

TV station's reputation takes hit in aftermath of school safety 'test' story

Editor's note: Tripp Frohlichstein has been retained by Kirkwood in the past, though not on this incident. He had two sons go through the Kirkwood school district. Also, a shorter version of this story appeared in the spring 2014 print issue of Gateway Journalism Review.

This is the story of a good idea gone bad.

It is the story of a series of mistakes made by a television station.

And it is the story of lessons learned by a school district.

On Jan. 16, KSDK Channel 5 (the NBC affiliate in St. Louis) was investigating security at five different schools in the area. One of those schools was Kirkwood High School. The station's undercover effort would result in a lockdown at the high school, angering students, staff and parents and ultimately forcing an apology from the station.

The details of this story are pieced together from interviews and previous accounts; Channel 5 officials, when asked for an interview, said the station had no further comment.

It should be noted that the other four schools, all much smaller, had almost no security problems, according to the Channel 5 report. Only Kirkwood "failed" the security test, according to the station.

The others schools are all attended by younger students. However, though the station failed to specifically point it out, it was an apples-and-oranges comparison. Kirkwood High School has multiple buildings on its 43 acre campus and 37

entrances. The other schools have far fewer ways to get in because of their smaller size.

Mike Havener, Kirkwood's principal, said it was unfair to compare his high school to the other schools tested. He explained why and how Channel 5 could have done its comparison in a better way.

"In the public educational system, elementary schools are run differently from middle and high schools," he said. "The age of the students should be considered in many ways, and security is one of them. Why would you have all elementary schools in the story and one high school? This doesn't seem like a valid study to me. There are many high schools around that could have been included. Also, high schools in California-style buildings (single story/spread out) could have been compared."

The incident began around lunchtime. A photographer from Channel 5, John Kelley, was able to enter the high school unchallenged through a door on the south side of the building.

Channel 5's website reported later that day that "one of our employees assigned to this investigative report visited Kirkwood High School. He entered and walked his way toward the office, asking a teacher for directions after a few minutes. There, he asked if he might discuss the school's security. He identified himself by name and gave the office his phone number.

"When the security official could not be reached, our employee left the premises without escort. Approximately an hour later – after our visit – the high school was put on lockdown. This lockdown certainly was not the intent of our visit.

"We will report this story tonight on NewsChannel 5 at 10 p.m. NewsChannel 5 will continue to be vigilant when it comes to the safety of our schools and your children within."

At this point, there was no apology from the station for causing the lockdown.

Kirkwood officials have acknowledged the lapses in security and say they have been fixed. One key change is that the door that Kelley entered was unmonitored for 20 to 25 minutes a day. It now is supervised full time. The school district has made other changes but has asked that they not be made public so that "people with ill intent" will not know how to get around the new measures.

The problem began after Kelley showed up in the high school office and asked to speak to someone from security. After leaving his name and number, Kelley asked for directions to the bathroom. However, a secretary noticed he went a different direction, so she called the School Resource Officer for backup.

They were not sure if Kelley had left the building and did not know where he was, so they called the number he left.

"We called the reporter's phone once and did not leave a message," said Kirkwood district communications director Ginger Cayce. "His message said he worked for Channel 5."

So Cayce said she called Channel 5 to confirm his identity.

This is her account of what happened: "I told them (the Channel 5 assignment desk) what was going on, that we got a message that it was voicemail of John Kelley, and we are calling to verify he works for you and was on assignment. The person at the assignment desk I talked to said she could not verify that he worked for the station. She told me, 'We can't give you that information.' So I asked if she could talk with someone who could. The person told me they were all in meetings or at lunch. I was transferred to Ava Ehrlich (listed on LinkedIn as senior executive content producer) but got her voicemail. I did not want to leave voicemail, so I hung up and called back right away. This time I asked for Brian, who is a

Kirkwood parent who works on the Channel 5 assignment desk. He was not in that day. So I told the person I talked to we had to call the Kirkwood police if Channel 5 could not verify this person worked at Channel 5 and had left our building. I pointed out anybody could say they worked at Channel 5 on their voicemail, and we had to determine his intent. Was he really on a story? The person again said they would not give us the information or confirm he worked for the station. She said she would take my name and number and have someone call right back. I said it was important someone call right back. No one did. I called a third time about five minutes later, since no one had called me back. I told the person we must go into lockdown unless we can verify he is with Channel 5 and left our building. I said, 'We need to know now.' Once again, the person said they didn't know.

"When I got to the high school, the police were there and the lockdown was being initiated. Because of the lockdown, I was escorted to the athletic office by a school counselor for my safety. Then I called Channel 5 for a fourth time. I spoke to a person named Melissa, and she said, 'Hold on, hold on, I am texting John Kelley now to see if he was on assignment and if he has left the building.' This was my first confirmation that John Kelley worked for Channel 5. Melissa then confirmed the details."

Cayce said she was frustrated, as this had never happened before.

"I have always been able to verify information in my 15 years in public education," she said.

Havener explained what was happening during the lockdown.

"Any time there is a lockdown situation in a high school, the first thing that is on my mind is the safety of our students and staff," he said. "What is the possible danger, and at what level is the actual danger? Making sure the proper safety

steps are followed in an intense atmosphere is vital to securing the campus. Securing the grounds and notifying police, students and staff of the situation – and actively seeking out the possible danger – is the highest priority.”

Later, Cayce said Channel 5’s Leisa Zigman, who narrated the on-air story, told her the assignment desk had not been told about the investigation because officials were concerned that if the identity of the Channel 5 staffer was confirmed, one school district might tell another and ruin the story. That had happened to Zigman years before, when she was working on a story about bullying in schools.

Even if the assignment desk was unaware of the investigation, why employees would not even confirm Kelley worked as a Channel 5 photographer remains unanswered.

This desire for secrecy was a costly error. During the lockdown, people were scared.

On Jan. 17, the Riverfront Times reported these examples:

- “Caroline Goff, a freshman at Kirkwood, says her teacher told the class he’d stand in front of an attacker and sacrifice himself if the worst occurred.
- “My son was given scissors and told to kill the person if it came to that,” Char Miller Henneberry posted on Facebook. “I’m thankful to the teacher as I know she was trying to protect the kids. But, wow, my son had to go through that for a story for the damn news station? Are you serious?”
- Dan Sammartano says his freshman daughter spent all 40 minutes of the lockdown believing she was going to die. “I have never heard her this shaken up in my life,” Sammartano posted on Facebook. “She described how her teacher barricaded the door and courageously prepared himself to fight an intruder. She described police running across the roof above her, and loud bangs.”

By the time the story aired, social media was alive with substantial criticism of the station and its tactics, though a few did support the station. Mike Bush, introducing the story, acknowledged the concern but took a defensive position clearly indicating Channel 5 felt what it did was a good thing. The total story was given a whopping seven minutes, a lifetime by local news broadcast standards. This included a piece reported by Farrah Fazal in the last minute and 45 seconds with Charles McCrary (formerly assistant chief of police in St. Louis who also ran security for city schools for many years) discussing school safety and why Kirkwood had messed up.

Bush's introduction, in full, read: "We begin tonight with a controversial story on local public school safety. We began the story with one premise: Are the security systems set up by school districts in St. Louis really working to keep our students safe? We have children in area schools, too, and we are the ones who are the first to get the news that there's been another school shooting where someone gained access who shouldn't. The story upset parents, and we've received your angry calls on this Newschannel 5 report. We knew this would be a difficult task, and we spent a lot of time determining how to approach it from a procedural and legal standpoint. Tonight, we want to show you what we found – and some of it will disturb you."

In the story itself, narrated by Zigman, she noted that the employee was instructed to enter the school as any member of the public might and go to the office. She noted that of the five schools the employee went to, according to their security consultant McCrary, only one failed. That was Kirkwood. She added that faces were being blurred out.

Her narration noted that Kelley (he was not named in the story) entered the building unchallenged. After walking by classrooms and the cafeteria, he asked a teacher for directions to the office. He was still not challenged. She explained that Kelley, a photographer, identified himself by

name. Zigman specified he left his name and KSDK cellphone number. He asked for directions to the restroom, Zigman said, to see if anyone would escort him. Zigman says he was pointed in the direction of the restroom and left on his own. She said he never went to the bathroom, but instead exited the building exactly where he entered.

Zigman noted it was troublesome to McCrary that it took an hour for the school to go on lockdown “after our photographer left the building.”

Kirkwood officials dispute that. They say the lockdown was initiated within 20 minutes after he left the office. They also acknowledged that even that timespan was too long and have since changed their procedures, which should mean a lockdown would occur much sooner under suspicious circumstances.

Zigman went on to say it was not the station’s intent to cause emotional distress, “and for that we are sorry. But we will continue to be vigilant when it comes to the safety of our schools and our children.”

After the story aired, the furor on social media continued. Although Channel 5 argued what it did may save lives because of the security flaws, many parents saw it differently. They continued to be angry about what happened.

Students were upset as well.

A student named Ian Madden, a copy editor for the school’s newspaper, the Kirkwood Call, wrote a scathing piece. It had more than 31,000 “hits” online.

Here is Madden’s commentary:

“As I watched the beginning of KSDK NewsChannel 5’s 10 p.m. broadcast Thursday, I felt like I was rewatching the Kanye-Swift catastrophe. ‘We have heard you (Kirkwood community

members), and we are sorry,' the reporter said, before an extended clip demonstrating everything wrong with KHS's security. KSDK's sorry if you're offended, but here's evidence that they are right and you are wrong. 'Imma let you finish, but ... ' Sure, I agree with them. In some aspects, KHS's security isn't effective. People could have died. But I'm reluctant to agree with KSDK. I'm reluctant to agree with someone who delivered their message in such a rude, intrusive and unprofessional manner ... According to the Society for Professional Journalist's (SPJ) code of ethics, journalists should 'avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story.' KSDK could have easily avoided undercover methods. They just used the footage of the reporter walking into the school with a hidden camera. He could have walked to the office and identified himself as a reporter, avoiding the ensuing lockdown, and still acquired the crucial footage that showed KHS's security isn't up to scratch. The result of KSDK's choice to use undercover methods exemplifies why those methods are discouraged in the SPJ's code."

Madden's column can be found online at:
http://www.thekirkwoodcall.com/_stories_/opinion/2014/01/17/where-ksdk-went-wrong-2/#sthash.yM1Mgy9e.dpuf

The Kirkwood Call's editor-in-chief, Jane Manwarring, added, "I think school security is an extremely important issue, especially with all the school shootings that have happened across the country in the past few years. It would be much more responsible to be completely honest with the faculty about why you're there and what you're doing, instead of trying to pull a stunt like this. The station was unfair in choosing Kirkwood High School as the only high school with multiple entrances to 'test.' It seems like they were purposely targeting Kirkwood. If they wanted to be accurate,

they should have chosen schools with all the same circumstances.”

Criticism of the report’s methodology continued into the weekend on both social media and calls to Channel 5’s newsroom.

There was an effort to get people to boycott watching the station.

Finally, on Jan. 19, anchor Mike Bush read a stronger, much more heartfelt apology. It was the lead story at 10 p.m. and read: “We begin tonight with an apology. By now, you may have heard that last Thursday we were working on a report that looked at school security. And in the course of doing that report, Kirkwood High School was put on lockdown. Well, it was unintentional and unnecessarily scared students, teachers and parents. And quite honestly, it doesn’t matter what our intentions were. We caused undue stress and fear, and we are very sorry this happened. I want you to know that Channel 5’s general manager, our boss, met personally with the Kirkwood superintendent to apologize in person. You should also know that our team worked all weekend taking a hard look at how this happened and what we could be doing differently to make sure this doesn’t happen again, and to prevent it. We have already begun implementing changes to make sure nothing like this will happen again. I’ve been at Channel 5 for almost 30 years, and I’ve always been proud of the fact that everybody at our television station deeply cares about our community. That we do a lot of positive stories. That we try to take the high road. In reporting this school security story, we didn’t live up to our own standards and the standards that you deserve as viewers. We can’t change the past. But our promise to you is we will make every effort to make sure nothing like this will happen in the future.”

Kirkwood publications adviser Mitch Eden feels social media was a big reason behind that apology.

“Just showing the tweets and posts on social media reminded everyone of how quickly information (accurate and inaccurate) spreads,” he said. “Ian’s piece lived a three-day news cycle, which was amazing. All the social media firestorm prompted KSDK’s lead anchor to issue a public apology Sunday evening. The power of social media was verified.”

Not everyone was happy with the apology.

“I don’t know what else Channel 5 could have done to apologize, but I still wasn’t satisfied with their apology,” Manwarring said. “It took too long, and too much backlash, for them to realize they did something wrong and admit their mistake.”

Despite the apology, Havener said that “this was a situation that could have been handled in a more productive and safe manner by KSDK.”

When asked if Channel 5 did enough after the story, Havener replied: “I still ask myself this question today. I am not sure, but we have moved on and continue to focus on the students, staff and community.”

Havener has no problem with journalists investigating school security but said there is a better way to do it.

“It should be done in partnership with the schools and law enforcement,” he said. “We are always looking for ways to improve Kirkwood High School, whether it is within curriculum, safety, opportunities for students and staff, etc. I understand the aspect of telling schools would not allow for a true test of the current system. But how about working with principals and chiefs of police, and letting us know so we do not take the testing to this level? I would have been very interested in the findings if we didn’t take it to this level and put students, staff and parents in this state of mind and situation. If it is a true activity to ensure safety, do we really need a ‘gotcha’ story for ratings?”

Despite the incident, Havener reflected the views of many when it comes to safety at the high school.

“Kids tell me they feel safe overall at Kirkwood High School, and understand that every door and window may not be locked and should not be locked at all times,” he said. “They would like Kirkwood High School to continue to be the welcoming and inviting school it has been. They have also said they have noticed in recent years the safety measures that have been implemented to make the campus more secure.”

Havener added that “overwhelmingly, the parents and community members have said, ‘Do not turn Kirkwood High School into a prison.’ They understand the layout of the school and security issues, but want Kirkwood High School to be a school with a welcoming atmosphere.”

The district estimates it lost \$20,000 in lost instruction time, not to mention the Kirkwood police’s involvement.

KMOV’s former news director (he was still at the station when this incident occurred) blasted Channel 5.

“I think these kinds of stories in general are irresponsible to do,” said Sean McLaughlin. “There are too many things that can go wrong, and I don’t think most people have an expectation of airport-like security at local schools. Unfortunately, if someone is determined to do harm at a school, there’s virtually no security scenarios that would guarantee safety. Clearly there were several instances when harm could have been minimized by more effective front-end planning.”

McLaughlin noted that if the assignment desk could have confirmed Kelley’s identity, “That would have prevented the entire fiasco, eliminated kids being locked in classrooms frightened by what was happening, and avoided wasting valuable time of local law enforcement. In my opinion, this was the critical error.”

McLaughlin said the brouhaha had an impact on the Channel 4 newsroom staff.

“About the only good thing to come out of this was it did give us pause to remember the impact of the decisions we make every day,” he said. “We did discuss in our editorial meetings the mistakes that were made, the obvious ethical issues at play, and how it should have been handled at various stages by the station. It was good discussion that made us all smarter in the end.”

While Channel 4 was direct, KTVI Channel 2 evaded answering the question. News director Audrey Prywitch, in an e-mail, asked: “Who are we to judge Channel 5? We are too busy judging our own service to the viewers. We have earned their trust, and every day as journalists we work very hard to keep it.”

Both stations reported on the Channel 5 incident on their own newscasts.

The reaction from some other media was negative.

The Riverfront Times carried a news headline that read, “KSDK Investigation on School Safety in Kirkwood Reveals Journalists Are The Worst.”

The Huffington Post headline read, “TV Media Stunt Caused St. Louis High School Lockdown – What Were They Thinking?”

The Poynter Institute Web site headline was a blunt, “St. Louis TV station causes school lockdown, pisses off everyone.”

The article on the Poynter Institute website (The Poynter Institute mission statement says, in part, “The Poynter Institute is a school dedicated to teaching and inspiring journalists and media leaders. It promotes excellence and integrity in the practice of craft and in the practical leadership of successful businesses.”) was critical of the Channel 5 methodology writing:

“I think it is shallow and presumptuous to test the security system that way,” said Kelly McBride, Poynter’s media ethicist. “You could do it with real reporting, and talking to people who come and go often. It’s sort of a cheap and easy way to do it.”

In the Post-Dispatch, the headline for columnist Bill McClellan was, “KSDK’s school scare lures viewers but loses the room.”

Bill McClellan was critical of the station’s actions.

“I wanted to shout at the screen, ‘We don’t want you sneaking around our schools. Just give us news, weather and sports. If you want to scare the bejesus out of kids, scare your own,’ ” McClellan wrote in a column.

He also noted that KSDK’s report didn’t take into account other incidents where security was good.

“Let me tell you what school had really good security – Sandy Hook Elementary,” he wrote. “Doors were locked at 9:30 a.m. Visitors were admitted only after a visual review via a video monitor. Identification was required. KSDK would have approved. But guess what? Adam Lanza shot his way through a glass panel next to the door.”

One parent, Mark Zimmer, summed it up best in a quote in the Riverfront Times.

“This was a very poor and ill-planned way to ‘test’ a school’s security system,” Zimmer said. “They should have identified themselves upon entering the school, and should have contacted the school before entering the Kirkwood High School campus to possibly work with the administration regarding a story on security. They poorly reported on the incident, took no responsibility for their own actions, and put everyone at Kirkwood High School in potential danger.”