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Local Television Coverage of a Mall Shooting: Separating Facts From Fiction in Breaking News

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Abstract: Local TV news emphasizes the earliest stage of crimes because “breaking news” is fresh, dramatic and visual. A qualitative analysis was conducted using a comprehensive set of recordings of the first three-and-a-half hours of local television news coverage in Omaha, Nebraska. This study identified a series of ongoing issues that have important implications for newsroom decision-makers. Local television news used charged and dramatic language, such as that shooting victims were “fighting for their lives.” Reporters and news managers find themselves in the middle of a struggle between two options: remaining a distant and objective observer of events, or connecting with the emotion felt by viewers.

Keywords: TV news media content

On December 5, 2007, Omaha, Nebraska, was the site of the nation’s most deadly mall shooting in history. The Von Maur department store shooting at Westroads Mall immediately followed the departure from the Omaha metropolitan area by then President George W. Bush. As Air Force One left Offutt Air Force Base in nearby Bellevue, live TV crews heard first word of the mall shooting across town and rushed to the West Omaha suburbs. Omaha’s mayor and police chief were out of town, and this resulted in a slow response by elite sources to provide accurate public information. For more than 2 hours, until the first official press conference, local television reporters relied upon unconfirmed and sometimes misleading eyewitness accounts, personal observations, police radio reports and their own speculation. In the absence of sourcing from officials and elite media, local reporters were driven by their own values to try to be first with details during a complex live breaking news event. Although this event preceded the emergence and widespread use of social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, the existence of cell phone photographs and text messages presented a substantial challenge for inexperienced and experienced reporters alike. This content analysis demonstrates that live newsgathering pressures, combined with the public’s access to media technologies, results in changing journalism landscape.

Event coverage began at about 1:52 p.m. Central time, and the project analyzed local television news content through 5:30 p.m. The current research utilized recorded video from all four of Omaha’s network-affiliated stations. This study examined how reporters and producers used available information from the scene to construct narratives. Previous research found that negative visual portrayals on television activate viewer emotions and deeper cognitive processing (Coleman & Wu, 2010). The Von Maur shooting was a dramatic crime story of historic proportion, and it provided a challenging backdrop to examine local news media values in a stressful environment.

News Reporting of a Crisis Through Available Information

Graber (2006) maintains that, “Media personnel are often the first to try to fit breaking events into a coherent story” (p. 130). Her three-stage pattern of live coverage identifies the first stage in a crisis or disaster as typified by a “rush to the scene,” interruption of regular broadcast programming and “a flood of uncoordinated bulletins announcing the extraordinary event” (p. 130). This is followed by a second stage in which “media try to correct past errors and put the situation into proper perspective” (p. 133). The final stage in Graber’s framework suggests a media role in placing “the crisis into a larger, longrange perspective and to prepare people to cope with the aftermath” (p. 134).

Shoemaker and Vos (2009) emphasize the importance of “raw” materials and sources in the newsgathering process (p. 19). In this view, journalists engage in a complex cognitive process: “Before a gatekeeper can decide whether a news item should pass through a gate, the gatekeeper must think about the item, considering both its individual characteristics and the environment in which the item resides” (p. 33). Gatekeeping engages the audience through the gathering of information from “participants” and

“observers” (p. 125). “Hard news” emphasizes “ongoing” events during the past day, and crime stories fit this model (Jamieson & Campbell, 2001, pp. 40–41). In the case of crisis reporting, such as the 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech University, new technologies become important resources in the absence of official sourcing (Wigley & Fontenot, 2009). Raw materials can be considered “information subsidies” when made available and weighed against the cost of not having it or using it (p. 98, citing Gandy, 1982). In the current study, local television news reporters sought information subsidies from official spokespersons but also received raw and unconfirmed information from the general public.

In addition to breaking news pressures, the current research identified racial issues often founding within television reporting of crime stories. Violent crimes such as murders, robberies, and rapes are: definable events between individuals; dramatic, conflict-filled and intense; disruptions to order and threatening to the community; short, simple, and verifiable stories; and visual and may be easily videotaped (Jamieson & Campbell, 2001, p. 41). By emphasizing crime, for example, in economically depressed neighborhoods, local newsrooms may reinforce stereotypes about minorities (Heider, 2000). Race has been related to social class, community context and the role police may play in constructing potential divisions (Moss, 2003). It is not known exactly how these social constructions are manifested in local media coverage of breaking news during a crisis. However, examination of news organization diversity has been linked to paucity of coverage of racial issues, as well as the invisibility of minorities outside the context of crime coverage (Poindexter, Smith, & Heider, 2003). By examining individual news stories, it is possible to identify “tensions between conflicting news frames” that may have an ideological basis from “unquestioned assumptions” and “routine preferences” in newsgathering (Wayne, Henderson, Murray, & Petley, 2008, pp. 75–76).

Local TV news emphasizes the earliest stage of crimes because “breaking news” is fresh, dramatic, and visual. Live shots and on-set debriefings may stray from scripted copy and lead to injection of reporter and anchor opinions (Lipschultz & Hilt, 2002). The aftermath of a violent crime event produces a scene particularly suited for television news—emotionally charged sound bites from eyewitnesses or police, a mystery about what happened and other out-of-the ordinary events captured on videotape. In some cases, local television newscasts use “We” as a way of constructing “their authority to tell moralizing stories” (Baym, 2000, p. 92). Anchors serve as both authoritative professionals who perceive a role in deciding breaking news coverage (Bradshaw, Foust, & Bernt, 2009), as well as the voice of the local community: “By speaking with the voices of both institutional authority and communal believability, journalists construct their right to mediate; affirming their position as agents of the people, moral watchdogs entrusted with the power to police the borders of proper behavior” (Baym, 2000, p. 109).

The purpose of this content analysis is to examine live local television news coverage of an extraordinary event. The side-by-side comparison of four competing newsrooms illuminates differences in the decision-making process. In addition to content analysis, news director explanations offer some insight into why journalistic mistakes and misjudgment were made.

Methodology

A qualitative analysis was conducted using a comprehensive set of recordings of the first 3½ hours of local television news coverage in Omaha, Nebraska. The framing analysis relied upon the search for “discursive characteristics that makes frames powerful” (D’Angelo & Kuypers, 2010, p. 2). These characteristics include story attributes that may elicit or trigger viewer salience and emotion. As an “analytical approach,” framing analysis has been done from a “critical constructionist perspective” that “is concerned with frame building and involves the dissection of the content of the frame” (Reese, in D’Angelo & Kuypers, 2010, pp. 18–19). Thus, “narrative and myths” have been examined through

“metaphors, visual icons, and catchphrases that communicate frames” (p. 19). Falk (2010) advances the study of words as a method to understand social construction of reality. She argues that language leads people to categorize events and develop stereotypes:

We then become accustomed to seeing life in the categories given to us by our language. We are, for the most part, unaware that these categories have been imposed and inherited. Rather we believe that the divisions and boundaries in language only reflect the true nature of our environment (p. 18).

In the case of the Westroads Von Maur store shootings, these factors help set the context for the local television news coverage and this analysis:

1. In the hour preceding the shootings, all four local television stations had been covering the departure of President George W. Bush from Offutt Air Force Base, southeast of Omaha in Bellevue.
2. The shootings happened in west Omaha at one of the state’s two busiest shopping malls at the height of the holiday shopping season.
3. The mall is located at the intersection of two of the city’s busiest highways.
4. The shootings occurred on a weekday in the early afternoon.
5. Other than the seminal local television news coverage of the Charles Starkweather 1959 murder spree, Nebraska had not experienced a local crime story of this magnitude.

The analysis examined the live broadcasts of the four local television stations. Within the content, the researchers reviewed language used, anchor presence on the set, and deployment of reporters, videographers, and equipment. The study identified critical moments in coverage, which included the first alert, the location of the shootings, the death of the shooter and racial identity of the shooter. At these moments, stations were most vulnerable to airing inaccurate information. A side-by-side timeline comparison helped identify differences in the decision-making during critical moments. The study was informed by critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2000): “All social practices involve forms of work, identification that is the construction of social identities, and representations of the social world” (pp. 167–168). The study of texts through discourse analysis was seen as an important development in traditional content analyses of television news because newsgathering may be seen as a “social practice,” a “practice of production,” and a “specific local relationship” that is driven by language (p. 168). In the present study, all elements of the local television news content were explored within their local context. Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000) contend that such local language is important as representation of “struggles over normativity” and power (p. 449). As such, “preferred topics” in critical discourse analysis include race, economic discourse, and media language among others (pp. 450–451). In the case of a mass shooting, a community may be influenced by a “discourse of fear” that emphasizes factors, such as violence, crime, and culture (Altheide, 2009, p. 1354).

Results

The day began for all four local television newsrooms with coverage of President George W. Bush’s visit to Omaha. Media had planned for this to be the lead story of the day, according to comments made later by station news directors. This scenario played out as expected until Air Force One left the area. Then, as police radios blared initial reports of the shootings, each of the four local television stations made a series of decisions that would impact coverage for the remainder of the afternoon.

CBS affiliate KMTV, owned and operated by Milwaukee-based Journal Broadcast Group, was following the Bush departure from Offutt Air Force Base. The station boxed a live shot as it joined a 1 p.m. network feed of the *As the World Turns* soap opera. The first inkling of the Westroads shootings from an Omaha television station came at about 1:50 p.m., as KMTV ran this crawl: “REPORTING SHOTS HAVE BEEN FIRED INSIDE THE VON MAUR STORE AT WESTROADS. ACTION 3 NEWS HAS CREWS ON THE WAY. . .”

WOWT, the NBC affiliate owned and operated by Gray Television based in Atlanta, also had begun the afternoon with a live shot of the Bush departure double-boxed with network programming. At the time of the shooting, that station was airing Martha Stewart’s program. Shortly before 2 p.m., WOWT broke into programming with a “BREAKING NEWS” open and anchorperson John Knicely reporting that there was news from the Westroads Mall: “There has been apparently a shooting, and police are responding.” He summarized that they had spoken with people who saw police cars and ambulances at the mall, and that the mall was in “lockdown.” Knicely said Channel 6 crews were about to arrive at the scene, and WOWT then used a full screen graphic placing the location of the mall on a map (“SHOOTING INVESTIGATION, WESTROADS”).

ABC affiliate KETV, owned and operated by Hearst based in St. Louis, also began the 1 p.m. hour with coverage of President Bush’s departure and then returned to regular soap opera programming. Just before 2 p.m., KETV broke into the end of network programming with the “BREAKING NEWS, More Complete Coverage” open. Anchor Julie Cornell said, “We have a breaking news situation at Westroads Mall.” She reported that, “apparently, a man has been shot” in the Von Maur store near the escalator. KETV, saying they were relying on unconfirmed police scanner information, reported details that were later discounted: “A young black male is being sought. He’s believed to be the shooter, and many, many police officers are at Westroads right now trying to get the situation under control.”

FOX affiliate KPTM, at the time owned and operated by Pappas Television based in Visalia, California, aired very limited coverage, including only a few break-ins to regularly scheduled syndicated programming during the time window under study. Several minutes after 2 p.m., as Judge Joe Brown continued to air, KPTM ran a crawl:

. . . Breaking News from the KPTM FOX 42 newsroom: Omaha police are on the scene of a possible shooting at the Westroads Mall. People inside the mall tell us the building is under lockdown as police are still looking for a suspect. It’s still not clear how many people may have been hurt. Stay with KPTM and www.KPTM.com for updates . . .

About 2 min after the first crawl, KPTM broke into programming with a BREAKING NEWS slide and then went live to the anchor desk. Amanda Mueller and Taylor Wilson were positioned at the station’s anchor desk. Wilson began, “Some really unimaginable happenings going on at Westroads Mall this afternoon . . .”

The use of words, such as “shooting,” “Westroads,” “Von Maur,” “young black male,” and “unimaginable,” is important in this study because they carry specific economic and racial meanings in Omaha. As a mid-sized city, Omaha news coverage typically associates shootings with gang violence in North Omaha—a predominantly African American and economically depressed part of the community. In contrast, the Westroads Mall in West Omaha is not typically a location that spawns violence and breaking local news coverage.

Racial Identity of Shooter and Victims

The incorrect racial identity of the shooter was an immediate and predominant aspect of coverage for most of the afternoon on KETV. Only one other station, KMTV, mentioned the incorrect racial identity of the shooter, corrected itself, but then showed a viewers' cell phone photograph of police questioning an African American man. The station labeled the image as that of a possible suspect, but KMTV's anchor immediately challenged the connection. The remaining two stations, WOWT and KPTM, avoided mentioning race as part of the story until police did so in their late afternoon news conference. Instead, WOWT Anchorperson Tracy Madden reported that the station had "confirmed information" that two men "in camouflage" clothing had been "arrested" at the Metro Transit Center bus stop. "We have not confirmed whether or not they were connected to this in any way," she added, mentioning the need for police to secure the area. "These men may not have anything to do with this." WOWT and KPTM did not show the cell phone photograph. An examination of how the stations identified the shooting suspect and victims has been broken down into four hourly segments to compare coverage shifts across time.

The 2–3 p.m. hour: KETV broke into the end of network programming with the BREAKING NEWS, More Complete Coverage open. Anchor Julie Cornell, relying on unconfirmed information, reported details that were later discounted: "A young black male is being sought. He's believed to be the shooter, and many, many police officers are at Westroads right now trying to get the situation under control." Cornell reported that it was "an elderly man" who had been shot. She repeated the information about "a young black male shooter" who "still may be in the area."

At 2:01 p.m., a graphic went up that said, "Police Scanners say five people are down." KETV showed a map to locate the mall, as Cornell again repeated that police were looking for a young, black male shooter. KETV then ran a crawl that reported "white male suspect with green hunting vest and a rifle." A minute later, Cornell contradicted the crawl in a recap by again stating that police were looking for a young black male. Cornell added to her description by telling viewers police were looking for "this guy" in a green hunting vest and a rifle.

Cornell interviewed "Kathy," a Westroads kiosk worker who "heard three pops." She said, "People were running down the hall saying those were gunshots." She added that people hid in stores, and the doors closed about 5 min later. A minute later and for a fourth time, Cornell described the shooter police were looking for as "a young, black male." This is at the same time that KETV's crawl described the suspect as "one male." Cornell for the fifth time at 2:16 p.m. recounted the "young black male shooter" description. During the same time frame, KMTV Anchor Carlo Cecchetto reported an account of a "black man" with a "shoulder-mounted weapon"—"All that authorities are telling us right now is that it may be a black male who is a suspect who pulled the trigger, but we do not have any confirmation." Once again, this information would later be repeated as unconfirmed, but it proved to be false. He went on to add that, "Right now, we do not have any idea where the shooter is." A few minutes later, Cecchetto reported unconfirmed police scanner radio traffic that at least two people were dead and that a wounded man had been shot in the arm. The station then changed its earlier unconfirmed report of a black shooter by saying that authorities were looking for a white man in a green Army vest with a shoulder-mounted weapon.

About this time, KPTM's Amanda Mueller turned to the station's assignment editor for details. She had called the Sharper Image store near Von Maur and spoke with the manager: "All the stores are on lockdown right now. This suspect apparently was seen walking with some kind of automatic rifle," as she described a man in a flak vest and Army fatigues. The manager, "huddled" with about 10 customers in the back of the store, heard the story from people running from Von Maur into his shop.

He's a white male, they say they saw him. There may be up to five people hit by gunfire. One of them was still in Von Maur at the base of the escalator. Basically, if you had someone in the mall, they are in a store right now behind locked doors.

The exclusive eyewitness account given to KPTM was the first quoted source to identify the shooter as a white male. Instead of reporting about the bus stop, KPTM found a reliable source. The information gathered from the live telephone interview enabled the station to never waiver from its accurate reporting of the shooter's race.

At 2:26 p.m., Cornell "re-set the situation" and described police looking for a suspect "wearing a green army vest." Cornell disclosed that the station was receiving a lot of cell phone calls from people at the mall. She described the police helicopter flying overhead, police with guns and bulletproof vests, and that they were "continuing to look for the gunman." KETV showed the police helicopter, and Reporter Brandi Petersen said she had never seen it fly so low. As she continued to describe what she saw, KETV aired edited video, which included a distraught woman in the parking lot on a cell phone. Cornell interrupted with information from her producers: "Am I hearing this right, a man in fatigues has just been arrested?" Petersen responded: "You know, Julie, we have not heard that at this point." KETV then aired a blurry cell phone photo of an African American man in army fatigues being handcuffed. "Someone out at the mall took this photo," Cornell said. "We have no confirmation from police that anyone has been arrested."

Continuing at 2:36 p.m., Cornell added, "It looks like this photo may fit the description, a young black male shooter wearing a green army vest, carrying a rifle." KETV then showed a second photo from a bus stop area. "We do have photos that a viewer sent us," Cornell explained as they rolled through several images. Cornell interviewed by telephone Todd Trimpe, the person who took the photographs, "As I got closer, I could see man in fatigues hiding under one of the bus benches," and he took pictures of police getting him out. Cornell asked Trimpe about a weapon, "By the time that I was there, there was no gun—I believe they must have taken it from him by then." When asked for a description, Trimpe described the man as in his mid-30s and African American. The interview concluded with Trimpe's speculation that the man being questioned would have "stuck out like a sore thumb," if he had entered the mall. Reporter Carol Kloss came next with more observations about police presence outside the mall: "I get the impression that there is still concern about people's safety." After Cornell followed with a question about the injured, Kloss disclosed that she saw a man in a black hooded sweatshirt handcuffed in a police cruiser, and said that he was then being "taken into the mall." Cornell then speculated, "Possibly, so that someone can identify him." Kloss, a veteran reporter, responded, "Yeah, we can only surmise."

KMTV within minutes also spoke to the man that they only identified as "Todd." He shared a similar cell phone photograph of the African American man. They labeled the shot, "BREAKING NEWS NOW, Picture of Possible Suspect." The station incorrectly reported the eyewitness assumption that this was a gunman who had been hiding under a bench, even though the witness saw no sign of a weapon. Anchor Mary Williams questioned whether this was a gunman or someone trying to seek shelter from the shooting. By about this time, however, WOWT Anchor John Knicely reported "confirmed" information to viewers that investigative reporter Mike McKnight had been told that one person had "a self-inflicted gun shot wound." KPTM also was reporting that a suspect was dead. Reporter Nabil Molai said, "From speaking to one of the officers. one of the suspects actually has a self-inflicted wound . . . I don't know if that's correct or not, but that's what one of the officers heard . . ." Anchor Amanda Mueller then responded, "We've heard that, and we're working to confirm that." At this point, Anchor Taylor Wilson added:

We have not confirmed that information, but we did hear that information through a person who knows a person who knows law enforcement indirectly that the shooter may have actually taken his own life, or attempted to have taken his own life. From what we've heard, that may have been an unsuccessful attempt to take his own life.

By 3 p.m., KMTV, WOWT, and KPTM all had moved in the direction of understanding that the gunman had shot himself inside the mall. However, KETV continued to report that two people “may have been arrested, may have been questioned,” and Cornell linked this statement to the African American man photographed underneath a bus bench and another wearing a black hooded sweatshirt over fatigues. The

3–4 p.m. hour: KETV’s Brandi Petersen, live from the scene, described what she could see in the parking lot. “Definitely a calmer atmosphere than an hour ago, when we saw Swat Team members appear rushing toward the entrances with their shields drawn, weapons drawn.” Carol Kloss, again on the telephone, confirmed the view of “a little bit calmer activity” with plain-clothes police officers on the scene and other officers looking around. At 3:09 p.m., veteran reporter Kloss had spoken with a public information officer, but he would not confirm that there was an arrest. He then told her, she said, of one of the people taken into custody: “He is not who you think he is.” She surmised that meant that he was not a suspect. At this point, coanchor Rob McCartney joined the broadcast for the first time and offered an overview summary of the facts. Six minutes later, however, Cornell again referenced a “black male shooter.” McCartney then said there were “a lot of different stories” being reported.

At about the same time, WOWT aired an interview with Von Maur employee Chuck Wright. He summarized that a woman standing next to the shooter had been killed, and that three others—including one store employee—were injured. Wright also verified that the shooter committed suicide. Reporter Justin Joseph had new information from a news conference at Creighton University Medical Center: there were two other fatalities—one man and one woman. Another person at the hospital was in critical condition and undergoing surgery. The station then showed videotape of five victims taken to ambulances shortly after the shooting.

About 10 minutes after WOWT reported the apparent suicide of the assailant, KMTV again showed the cell phone photograph of the African American man in fatigues being handcuffed, as Anchor Mary Williams asked Reporter Dave Roberts about the existence of a suspect description. Roberts said he had no official information and was waiting to speak with police.

At the end of the hour, KETV Anchor Rob McCartney outlined “major questions,” which included whether or not police were still looking for a person who “pulled the trigger,” and how many were injured. Cornell followed this by again repeating that “we know” two black males in camouflage had been taken into custody. At this point, she added a qualifying statement, “We don’t know if these guys are suspects or, [whether police] were just questioning them.” During this hour, KPTM had returned to regularly scheduled programming—The People’s Court. The station ran crawls updating the situation until its regularly scheduled newscast at 4 p.m.

The 4–5 p.m. hour: at the beginning of the third hour of coverage, three of the four stations prepared to broadcast the first live news conference held by police, fire, and other city authorities. KMTV, WOWT, and KETV had different approaches to leading into the live event. KMTV was focused on identifying one of the victims by name and with a photograph the station had obtained. WOWT Anchor John Knicely wondered how someone could sneak a shotgun into Von Maur. Anchor Tracy Madden called it a “cold, cold day in Omaha” and said it would be possible to have a weapon concealed under a heavy winter coat. KETV anchors Julie Cornell and Rob McCartney “set the scene” with a recap of “multiple fatalities” from

“35 to 40 shots” fired. Although the KETV crawl had by this point dropped the unconfirmed suspect details, Cornell again repeated the erroneous description:

Here’s what we know about the suspect. We know from witness accounts that he was a young black male shooter. He’s wearing a green Army vest, carrying a rifle. We do not know if he’s been apprehended, or if he’s one of the injured at these two hospitals that are dealing with those folks right now.

The pair awaited the press conference by reminding viewers that they did not have “specific” information. At the same time, the fourth station, KPTM, launched its afternoon newscast. By telephone, reporter Julie Hong summarized the just concluded Creighton University Medical Center news conference. At 4:06 p.m., Omaha police spokesperson Sergeant Teresa Negron began a press conference at the outer edge of the mall parking lot:

Today at about 1:42, we had a call of an active shooter at the Westroads Mall. Officers responded an expedited status, arrived here at approximately six minutes. The officer went into the Von Maur store, located a victim, that had been injured by gunshot. They also—other officers arrived and they began to clear the mall, searching for a suspect. They located other victims. At this point, we can tell you that we have confirmed nine people that have been—that have died from their injuries. We have five other people that have suffered injuries, have been transported to the area hospitals, Creighton University Medical Center and the Nebraska Medical Center with injuries.

As she continued live on KMTV, WOWT and KETV, the fourth station (KPTM) broke away from a recorded interview for an update. Anchor Taylor Wilson reported that at least nine people had been shot. Reporter Scott Lea, by telephone, then said nine were confirmed dead, and “one of those believed to be the shooter.” Wilson followed the report with this summary, “That is definitely not the information that we wanted to hear, because initially we heard that two people had died and . . . Scott Lea just confirmed from the Omaha Police Department that nine people have been killed.”

When asked at 4:12 p.m. about the detention of two men at a mall bus stop, Sgt. Teresa Negron explained what had been seen earlier:

What I can tell you is that when we got to the scene, obviously, it’s very chaotic. The officers are trying to locate a person who, when we got here, we found a person shot and injured at least several people . . . We received preliminary indications as to who the suspect, description of that suspect. Like I stated earlier, the description was varied. So, anyone that matched any type of description to what we were given we were gonna stop and detain them, and that’s what occurred.

Her explanation about the bus stop questioning that was reported by KMTV and KETV definitively rejected the interpretation that the man in the cell phone photos was the shooter.

The police news conference lasted about 10 minutes. WOWT went directly to Sheila Brummer, a reporter on the scene. She summarized the facts—“nine people dead, including the shooter.” WOWT, at 4:17 p.m., was the first station to report that a 19-year-old Sarpy County, Nebraska man had “left a suicide note.” Anchor Tracy Madden said this “new” information was confirmed from several sources and that the shooter wrote, “I’m going out in style.” She added, “That man is believed to be the gunman.” Knicely and Madden reported additional new information: the “alleged shooter” was from Bellevue, just south of Omaha. He had a pending court date and had spent 7 days in jail during the past year for disorderly conduct.

As the bottom of the hour approached, by telephone, reporter Carol Kloss summarized the police news conference announcement earlier that nine were dead including the gunman: “When she made the

announcement, you could just feel the shock going through the reporters.” Finally, at 4:31 p.m. she addressed the issues surrounding KETV’s confusion over the description of the suspect during the first 2½ hours of coverage:

She [Sgt. Negron] did not give out any description of the suspect. She said that they [Omaha Police] did get sort of a general description of what the suspect looked like when officers arrived. And, they basically were stopping anyone who might match the description of that suspect, hence, the man you saw who was taken away in handcuffs, in the fatigues, at that point they weren’t sure who they were dealing with. And then, of course since then a lot more has become known, and they realized that this gunman had killed himself on the third floor of Von Maur, and as we wait right now for him to be transported away in a rescue squad.

At the conclusion of the report, Cornell transitioned to “new information” from McCartney. Shortly after the shooting, he reported that a woman walked into the Sarpy County (just south of Omaha) Sheriff’s Office with a note that may be connected to the Westroads shootings, “The note contained information that a 19-year-old male could be interpreted as suicidal.” McCartney said Omaha Police were contacted and interviewed the woman. “We have no description on who the shooter was.” He said an eyewitness described the shooter as “a tall man.” While KETV continued to struggle with the identity of the shooter, KMTV by this time had dropped references to race. WOWT and KPTM never mentioned race in connection with the identity of the shooter. By the end of the hour, KPTM concluded its hour-long newscast. The station made the decision to run crawls updating viewers with only verified facts rather than speculation.

The 5–6 p.m. hour: WOWT Reporter Maniko Barthelemy joined the anchor team via telephone from Bellevue—a suburb just south of Omaha—and the location of the suspect’s home. “We’re told the 19-year-old lived here for a little bit with a different family—not his parents.” She said the home was “part of the ongoing investigation.” WOWT aired its first live shot of Barthelemy in front of the Bellevue home. She said neighbors saw the suspect coming and going, “but no one would suspect anything like this.” Back on the anchor desk, Madden said this had become a national story.

At 5:17 p.m., KETV Anchor McCartney disclosed that the Bellevue suicide note had come from the mother of the suspect—Robert Hawkins. This was their first naming of the shooter, although they did not report the source of the information. McCartney said the 19-year-old was due in court later in the month on charges of contributing to the delinquency of a minor and possession of alcohol. Anchor Julie Cornell said, “Right now, deputies are getting a warrant to search that house in Quail Creek,” where Hawkins had been staying. Cornell repeated that the suspect was “Robert A. Hawkins of Bellevue.” She also reminded viewers that the 19-year-old suspect had shot himself on the third floor of Von Maur.

Cornell then interviewed by telephone a man who claimed he had been a friend of Hawkins. The caller said Hawkins had been taking antidepressants and was “depressed about life in general.” The caller, “Shawn,” said Hawkins had “bounced around from job to job.” “Shawn” said he was at school when he and friends heard about the shooting. Worried that the shooter might be their friend “Robby,” they turned to the news but were relieved to hear that police were questioning “an African American man.” When reports cleared that person, he again became concerned. Cornell then asked, “Is he a white guy?” “Shawn” responded, “Yes.” He then told McCartney he last saw Hawkins “about two months ago.” Questioned further about Hawkins, he described him as “a partier . . . he always seemed to be on something.” Cornell asked “Shawn” about a McDonald’s job Hawkins had after dropping out of school, and “Shawn” repeated that, “he bounced around a lot.” When asked if Hawkins had access to weapons, he said that was “hard to say” because he had quit “hanging out with him” 2 months ago. But then he added,

“Yeah, I’d say he had access to guns . . . he could go out and buy one.” The interview ended at 5:30 p.m. KETV, as did KMTV and WOWT, continued local coverage instead of the usual network newscasts.

Implications for the industry

In 2008, the National Broadcasting Society held a regional conference in Omaha that featured two of the four local TV news directors—the other two news directors declined the invitation. Amy Adams of WOWT said that at the time of the shootings, her staff had not put the magnitude of the tragedy in context: “I don’t think it sunk in, until way after [just] how tragic it was” (Adams, 2008). This was because her station remained on the air with coverage from the earliest moments through the next morning. By contrast, Joe Radske, news director at KPTM, decided to not provide continuous coverage of the events (Radske, 2008). He told the panel that his newsroom took on a public service orientation—it reacted to events and tried to be responsible. The failure of law enforcement to provide timely information placed an additional burden on newsrooms: Radske said, “We kept a lot of rumors and innuendo out of the news.” The current study validated that the events during the first few hours of coverage presented serious issues for newsrooms, as they sorted out the facts in real time. In a live television environment, the use of unedited video and telephone reports—shaky video, tower camera footage, and eyewitness accounts emphasizing that the gunman or gunmen had not been caught—only served to intensify public fears. In the absence of official information from law enforcement, for example, one station described the shootings as “random.” At the same time, another station interpreted video of empty stretchers leaving the mall as a positive sign.

An ongoing difficulty for field reporters was to pinpoint the exact location of the shootings. The size of the mall, the availability of confused and traumatized eyewitnesses, and the pressure to be live with new information made it difficult to maintain typical newsroom safeguards used on routine stories. Stations that were able to obtain over the telephone additional and accurate information from sources inside the mall were less confused about the facts and made fewer mistakes. The existence of ambiguous cell phone photographs motivated two stations to air them, and one station to continue to talk about these photos as newsworthy. This was the most dramatic example of a persistent factual error. For the two stations that did not use the unverified photo, there were conscious decisions by news directors to wait during this critical moment: “The most important thing is to be sure what you put on the air is factual” (Adams, 2008). The lone station that replayed the photo and then continued to refer to it when mentioning the race of the shooter did not pull back until a friend of the shooter told them that he was white.

This study identified a series of ongoing issues that have important implications for newsroom decision makers. Local television news used charged and dramatic language, such as that shooting victims were “fighting for their lives.” Reporters and news managers find themselves in the middle of a struggle between two options: remaining a distant and objective observer of events, or connecting with the emotion felt by viewers.

As news organizations moved away from the beat system to general assignment reporting, the result is a lack of source cultivation that would be of assistance in moving quickly to the facts of a story. In this case, experience as a crime beat reporter might have produced different results. By verifying facts and not falling prey to reporting rumors, a newsroom may be able to be more descriptive than interpretive in the earliest moments of a breaking news story. The lack of a timely police press conference exacerbated the challenges for even veteran reporters.

As an ongoing story continues for many hours of live coverage, the industry may not employ a clear set of standards for the use of field video obtained and replayed. When video was framed around factual information, the effect was that it offered viewers a calmer picture of the scene. There are real dangers in

airing unedited videotape during a live broadcast. One issue that surfaced was the naming of victims by eyewitnesses prior to official release of the information. At the same time, some eyewitnesses volunteer or are enlisted to take on the role of reporter early in live coverage, and this may lead to: reporter inaccuracies, violation of station policies or newsroom norms, ethical issues, as well as legal and medical liability concerns.

Live local television news coverage inevitably reduces or even eliminates traditional gatekeeping. The experience of news anchors may mediate a variety of concerns produced by the inadvertent airing of incorrect information. The co-anchor model increases the likelihood that people will have time to place pieces of information within a broader context. A single anchor, without adequate behind-the-scenes assistance, may be tempted to use over-the-top language to describe unfolding events. It can be argued that such events justify the need for systematic professional continuing education within media organizations.

Conclusions

In the minutes following the mall shootings, local television stations were faced with what police later described as a chaotic scene. As police and local television news reporters rushed to the scene and questioned witnesses, there was a 2-hours period in which information synthesis involved sorting facts from rumors. In this case, the scene was a large shopping mall and parking lot, and this delayed correction of errors in some cases. Boggled down in Graber's second stage, it was difficult for some reporters to place the event in an accurate context. One station, for example, chose to limit its live coverage. KPTM Fox 42 News Director Joe Radske said that the station lacked resources—people, experience, and adequate live technology. For him, the key concern was providing accurate information that was important to public safety:

The difference here is that really there was no one here who'd ever been through something like that; and so it was like a teaching moment, and hoping that we would all learn from this. But I'll tell you, as it was going on, I was at some moments just paralyzed by it. Because thought, "Wow, I don't have any veterans here who would take the ball and run." I stood in the middle of the room and they all looked at me and said, "What do we do?" So there was a great feeling of coming together, of being able to tell this important story.

Radske decided to limit extended coverage and frequently return to regular programming rather than continue on without new and verified information.

Beyond the issues of extended live coverage and staff inexperience, this study identified some racial concerns. All of the news directors and news managers, and most of the reporters at these stations were Caucasian, but we do not know whether staff demographics were significant in influencing content decisions. For example, two pieces of information that implied possible race of the shooter—police radio conversations mentioning the search for "a young black male," and cell phone eyewitness photographs showing an African American man detained by police—should not have aired without source corroboration. Future research should investigate the relative importance of newsroom factors in decision making, such as demographics, experience levels, duration of live coverage, and the intensity of stress in a breaking news story.

This study found that individual stations handled the information differently. Early in the coverage, two of the four stations carefully filtered unconfirmed information subsidies. At least one of the two stations had the bus stop cell phone photographs and chose not to use them. The other stations, perhaps driven by the availability of eyewitness photographs, used the information without having verification and

interpretation from police. Of these two stations, one continued to incorrectly connect the information to the unidentified suspect in the shootings until police clarified the facts 2 hr later at the press conference.

In this study, stations that dwelled on the race of the shooter may have done so at the expense of time devoted to eyewitness descriptions, which sometimes included hyperbole and dramatic language. For example, words such as “chaos,” “scary,” “intense,” and “terrifying” crept into the coverage. While this goes beyond the scope of the current study, it was evident that there was a trade-off in coverage decisions—emphasis on the shooter versus emphasis on the victims. After the police news conference, the one station that continued to emphasize race of the shooter appeared to quickly shift to relay eyewitness accounts, which included charged language—even repeating the phrase “bodies and blood” three times within a 20-minute time period after media came to grips with the number of people shot and killed. In the end, official and verified information from police is critical in producing breaking news story accuracy.

Another important early theme that emerged from all four stations was, how could something like this happen here? This research did not settle the meaning of the word “here” in the context of these events. “Here” could simply refer to a mid-sized city, be encoding for the suburban location, or be a way of addressing socioeconomic status and class. In addition to the language used, the interviewing of mostly Caucasian eyewitnesses during the 2 hours before the police news conference by mostly Caucasian reporters may have left an impression with viewers. After the news conference, 2½ hours after the first reports of the shootings, local television stations began to shift coverage toward what Graber (2006) would describe as the final stage—placing a crisis event into some broader perspective, which may help the public cope. It is possible that future research could find that there are levels within Graber’s second stage of coverage. Likewise, the use of words, such as “calm” or “calmer atmosphere,” may signal aftermath coverage and raise important research areas focusing on the transition between the two late stages.

In this case, local newsrooms also were faced with following police on the trail of evidence to the real shooter’s home in the south suburb of Bellevue. That shift in location, as well as the earlier shift in identity of the shooter, produced a transition in the social construction of reality presented to viewers through various local television news frames. The results of this study fit with previous findings about the importance of local television news in terms of storytelling that produces shared meanings within the context of a community.

Future Research

Reporters and news managers find themselves in the middle of a struggle between two options: remaining a distant and objective observer of events, or connecting with the emotion felt by viewers. Interviews with reporters, producers, and news managers would offer insights into the effects from stress, lack of source cultivation, and rumor dissemination. The industry may not employ a clear set of standards for the use of field video obtained and replayed. The current study identified video aired without context. When video was framed around factual information, the effect was that it offered viewers a calmer picture of the scene.

Emerging Models for the Future

This study raises questions about the dominant local television news model for live coverage during dramatic events. Since 2007, the rapid diffusion and evolution of social networking has introduced new problems for local television news operations. Sharing of information (in the absence of traditional gatekeeping) from individuals and international news organizations creates a new environment for local

reporting. There is a potential for virtually all rumors to be spread through sites such as Twitter and Facebook. “Citizen journalists,” many without formal training, can “broadcast” details to a wide audience. For example, when the reporting of the Von Maur shootings was aired on CBS News, the network used an animation of the path of the shooter, which was not aired by the local affiliate. In the present social media atmosphere, some audience members would obtain the story and share it. The future of breaking news reporting could involve an increase in rumors or graphic details. As these reports are spread instantaneously within a community, the potential exists to incite a “flash mob” (such as could be triggered by Foursquare or other geo-positioning sites), and subsequent mob behavior. When traditional or nontraditional media spread unofficial information about possible suspects, there is a chance that innocent people may be affected. The problems demonstrated in the current study may be magnified by the landscape of social media. As citizens use mobile media technologies, newsrooms must learn how to verify, synthesize, and report accurate news as it happens.

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