribably sad. Fifteen people are dead. That's probably the hardest thing to struggle with. Yes, it's a big story, but look at the horror. That's probably going to linger a long time."

Top editors at the 370,000-daily circulation Post felt the paper had been battle-tested in covering such stories as the JonBenet Ramsey murder in nearby Boulder, the Oklahoma City bombing trial in Denver, a summit meeting of world leaders and the mysterious disappearance of a U.S. military A-10 airplane.

But Columbine was in another league.

"We've never had anything of this magnitude before," says Jeanette Chavez, the paper's managing editor. "We don't have anything written down. I don't know that you can prepare for something like this story as a written-down plan. You just mobilize everyone and know that's what you have to do."

DEPUTY METRO EDITOR Michelle Fulcher came into the newsroom at about 10:30 a.m. on April 20. It was her second day back at work after a two-week vacation. The day before she'd spent catching up. Since she didn't have lunch plans, she decided to draft the next week's work schedule. Sometime around 11 a.m., she checked in with an assignment editor for the local NBC affiliate, KUSA-TV, as she does every day as part of a cooperative agreement. "There was absolutely nothing unusual on the log," says Fulcher, a 13-year Post veteran.

At about 11:35 a.m., Fulcher was walking away from her desk when an editorial assistant said someone from KUSA was on the phone. Strange, thought Fulcher, I just talked to them. This time it was a voice she didn't recognize, although she certainly recognized its urgency.

"Have you heard what's going on in Columbine?" the voice shouted. The caller had little information. A shooting at a high school. Possibly injuries.

Since Metro Editor Frank Scandale was away at a conference, Fulcher took command. She talked to four assistant city editors, and they immediately decided to send three or four reporters to the school.

"I have to say I was a bit skeptical at first," Fulcher says. "As a former cop reporter, shots at school are often just cap guns."

Not this time.

Across the newsroom, the police scanner was crackling: "Reports of a shooting and grenades at Columbine High School."

"As I saw Michelle walk over to the police scanner, I knew instantly it was more than the average shooting, especially when they mentioned grenades," says medical/science writer Ann Schrader, who was sitting at her desk near the scanner. "I told Michelle students would be taken to Swedish Hospital, and she looked at me and said: 'Go.'"

As Schrader left the newsroom, she wanted to grab a cell phone. But the paper only has a half-dozen, so she left the office without one. That would later prove to be a problem. As she waited for the elevator, she encountered Post Sports Editor Neal Scarbrough, who was leaving for a doctor's appointment. "She was talking excitedly about guns and a shooting at a high school," recalls Scarbrough. "But that's all she knew. I didn't know what to think."

By 12:30 p.m., terrified students and teachers hiding in the school had called the police on cell phones, and "it became clear that this was the only thing we were going to be doing for the next two weeks," says Arthur Hodges, an assistant city editor who ordinarily oversees City Hall reporters. More reporters were dispatched to the five area hospitals to wait for casualties--no one knew exactly where the wounded would be taken.

"It was total chaos," Hodges says. "No one knew what was going on. The police didn't know."

Schrader was halfway to the hospital when her pager went off. She searched for somewhere to call the city desk, settling on a 7-Eleven. "Don't go to Swedish Hospital," Fulcher told her. "Go to the triage site near the school."

That frightened Schrader. Her fourth-grade daughter attends Leawood Elementary School, only blocks from Columbine High. "I offered up a prayer for her," Schrader says. "I hope she's not scared. I hope she's safe.' I didn't know at all what I was driving into."

On her way to the triage site, Schrader was paged again. This time she called from a liquor store. It was Fulcher again. Ten people were "down"--police argot for shot--at the triage site. As she got close to the site--several front yards of ranch homes two blocks from the school--Schrader saw two ambulances screeching away.

A little after noon, Schrader parked and ran toward the scene. "Other news people were arriving," she recalls. "Dozens of kids were being brought out. Some were more seriously wounded. Guys were taking off their T-shirts and using them as tourniquets to stop the blood. I had to borrow a cell phone to call the desk. When I finally found a phone, it was difficult to call out, virtually impossible, because there were so many cell phones being used."

At the city desk, Fulcher knew this was no false alarm. No cap guns. Kids at a high school might be

dead. "Calm is not my strength," she admits. She remembers saying to herself, "OK girl, you almost deliberately have to take a deep breath and walk a little slower than you usually do." She told herself to think like a doctor, to separate her own emotions from the story, not to think about kids riddled with bullets.

"I had to make a conscious decision," she says. "I can wallow in the emotional impact of it or do my job. I can't do both. So I decided to block out the images on TV."

On a story of this magnitude, calm is crucial. So much is happening at once, it is easy for panic to become contagious. Fulcher and others realized they had to remain unruffled, and they had to form a plan establishing clear lines of authority: Which editor would be in charge of what? Reporters working the phones and those out in the field needed to know whom to contact.

Fulcher decided to break down editors' responsibilities by subject area: Dreyer would concentrate on suspects, Hodges on victims, Dan Haley on the breaking news/main story. A fourth editor, Jeff Roberts, would be in charge of anything to do with the Internet or guns. State Editor Chris Lopez would handle all nonshooting news.

"The Oklahoma City bombing trial helped a lot," says Fulcher, who coordinated the paper's coverage in June 1997. "Especially when it came to the verdict days, and we were dealing with fast-breaking news and lots of reporters on the street. We had to make sure there were clear lines of communication."

METRO EDITOR SCANDALE HAD spent the morning at a growth management seminar. At noon, he had a lunch date with Peter Mattiace, the Associated Press' Denver bureau chief. When Scandale walked into the AP bureau, people were crowded around the television. Scandale couldn't believe what he was seeing. A SWAT team was moving around a school. As he turned to leave the office, his pager went off. "All I thought," says Scandale, "is why didn't they page me sooner?" His long-planned lunch with Mattiace would have to wait.

When he got back to the newsroom, Scandale took stock of what had already happened. At least four reporters were on the scene and more were at area hospitals. Photographers had been dispatched, as had two graphics staffers.

"The first thing I did was find out which reporters were already out there," Scandale says. "You want your A-team on the big story. So I looked around the newsroom for the talent and decided to get more people out there, to make sure there were enough people at the scene." By 4 p.m., the Post had 20 reporters at or near Columbine High.

Among those Scandale sent was Peggy Lowe, a former AP reporter who, says the editor, "can work a scene like nobody else." And Kevin Simpson, "a terrific writer who is good at pulling out quotes from people in bad situations. People like to talk to Kevin because he's not hysterical." Scandale also assigned reporters to other tasks, "on the basis that they are better at behind-the-scenes stuff or working on the second-day story." The city editor, a nine-year Post veteran, was working with a relatively new staff: The roster of 56 cityside editorial employees includes 27 reporters and editors who have been hired since 1995.

Scandale, who is said to be calm under pressure, says he drew on his own experience in deciding how to handle the story. On his first day in the newspaper business in 1980--as a 21-year-old reporter for the Daily Journal in Elizabeth, New Jersey--a fire broke out at a chemical plant. "That was my first day as a news guy and I said, 'This is cool.'" He later became the now-defunct paper's city editor.

Evan Dreyer, an assistant city editor, says his experience handling the Heaven's Gate mass suicide in March 1997 for the North County Times in San Diego County, California, helped shape his approach to the Columbine story. It made him realize the importance of planning not only for the next day's paper, but for the days after that, and for the weekend editions. "That experience of watching a story get bigger and faster as time went on for days and weeks is something no journalist will ever forget, and it's certainly something to draw on," Dreyer says. "I learned you have to listen to people in the field. You have to try to be as organized as possible, which is really hard. And you have to be tolerant of disorganization."

Scandale and Dreyer agree that in dealing with a breaking megastory, it's critical to have one person in charge. Scandale decided Fulcher would continue to be the field marshal. "She loves that kind of story and is very competent," he says. But Scandale assumed overall command. Given the intensity of the situation and the sheer amount of work to be done, though, the lines of authority weren't always clear, particularly in the early stages. "We both can't do it [run the coverage], although the first day or two we tried," Scandale says.

Throughout the day, says Managing Editor Chavez, there'd be huddles around the newsroom to keep everyone apprised of who was doing what. Besides dispatching people, Fulcher constantly updated a budget of shooting stories in the newsroom computer system. A "shooting log" was also posted on the bulletin board.

Another key decision was who would write the main story. Executive Editor Dennis Britton stopped by Fulcher's desk around 1 p.m. to confer on who could best handle the job. They decided on political writer Mark Obmascik, who has been with the paper since 1985. "He thinks clearly," says Fulcher. "He's calm. He's been around a long time, and he knows the players in the newsroom and around town."

It soon became apparent that a newsroom staffer's job description was no longer relevant. "If we needed you to run to pick up a photo, even if you are the political editor, that's what you did," says Assistant City Editor Hodges.

Susan Greene, a City Hall reporter, was assigned to stay in the office and find out as much as possible about the jock culture at Columbine High. Within a few hours of the shooting, students fleeing the school had told reporters that athletes were handpicked targets of the gun-wielding Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris. So Greene tapped into the paper's computer library and found stories about Columbine sports, which gave her lots of names. "I got on the phone and started calling jocks at home," Greene says. "I was getting information, but what we really needed was a Columbine yearbook."

Once she tracked one down, a cabdriver was hired to pick it up. Graphics Editor Blair Hamill and artist Jonathan Moreno, who were at the scene, obtained the school's floor plan.

Meanwhile, Greene continued working the phones, calling one athlete who would lead her to another student who would lead to another. "I didn't really get the magnitude of what was happening, since I was in the office," recalls Greene. "I did find a girl who was in Klebold's creative writing class. She got me on to the Trench Coat Mafia theme. There were a bunch of people at her house, so they just passed the phone around. I was assigned the Trench Coat Mafia/Goth beat and went on the Internet looking for the nexus between the coat imagery and Goth."

As Greene pursued the Goth angle, Obmascik started taking dictation from Schrader and others in the field to write a story for the Post's Web site. "I really tried to be as dispassionate in the writing as possible," Obmascik says. "With a story like this, you have to get out of the way."

"I felt I was writing for history."

AROUND 11:45 A.M., Todd Engdahl, the Post's online editor, was on his way to the optometrist when he heard about the shootings on his car radio. He quickly called a producer in his eight-person office and had her post the AP's story on the paper's Web site. By 3 p.m., Obmascik had written a 20-inch story and Engdahl, back from the eye doctor, prepared it for the site. That first day, the site received about 120,000 visits, or three-and-a-half times the normal traffic. (By late the next day, the paper's server, InfiNet, in Norfolk, Virginia, put the Post on an isolated server because the volume of traffic was so great.)

"It was gratifying to get the news out as fast as you could," says Engdahl, a former Post city editor, "and not have to be captive to the back shop or delivery trucks."

By 6 p.m., the Web site featured an updated version of the staff-written story and four sidebars. By 9 p.m., Engdahl was able to put the entire newsroom package of 27 stories online. And by 1 a.m., when the staff had updated its package for the Home edition, it went live on the Web site. "I was in constant touch with Michelle," Engdahl says.

By 3 p.m., while Engdahl was posting Obmascik's first story, Sports Editor Scarbrough had returned from his doctor's appointment. He immediately went over to the news side to see how he could help. "As soon as we heard that the shooters were saying, 'All jocks must die,' that became the point of how we might cover it," Scarbrough says.

High school sports reporter Kevin Coleman had written about Columbine sports and knew some of the school's coaches. It also helped that part-time photographer Barry Staver's son Michael was a junior at Columbine High; Michael came into the sports department to brief the staff. Coleman and high school sports editor Neil H. Devlin were detailed to the news staff.

Features staffers also were pressed into service. "Bill Briggs and Cate Terwilliger were assigned stories," Managing Editor Chavez says. "It was like being on a train that was picking up momentum." Briggs teamed up with Greene to work on the Trench Coat Mafia angle, and Terwilliger wrote about blood donations.

The business staff was putting out its own pages, but Business Editor Dan Meyers went over to the Metro side after 3 p.m. to do rewrite.

During the early afternoon in particular, the Post's switchboard was inundated with telephone calls from people asking for details or venting their distress. Top editors decided to open up two lines to let

people express their feelings via voice mail. The next day, the paper ran an ad saying the lines would remain open between 6 and 10 a.m. More than 200 people called during the four-hour period. "I ended up bringing in a temp and someone from customer service to transcribe it," says Sue O'Brien, the paper's editorial page editor. "Even in the days of e-mail, we needed phone lines for those without the Internet." The Post ran 147 inches of personal expressions of grief in Thursday's paper.

Another problem surfaced soon after the first shots were fired around 11:15 a.m. The newsroom wasn't prepared for the army of journalists from the national and international media who would call, desperate for information: phone numbers, reference points, names of students. "About noon, we pulled [reporter] Fred Brown over from the Statehouse to field calls from all over the world," Chavez says.

Brown, a past national president of the Society of Professional Journalists, was chosen because of his experience in dealing with the media. His only job during the shooting crisis was to handle calls from journalists. He was buried by nonstop calls from noon until 9:30 p.m. the first day. After he got home, he fielded more calls and gave more interviews--one as late as 4:15 a.m. Calls poured in from the BBC; "Good Morning Scotland"; Cape Town, South Africa, talk radio; "Rivera Live"; "20/20"; "Larry King Live"; Australian radio; Canadian radio; and Japanese newspapers and radio.

As soon as Brown hung up, his phone would ring again. A Quebec radio station wanted to conduct an interview in French: Could Brown find someone? Another television station wanted him to go out to Columbine and do a live interview from the scene. ABC and "60 Minutes" sought to strike information-sharing arrangements with the newspaper.

"The whole reason for my doing this was to keep other reporters from fielding calls," says Brown, a 36-year Post veteran. "Unless there was one person to talk to, they'd keep calling and calling."

But once bylines started appearing in the paper, out-of-town reporters began to bypass Brown. It happened more than a dozen times to Susan Greene, who had become the authority on the Goth angle many journalists were chasing. "I had dozens of phone calls from every medium, and more international than not," Greene says, "all asking for phone numbers. What they'd do is blow smoke up your butt. They all did it. The same approach. Telling me I'd done a brilliant story. I didn't pass on any numbers."

The Post's graphics department was overwhelmed with requests, Hamill says. Since Hamill and Moreno had been to the school, talked to students and had the school's floor plan, they were able to cobble together a coveted graphic. Given the fact that the Post is locked in a bitter newspaper war with the Denver Rocky Mountain News, it would not ordinarily share its graphics with anyone. But April 20 was different. "The phone was ringing off the hook," Hamill says. "We were concerned about competition but decided because of the huge number of requests to put out our graphics that first day on the AP wire."

WHILE BROWN WAS DEALING WITH the outside world, Patricia Callahan, ordinarily an urban affairs writer, was on the scene. She had no idea where Columbine High was before she got there; she hadn't even heard of it. She consulted a map as she drove. Her destination was Leewood Elementary School, which had become a gathering place for Columbine High School parents and students.

Callahan arrived at about 12:30 p.m. "It was mass panic," she says. "I started approaching kids and parents as delicately as possible. About three out of four kids wanted to talk. They started blurting out what they'd seen and heard. It was intensely emotional. I was witnessing all these crying reunions, and still there were other parents just waiting."

"Look at this," one girl said, hysterically pointing to her shirt. "This is somebody else's blood." It was surreal for Callahan. "As a reporter, I'm writing it down, and at the same time I didn't know what to say to these kids," she says. "I was writing it down and phoning it in, but I did not feel detached. It was too raw. They were all kids with these gruesome, warlike stories. It was really tough to take notes and not hug them."

Reporter Schrader was on the scene at the triage site and later at Leawood. She was getting quotes from students and knocking on people's doors in search of a telephone. She called in at 1:45 p.m. to unload some material. But the process was frustrating. From Schrader's perspective, it seemed as if there was little coordination in the newsroom.

"I phoned in a lot of stuff that didn't get used," she says. "Maybe the editors thought they were communicating, but we had no clue what was going on. You didn't know who to feed stuff to. About three-fourths of what I had never got to anybody. It would have been helpful to know which direction they wanted to go in. I could have kept my ears open."

Schrader and Callahan were continuously reporting and calling the office until about 11 p.m. Schrader, looking very much like the parent she is, managed to sneak into Leawood after reporters were locked out. Grief counselors, she says, outnumbered family members four to one. "Earlier the district attorney asked all the remaining parents to fill out descriptions of their kids and bring dental records," Schrader says. "Two mothers ran outside and threw up."

The lead story for the final edition left the city desk at 10:45 p.m., wrongly reporting, as did most newspapers, that at least 25 were dead. One decision editors made early on was not to identify fatalities until a death was positively confirmed. "The single biggest stress for me was hearing the names of who was dead unofficially and trying to confirm it," Hodges says.

Reporter Kieran Nicholson, based in a Post bureau near Columbine High, stayed at nearby Clement Park, where press briefings were held throughout the night. Other reporters were sent home after deadline. They'd be needed again the next day--and the day after that. (All told, 54 reporters, including nine from sports, would work on the ongoing story, as well as eight photographers.)

Many straggled home shell-shocked that first night. Some say they had been so caught up in the mechanics of reporting and editing that they hadn't had time to process what had transpired. "That night, walking back to my car, I realized these were not just numbers that I had been writing, they were kids," says Obmascik, who wrote the main story for the first week until it became so emotionally and physically grueling that he begged to be taken off.

Callahan says she had a hard time sleeping the first week. The first night, she went home and threw up. "That first week," she says, "I took every shift I could. It wasn't altruistic or that I needed the money. It was easier to be at the office than to have down time to process what had happened."

Over the next two weeks, the Post's competitors on the story included not only the News, its rival in perhaps the nation's hottest newspaper war, and local broadcast outlets. Also in the hunt were the national media, which had arrived in force. Pursuing the story meant 12-hour workdays for many Post staffers, not to mention blowing the overtime budget. (Some, says Scandale, got 30 to 40 hours of overtime that first week.) "One of our big fears was that we would get bigfooted by the New York Times," Obmascik says, "or that people would be inclined to talk to [NBC's] Stone Phillips rather than the local media."

To make life easier, the paper provided bagels and coffee each morning, and pizza or sack lunches in the evening. A masseuse was brought in for two afternoons to do free 10-minute chair massages. Counseling was offered to those who needed it. Publisher Gerald E. Grilly brought in smoked salmon, cream cheese and crackers and set up the spread himself for the staff in the conference room. Reinforcements--two reporters and a photographer from the Oakland Tribune, two reporters from the Los Angeles Daily News, a copy editor from the Inland Valley Daily Bulletin in Ontario, California, among others--arrived from sister MediaNews publications. Reporters assigned to Post bureaus were drafted for duty in the main office. The fashion editor, Francine Parnes, found herself updating information on donations and counseling. Staffers worked six days in a row. "There was very little grouching," Fulcher says. And in the end, though most interviewed for this story felt funny admitting it, the terrible tragedy was a morale booster. "As many catastrophes as we've had, there were none this big that required the whole newsroom," Scandale says. "If this had happened five or six years ago, we might not have done as well. This really unified not only the newsroom, but the newspaper. All departments were saying: 'Whatever you need, Frank, you got 'em.' And they provided it."