

# Massacres in the media: Journalists discuss challenges of covering mass death

Charles Lee “Cookie” Thornton walked into the Kirkwood (Mo.) City Council one night in February 2008 and opened fire on city officials. Police who arrived on scene within minutes shot and killed Thornton, but not before he had killed six people and wounded two others. One of those wounded was Todd Smith, a reporter covering the City Council meeting for Suburban Journals, a St. Louis-area group of publications.

Smith, who was shot in the right hand, found himself catapulted from his reporting beat into the spotlight of national media. Smith recalled the events of the night for a group of 40 who attended a recent News at Noon event titled “Massacres in the Media” that was sponsored by the St. Louis-area Society of Professional Journalists.

“I thought it would be a normal meeting,” Smith said. “I was typing notes on my computer and had no sense anything about that night would be different. I saw Cookie Thornton come in and ... it is a tragic thing to see someone – to see people – killed.”

His first call, when receiving emergency medical treatment, was to his editor.

“I said, ‘I can’t finish writing this because I’ve been shot,’” Smith said. “I didn’t know what was going on really. It was all confusing at the time.”

He started to get media calls once he was at the hospital. Smith said his family was able to run interference for him,

which helped.

“To go from a reporter to being in the news is something else,” Smith said. “In this business it sometimes gets lost that you are a human being.”

Keeping in touch with the human aspect of tragedy is important for members of the media. This is the line of thought expressed by Smith’s fellow panelist, Don Corrigan, editor-in-chief of the Webster-Kirkwood Times.

“It is different when you are a community journalist during something like this,” Corrigan said. “When the national media swoop in, they rely on local media for details. We had requests from CNN for photos of Thornton.”

“You know these people,” Corrigan added. “You write about them, cover them. They are not just the latest numbers, or the latest tally. They are people you know in the community.”

Members of the national media often appear to be cold when covering tragic such as the Kirkwood or Sandy Hook shootings, Corrigan said. He said many of the national media outlets have reporters that travel the country from tragedy to tragedy. Many of the reporters who covered the Kirkwood shootings left St. Louis and went straight to the site of the next big mass shooting at Northern Illinois University killings in DeKalb, Ill.

“I don’t know how they do it,” Corrigan said when discussing national media.

He stressed that reporters need to keep site of what’s really important when covering stories when many have been killed and injured. He recalled the words of a colleague: “At times like this, it’s more important to be human.”

The website of the Webster-Kirkwood Times received 50,000 to 60,000 hits a day following the shootings. The public wanted

information. Corrigan discussed how he and his staff continued to work through the aftermath and the stress it put on them, since they personally knew the victims. He also said they knew early on who had been killed but did not immediately release that information to the public or national media.

“We had relationships with these people,” Corrigan said. “Out of respect of those relationships, we held the details until the next day. We also had to take time to grieve.”

The reporter who was covering the City Council meeting for the Webster-Kirkwood Times was traumatized by the event. Corrigan explained how the newspaper staff worked with her to help her through recovery and to move forward.

Corrigan said he struggles with teaching objectivity in his role as a professor teaching journalism at Webster University. He believes media should question the practice of offering what he called a “false balance.” Sometimes there is a truth, and it is on one side of an argument, he said, citing climate change as an example.

“Tools for covering news change every 20 years,” Corrigan said. “But the tools for being a human, for being a good reporter, don’t change. We need to remember we are human.”

Social media also presents unique challenges and opportunities when reporting on tragic events, Corrigan said. He worries about the accuracy of most social media news content.

“I am glad to work in community journalism,” Corrigan said. “We are loyal to the community. We are not worried about getting something out first, but getting it out accurately.”

Members of the audience questioned how media covered the event and expressed the opinion that most of the media failed to cover the “why” of the event, which was linked to mental health issues.

Smith, who since has been laid off, now works in social services. He said this new line of work helps him in his recovery, and he feels he is contributing to possibly stopping other events of violence.

The next News at Noon event will take place Feb. 14. The event will feature a year in review by local photojournalists.

Please see this two-part article written by William H. Freivogel, Gateway Journalism Review publisher, for background on the Kirkwood shootings:

[Kirkwood's journey: Separating myths and realities about Meacham Park, Thornton, Part 1](#)

[Kirkwood's journey: Separating myths and realities about Meacham Park, Thornton, Part 2](#)

For more information about the St. Louis Society of Professional Journalists, visit the website [http://www.stlspj.org/events.](http://www.stlspj.org/events)