



The Media Response

The News Crews Arrive

Although other school homicides have received intense media coverage, the response to the Columbine shootings dwarfed anything that had come before. As President Clinton remarked, the event “pierced the heart of a nation” and held the country in spellbound horror.

The public has an intense interest and the media a responsibility to report about an incident of this magnitude. Managing the media presence and meeting the corresponding information demands required significant county resources, however, and became an important part of the emergency response.

On April 20, news crews were in nearby Boulder, Colorado, anticipating developments in the Jon Benet Ramsey murder investigation. As word of the Columbine shootings spread, the media immediately shifted from Boulder to south Jefferson County. Somewhere between 400 and 500 reporters were on scene at the height of the media coverage. With them came 75 to 90 satellite trucks and up to 60 television cameras. At least 20 of the television crews arrived from other countries.

The reporters on scene placed only a fraction of the media calls the county received. Given the scale of the media interest, the county called on many agencies and organizations to help with the public information effort. All told, more than 35 employees from the county and elsewhere assisted with this aspect of the emergency response.

Emergency PIOs on Site

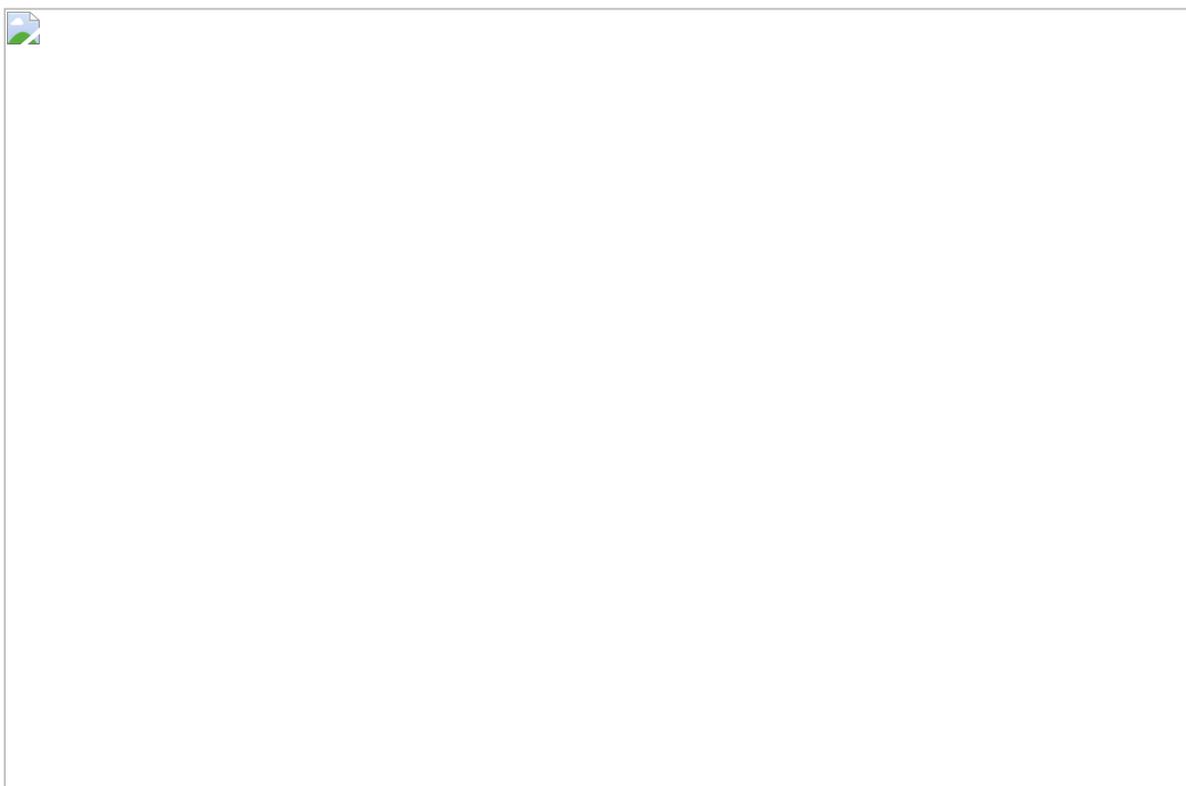
The main spokesman for the tragedy was Sheriff’s Deputy Steve Davis, who had been the public information officer (PIO) for the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office for slightly more than a year. Davis called into Dispatch at 11:32 a.m. and arrived on scene shortly thereafter, yet two or three local news crews had already beaten him there.

Operating from the incident command bus, Davis worked with public information officers from the various first-responder agencies. He filled the key role of spokesman during the following days, while the other PIOs helped him track hundreds of calls and pages from local, national and international reporters. During the opening hours of the crisis, Davis dictated a press release to a West Metro Fire & Rescue PIO, who sent the bulletin from her office. Meanwhile, two other fire department PIOs helped Davis set up a staging area where the media could get information and pictures without interfering with the response efforts.

At 1:30 p.m., Davis gave his first press conference. He held subsequent briefings each hour for the first two days after the incident. Those hourly news conferences, which were held at the Clement Park staging area, allowed reporters to confirm information and hear about new developments in the investigation.

Between the hourly briefings, Davis obtained updates from the command post, organized new information and checked to see what questions reporters wanted answered. The other PIOs were working in shifts as his assistants, and they scheduled his interviews, answered routine media questions, gathered lists of new questions and acted as a buffer between Davis and the media.

Without their assistance, Davis would have been quickly overwhelmed by the demands on his time. The Columbine story was covered around the clock, and the demand for new information was constant. In the first two days alone, Davis did 134 on-camera interviews in addition to his hourly briefings. Sheriff John P. Stone and other law-enforcement officials were equally sought after by the media.



After several 20-hour days, Davis received help from Sgt. Jim Parr, who had filled the Sheriff's PIO slot before Davis. As the crisis wore on, Parr served as the back-up, on-camera spokesman. Davis started work at 4 a.m., and then Parr came in at noon. The two worked together for several hours to insure they were dispensing consistent, accurate information, and then Davis would go back to his office for a few hours and then home to sleep. Meanwhile, Parr took over the reigns as spokesman for the late afternoon and evening.

Unified Media Command Center Established at Columbine Public Library

While Davis and the emergency public information officers dealt with reporters on site, other media outlets began phoning the dispatch center. The calls came within minutes of the first 911 reports, and dispatchers were desperately looking for people to handle the media so they could focus on the unfolding crisis at the school.

By noon, K. Ann Grider of the county's Public Information Department arrived at the dispatch center with County Administrator Ron Holliday and Emergency Management Coordinator Judy Peratt. The three took over the PIO function there and corroborated what little information they could during the opening hours.

The high media interest was immediately evident. By 11:33 a.m., local media had contacted dispatch asking for information about the shootings; by 11:42 a.m., the first national news organization had called. Soon news helicopters were flying over the school, and other media figures—including Jay Leno and Larry King—were calling to request interviews with responding officers and Sheriff Stone. By midnight, 339 media calls had come into dispatch from more than 60 countries.

A meeting was held at the dispatch center shortly before midnight to plan the next step in coordinating the media response. At the meeting were public information officers from the school district and the county, representatives from the Sheriff's Office, the county administrator, the county emergency management coordinator and two of the county commissioners. Also in attendance was the co-director of the Colorado-Oklahoma Resource Council, who had coordinated the media response during the Oklahoma City bombing trials that were held in Denver the previous year.

Everyone agreed that a coordinated response by the primary agencies involved—the Sheriff's Office, the county, the District Attorney's Office and the school district—could happen more easily if all parties shared a communications center. By working out of the same building, the agencies could share resources and check facts to keep misinformation to a minimum. The dispatch center, which had limited space, was obviously not an appropriate headquarters for a long-term media response.

Instead, the group chose the Columbine Public Library, which is located near the school just across Clement Park. The library was part of the county infrastructure, and it was reasonably equipped to handle an influx of media and staff.

Once the facility had been selected, Holliday placed a call to Library Director William Knott and asked if the library could be used as a media center. Knott and the Jeffco Public Library Board promised their full support and made employees available to assist.

By 1:30 a.m. on April 21, library, county and sheriff's personnel moved in to set up computers, faxes, copiers, printers and televisions and establish a phone bank and Internet service. By 6 a.m. on Wednesday, the county had a fully functioning crisis communications center, and the phones began ringing. The county and Sheriff's Office staffed the center immediately, and the school district moved its public information officers and volunteers in the following Monday.

Over the next 2-1/2 weeks, thousands of reporters would call the communications center for assistance. Davis and his team of on-site PIOs continued to function as the primary information source, but sheriff's deputies and PIOs at the library provided what background information they could and helped connect reporters with appropriate agencies and people.

In addition, the library served as a daily meeting place where all PIOs would gather to coordinate information given out on site and over the media line. The facility also offered space for PIOs to research and prepare written materials as needed.

Several days into the crisis, the media number was broadcast to the public, and the phone bank was inundated with inquiries about where people could send condolence cards or go to donate money, gifts and services. The calls poured in from citizens around the world until the communications center was finally closed more than two weeks later.

Media City Erected at Clement Park

Before the communications center was ready, the media had set up at Clement Park for the first news conference. The 285-acre park is located adjacent to Columbine High School, and the media could transmit the briefings from there with the high school as a backdrop.

In addition, the park had hard-surface parking lots that could support satellite trucks. By early Wednesday morning, more than 60 trucks and auxiliary vehicles were on site, along with generators, portable lights, phone and fiber-optic hookups, tents, portable stages, food wagons, portable heaters and miles of cable strung throughout the park.

Since the media had already erected their equipment, it was pointless to move them. From that point on, Clement Park became the center of live coverage of the Columbine response and the location for all news briefings. Within hours, the park was transformed into a media city.

Although the county owns Clement Park, Foothills Park & Recreation District manages it. As the hours wore on, more and more media arrived on scene. They began spreading from the parking areas onto the grassy turf, trying to gain the best view of the school.

The damage to the park was compounded as the weather worsened. Within 24 hours, an ongoing battle with rain and snow began. The three weeks following the shootings were the wettest on record since 1900. Accommodations were made for the media, many of whom weren't prepared for winter weather in April. Canopies and tents were erected for the first few days of briefings to protect both the spokespeople and the media from the freezing conditions.

The media did not fully vacate their encampment for more than three weeks, and, during that time, district staff provided utility hookups, sanitary facilities, snow removal, trash collection and crowd management assistance.

The Coverage Continues

From the earliest moments, the media became part of the crisis response. At a local level, the media were invaluable in helping to get information out to the community. Newspapers and television and radio stations dispersed the news, but they also announced phone numbers for hotlines and counseling services, phone numbers and addresses for donation centers and volunteer programs, and information about events, memorials and school-related issues. They even gave mental health tips to the Columbine and wider community as people dealt with their grief.

The media's main interest, of course, was in learning details about the crime, emergency response and subsequent investigation. Balancing the media's interest in obtaining information against the needs of the community and the investigation was a continuing challenge.

Davis provided as much detail as possible in his news conferences, but the facts remained sketchy during the opening hours of the crisis. Meanwhile, the media interviewed escaping students and teachers, contacted Columbine-area residents and searched the Internet for information about the suspects and the Trench Coat Mafia, an informal group the suspects had reportedly joined. On the suspects' web site, reporters discovered excerpts from Harris' journal, which the Sheriff's Office did not release as it was evidence in an ongoing investigation.

The media's proximity to the SWAT staging area also caused confusion. More than 1,000 law-enforcement and fire/rescue personnel responded to the scene. Many simply came on their own when they heard of the shootings on the radio, and they reported to the command bus, which was near the media staging area. Enough personnel were already in the school, so the extra SWAT officers were asked to wait while those inside the school finished their sweeps. Those extra officers were pictured on television, which created the erroneous perception that SWAT teams were making no effort to help students still in the building.

Other pieces of evidence the media wanted to have were the cafeteria videotapes and 911 audiotapes. The videotapes were not made public, but portions of a 911 tape were. Lt. Jeff Shrader and an investigator from the Sheriff's Office spent an entire night putting together excerpts from a recorded 911 call from the library, which was released the next day along with a brief timeline.

"I was asked why we didn't release the whole tape," Shrader later said. "First, there was an ongoing investigation. Also, we feel more compelled to be sensitive to the community than to satisfy the curiosity of the world. I did not want to release the portion of the 911 tape in which kids were killed."

As the initial crisis ended and the investigators began processing the crime scene, there was less news to report. After the Columbine Investigative Task Force was formed, investigators reported being followed by members of the media when they left the Administration Building to conduct follow-up interviews. One member of the foreign press corps showed up on the doorstep of the investigation commander as he left for work early one morning. Other county employees reported individual media showing up in different

departments at the county building. They were asking questions and looking for new angles for their stories.

But reporters also assisted in the investigation when they would obtain information that they felt might be of value to the investigation and made a point to forward the information to the task force.

Davis stopped holding daily briefings after the middle of the third week, but the media stayed. The first day back in his office after nearly three weeks on scene at the high school, Davis still received 361 pages and nearly 50 e-mail and phone messages in one hour.

Columbine remained the nation's top story until Jesse Jackson went to Kosovo, John Elway announced his retirement from the Denver Broncos, and a deadly tornado struck Oklahoma City.

[GO TO THE TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)
