

How Facebook outpaced traditional media in Grand Rapids

The news on Thursday, July 7 was unnerving for Grand Rapids natives. The headline on MLive read “Grand Rapids man tells mother on phone that he killed his wife, police responding”.

The article was brief, the update and live coverage blurbs chilling.

“Police blocking off neighborhood in standoff, telling neighbors to stay inside.”

“Police report multiple deaths in Northeast Grand Rapids.”

Updates mounted as the story gathered attention. People watched and waited in horror, not knowing who was dead or that this was the worst mass murder in Grand Rapids history; not knowing the whereabouts of alleged killer Rodrick Dantzler.

Police released descriptions of Dantzler and his vehicle. Additional shootings appeared to involve the suspect. The manhunt became a chase as he led police through downtown and onto a freeway. The story consumed local news and jumped to social media. During the chase the suspect moved into oncoming traffic, forcing others off the road. It didn't end when his vehicle crashed. He fled on foot, not far from where seven people were found dead earlier that day, and kicked in a door. The hunt that held Grand Rapids hostage while Dantzler was at large was now a true hostage crisis. And coverage on Facebook was taking on and perhaps overtaking local television, radio and online news coverage.

Bouncing mainly between MLive.com (online home of the Grand Rapids Press, a Booth Bureau newspaper) and FOX 17 television

for news and live police updates, the reports proved to be remarkably timely and thorough given the situation's gravity. Facebook entered the picture when a friend from Detroit posted "Are you okay over there? I heard there was a big shooting."

Local news had gone statewide and beyond. And Facebook rapidly became a news clearinghouse: People monitoring police scanners and multiple news resources provided updates faster than local media, possibly providing as much horror to those in affected areas as relief to those hoping to be out of harm's way.

Through Facebook, people learned of both the hostage situation before it was announced on the news or MLive and of the presence of a third hostage who had been hiding. Facebook postings with links to online scanners and to blogs with firsthand commentary were shared and forwarded. Friends living near the crime scenes wrote of blockades and of not knowin

g. We watched. We waited. We wrote.

I'd stepped back in front of the television as the latest news was broadcast: All hostages had been safely released. The gunman—after threatening to kill himself, threatening to kill others, wondering how to surrender, inquiring whether there were snipers and asking where to stand—turned his gun on himself and died of a self-inflicted shot to the head. I returned to my computer, to post this news for friends who'd watched and waited with Grand Rapids.

A sad and terrifying situation was handled incredibly well by the public and law enforcement alike. Seemingly, social media outpaced traditional media. Grand Rapids Police Department Chief Kevin Belk's did not want to give his opinion of the media's performance: "It's up to the community to answer the question of how well media performed."

Scott Winters, a longtime local news/talk radio host, was involved with all types of media that day as details unfolded. By the time of the police chase, he was listening to the

police scanner and checking between local television stations WOOD TV8, WZZM 13 and FOX 17. He monitored local news/talk radio stations WOOD AM 1300 and WJRW 1340 AM, and followed MLive and Facebook. The next day, he filled in on WJRW for two hours and talked extensively about the coverage. And he noted that traditional TV and radio trailed the Internet and Facebook.

Winters found WOOD TV8 the most conservative, alluding to scanner information but not reporting it until confirmed. FOX 17 took the most reporting risks. WZZM 13 reported some scanner information heard. On the radio, WOOD AM failed to impress. While WJRW aired live play-by-play and updated listeners during the chase, WOOD aired a syndicated financial program. MLive received good marks from Winters, who placed the online source second only to Facebook.

“A lot of individuals, like me, were listening to the police scanner that evening,” Winters said. “It was interesting to hear the officer whispering while inside the house and talking on his radio over the scanner.”

Winters, a professional journalist, chose not to report all the news over the scanner, waiting for confirmation of information. His actions and the actions of others underscored the differences in professional and social media.

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