Digital Deadline: The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* and the Kirkwood Shooting

On the evening of February 7, 2008, a City Council meeting was beginning in the quiet St. Louis suburb of Kirkwood, Missouri. As the Pledge of Allegiance concluded and Mayor Mike Swoboda called the meeting to order, Janet McNichols, a freelance writer for the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* newspaper, readied her notebook. It was shortly after 7 p.m.

Back in the *Post-Dispatch* newsroom minutes later, police scanners crackled to life with frantic reports of shots fired at the Kirkwood City Council meeting. Reporter Greg Jonsson got through to McNichols on her cellular phone—she was unhurt, but badly shaken, and had seen two people she knew shot before diving under her chair to await what she was certain would be her own death. She had recognized the voice of the shooter over the continuing sound of gunfire—he was an acquaintance of hers, and he frequently attended City Council meetings. His name was Charles Lee Thornton, known in the neighborhood as Cookie. He had screamed about shooting the mayor, whom McNichols now feared must be dead, before being shot himself by police. It was all over in less than two minutes.

As the only major local news organization with a reporter on the scene, the *Post-Dispatch* had exclusive access to a major story. The newspaper's website, STLtoday.com, seemed the obvious place to break the news, but editors and reporters would have to make rapid decisions about how best to use their information, and how to tell the story in a manner both thorough and responsible. Their main source was one of their own reporters, but she was also a stunned eyewitness to a shooting rampage. How much should they rely on her account?

Editors immediately dispatched staff to several sites: to Kirkwood City Hall, to await official police statements; to the hospital, to try to determine the status of the victims; and to the shooter's Kirkwood home, seeking family members who might shed light on why Thornton had killed. Reporter Jonsson remained in the newsroom to gather the details reporters phoned in and write a description of the events; he updated his story dozens of times throughout the evening as he learned more. STLtoday.com stayed well ahead of local television stations in breaking the

news—an area where the print newspaper usually lagged far behind. Television reporters, stuck behind police barricades blocks from City Hall, resorted to repeating facts first published on STLtoday.com. Meanwhile, official police sources remained silent as to the number, identities, and status of the victims.

The *Post-Dispatch* was in an unaccustomed—and uncomfortable—position as the sole judge of which details of the shooting to make public, and when. Television news had long been the venue for breaking stories; the newspaper had a well-established role providing next-day context and analysis of the news. Though *Post-Dispatch* editors and reporters had moved toward breaking more stories on STLtoday.com in recent years, this was one of the biggest stories yet to go first to the Web. Editors knew that the impact of the choices they made would be keenly felt in Kirkwood, a small community unaccustomed to violence on such a scale.

A crucial question editors had to consider under the constant deadline pressure of the Web was whether to name the victims—five, not including the shooter—especially since McNichols could not verify which ones were dead. Should they wait for official confirmation of their names? What was their responsibility to the victims' families? No less pressing were practical questions about how to tell the story. What would be the most effective online presentation? Should they hold information back for the next day's newspaper, given that it was unlikely television would beat them to it? Or were they obliged to release details as soon as they were confident of their accuracy?

They also had a newspaper to publish. Their evening deadline was fast approaching: First editions had to reach the printer by 10:30 p.m., and the final edition had to be complete by 12:30 a.m. But what was the newspaper's role now that the details of the shooting had been well publicized online and on television? How could the paper best serve all of its St. Louis audience—both those who had learned of the shooting immediately after it happened, and those who would pick up the *Post-Dispatch* the next morning with no knowledge of the tragedy?

The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*

In 2008, the *Post-Dispatch* was one of the top 30 newspapers in the US by circulation, as well as one of the largest newspapers in the Midwest.[1] It served close to 300,000 weekday subscribers in 16 counties in Missouri and Illinois. The paper had a proud history as the first newspaper founded by Joseph Pulitzer, who bought the bankrupt St. Louis *Post* and merged it with the ailing St. Louis *Evening Dispatch* in 1878.[2] The Pulitzer family controlled the newspaper

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[1]   Audit Bureau of Circulations via Burelles*Luce*, "2008 Top Newspapers, Blogs & Consumer Magazines," http://www.burrellesluce.com/top100/2008_Top_100List.pdf.

[2]   Harry Levins, "Family's newspaper tradition comes to an end," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 31, 2005.

through three generations; when its primary competitor, the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, shut its doors in 1986, the *Post-Dispatch* became the only large daily in town.

In 2000, Pulitzer's purchase of the weekly Suburban Journals of Greater St. Louis—a chain of more than 30 neighborhood-level newspapers—further consolidated the company's print news hegemony in St. Louis. Under the stewardship of Chairman Michael Pulitzer, Pulitzer Publishing Company was also early to recognize potential in distributing news electronically. By the 1980s, its newspapers had already begun to experiment with delivering news via television and telephone. In the early 1990s, Pulitzer was one of the first to invest in the emerging technology of the Internet as personal computers (PCs) became cheaper and more common in American homes. In December of 1991—when there were around 50,000 PCs in the St. Louis area—the company launched PostLink. The venture was not an online version of the newspaper, but an "electronic information service" that delivered news briefs, stock quotes, forecasts, classifieds, and sports scores to computers for a flat fee of $9.95 per month. The company had only modest ambitions for the new service. In an article announcing PostLink's launch, the newspaper declared that "the venture is not seen as a major business initiative but represents a field that the company wants to enter."[3]

Throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century, the *Post-Dispatch* like other newspapers struggled to create an online identity—a blend of text content, images, interactivity, and multimedia elements that could supplement the paper product without replacing it altogether. But it was unclear to many in the *Post-Dispatch* newsroom whether the Web, and its many opportunities for experimentation, would strengthen or undermine their journalism. Among reporters' concerns, recalls Pat Gauen, *Post-Dispatch* public safety editor, was the fear that publishing stories for free online before the next day's paper was printed meant "giving away" their work—primarily to television news stations. Gauen elaborates:

> We were sort of parting with something we owned and giving it away earlier in the day. And there was a lot of raw resistance on the part of reporters, and some resistance on the part of me… We knew that the first four or five readers of our online product would be the TV stations and radio news operations here, and that they would harvest it for their own use. And our fear was that we'd have a good story on Monday afternoon for Tuesday's paper, but by the time it got in Tuesday's paper, the TV people would have grabbed onto it, and our readers would have seen it on TV at 5, 6 and 10, and by the time they saw it in the paper, they'd say, well, we already knew that… We'd end up scooping ourselves.[4]

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[3]   Robert Sanford, "Pulitzer plans new computer service in fall," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 1, 1991.

[4]   Author's interview with Pat Gauen, on June 23, 2008, in St. Louis, Missouri. All further quotes from Gauen, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

Like other newspapers, the *Post-Dispatch* moved steadily toward providing its entire newspaper online, so that by the late 1990s, the newspaper was in effect reproducing a stripped-down version of its print product on the Web. But other newspapers were starting to treat their websites as separate products, not simply print in another medium. In 1997, the Knight Ridder chain created "portals" to accompany their online newspapers—guides to arts, culture, services, and jobs in the cities in which the chain owned newspapers. Philly.com, for example, was a portal to Philadelphia that supplemented the online *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and Boston.com served readers of the *Boston Globe*.[5]

The *Post-Dispatch* followed suit in March 2001 with STLtoday.com, which its president hoped would become "the definitive online guide to living in St. Louis." The site—with its own staff of 65, housed outside the *Post-Dispatch* newsroom—radically deemphasized the newspaper itself. The online version of the newspaper was just one among many links in the portal, which also linked to other news sites such as the Associated Press.

But it soon proved unprofitable to treat STLtoday.com as an independent enterprise. Within a year, by March 2002, the Pulitzer Publishing Company had laid off 15 STLtoday.com staff members, and the site's president resigned over the portal's disappointing revenue.[6] A few months after that, STLtoday.com's staff moved into the *Post-Dispatch* newsroom—the newspaper and the website were no longer separate operations.

Sale to Lee Enterprises

The *Post-Dispatch*'s identity was strongly tied to the Pulitzer name. There was a bust of Joseph Pulitzer by the elevator bank, and Pulitzer quotes wrought in brass on the marble walls of the entryway. A portion of Pulitzer's retirement speech formed the *Post-Dispatch* editorial platform and appeared daily at the top of the editorial page. But in January 2005, with no heir willing to take over the Pulitzer Publishing Company, the family sold the company—and all of its 14 newspapers including the *Post-Dispatch*—to Davenport, Iowa-based Lee Enterprises for $1.46 billion. The purchase made Lee— with more than 50 daily papers—the fourth largest newspaper publisher in terms of papers owned and the seventh largest in terms of circulation. The *Post-Dispatch* became its largest paper. Lee's papers served primarily mid-sized markets in the Midwest.[7] For the first time in its history, the *Post-Dispatch* would not be a locally owned family newspaper—it would be subsumed into a much larger company.

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5   J.D. Lasica, "Gleaming Portal, Pauper News Site," *Online Journalism Review*, March 22, 2001, http://www.ojr.org/ojr/business/1017961414.php.

6   Kathryn S. Wenner, "Pruning the Portal," *American Journalism Review*, March 2002.

7   Christopher Carey, "Lee Enterprises Buys Pulitzer," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 31, 2005.

It was unclear what this would mean for the paper; some feared the aggressive cost-cutting and layoffs that characterized other corporate newspaper purchases. *Post-Dispatch* staffers were well aware that the Gannett Company, for example, had aggressively boosted profits in newspapers it had purchased. It did so mainly by cutting newsroom budgets—especially payroll, and even in some cases circulation.[8]

Lee formally took over in June 2005. On some levels, the transition was harmonious. Lee and Pulitzer shared a similar focus on local news. The *Post-Dispatch* had only three bureaus outside Missouri: two in neighboring Illinois, and one in Washington, DC. For other national and international news, it relied on wire reports or other newspapers. But Lee was also a well-known—and effective—cost-cutter, and within two months of taking over the *Post-Dispatch*, it launched its first round of buy-outs, or offers of early retirement, which were ultimately accepted by 41 newsroom employees. At the same time, the company oversaw a redesign of the paper that Pulitzer had mapped out before the sale. The new *Post-Dispatch* emphasized photos, graphics, bigger headlines, and shorter stories in an effort to compete with television and the Web for the attention of a time-starved audience.[9]

Not long afterwards, on November 4, 2005, the newspaper's editor, Ellen Soeteber, stepped down. Though she did not criticize Lee's priorities in her announcement, she cited concern over shrinking newsroom resources as a factor in her decision to leave.[10] She chose as her replacement longtime Managing Editor Arnie Robbins, who immediately began searching for his own replacement as managing editor. He found her in September 2006: Pam Maples, who had been an editor at the Dallas *Morning News* and brought online expertise and innovative zeal to the job. She had just concluded a Knight Fellowship at Stanford University.

Becoming Web-first

The paper was still adjusting to online reality. The staff took advantage of the immediacy of STLtoday.com to update sports scores and breaking news, but the first major story the *Post-Dispatch* covered on its website first broke on the afternoon of January 12, 2007. Public Safety Editor Gauen was at his desk around 4 p.m. when off-duty City Police Reporter Bill Bryan called with a news tip: Police had found a boy who had been kidnapped four days earlier. What's more, where police had found the abductee, Ben Ownby, they had also found another boy, Sean Hornbeck, who had been missing for five years. Both were being held in a suburban apartment by a pizza store manager named Michael Devlin. Gauen says: "I remember thinking for an instant, he's kidding. Except a) it's not funny. And b) Bill never, ever jokes."

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[8] Ed Bishop and Roy Malone, "Whither Pulitzer?" *St. Louis Journalism Review*, December 2004/January 2005.

[9] Roy Malone, "Daily Changes at the Post-Dispatch," *St. Louis Journalism Review*, September 2005.

[10] Roy Malone, "Soeteber Resigns," *St. Louis Journalism Review*, November 2005.

Gauen wasn't sure what to do with the news. It seemed to belong on STLtoday.com, but anything that went out on the Web would have a long half-life—and Gauen was nervous about the reliability of Bryan's report. Bryan was passing along a tip from an unofficial source. On the face of it, it seemed highly unlikely that the boys were held together. "This would be such a monumental blunder if we're not [right]," Gauen recalls thinking.[11] Only after another reporter called with confirmation from the FBI, and television news began to report the story, did Gauen write a breaking news update for STLtoday.com.

As the Devlin story evolved, *Post-Dispatch* editors and reporters fell into a pattern of reporting one kind of story on the website, and another in the paper. On the Web, reporters posted and updated frequently. They focused on describing what had happened, from hour to hour or day to day. The print writers went into greater detail, with profiles of the victims, their families, and Devlin's troubled history. The story immediately drew national attention. It was the first time, says Gauen, that "we were a full competitor for the immediate news against television."

The *Post-Dispatch*'s coverage of the Devlin story—both in print and online—meshed with Managing Editor Maples' and Editor Robbins' vision of the newspaper's role and continued relevance in an online world. By and large, the print paper no longer focused on breaking news, which other media usually had reported by the time the paper landed on subscribers' front lawns. Yet Robbins was aware he had to strike a delicate balance; he knew the newspaper could not ignore breaking news altogether. The problem, in Robbins' mind, was "what are we going to say tomorrow on the front page that's not already out there?" while at the same time serving *Post-Dispatch* readers who did not go online.[12]

Adjusting and Experimenting. Maples pushed her staff to make STLtoday.com a priority. Rather than plan stories for the print paper and only later consider the Web, she says: "[our writers] should be thinking… what do I do with this story right now? … What kind of story is it and what's the best way to tell it and is that online right now?"[13]

Maples also wanted to experiment. In 2007, she started looking for a story that would be appropriate to cover by Twitter feed—short text strings of 140 characters or fewer that could be sent via cellular phone text messages or other applications. When a construction project closed miles of a major interstate in January 2008, she felt she had found the ideal story, one that, in her words, "would be of high interest and usefulness to the community and be likely to be developing and changing swiftly." She wrote of the experiment later:

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[11]   Gauen's email to author, October 23, 2008.

[12]   Author's interview with Arnie Robbins, on June 25, 2008, in St. Louis, Missouri. All further quotes from Robbins, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

[13]   Author's interview with Pam Maples, on June 26, 2008, in St. Louis, Missouri. All further quotes from Maples, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

> We wanted to provide real-time information of an immediate nature that could be posted—or accessed—on the move, using wireless devices. Twitter was ideal because people didn't need, or even want, long or detailed posts to help them navigate the new situation as they were commuting. [14]

Maples was also eager to start a breaking news blog, which she had noticed on other sites. However, she felt that method of delivering news had limitations. It could be difficult to find the narrative in a series of short updates. She explains that during Hurricane Katrina, for example:

> There were people who were doing both the story and then the blog where all the reporters out in the field were posting in just little updates… The problem with that is you don't see the whole [story]. You have to wade through all of it to kind of put the pieces together.

She felt there must be breaking news stories for which blogging might be appropriate, but had yet to find the right story.

Trouble in Kirkwood

At 7 p.m. on the evening of Thursday, February 7, Public Safety Editor Gauen was on his way out the door. It had been a quiet day in a string of quiet days. Gauen usually left the office closer to 8 p.m., and as he stopped to chat with Night Metro Editor Lisa Eisenhauer to help set the agenda for the evening's coverage, he remarked on the fact that he had been home early every day that week.

But then Gauen noticed Photographer J.B. Forbes burst from the photo room. "He comes running from the doorway, and the fact that he was moving so fast caught my eye," Gauen recalls. "I could tell from the look on his face… I was not going home." Gauen could not initially understand what Forbes was saying as he dashed across the newsroom toward the Metro section. But by the time Forbes reached Eisenhauer's desk, it was clear why he was so distraught: He had heard on a newsroom police scanner that shots had been fired at a City Council meeting in Kirkwood, an affluent St. Louis County suburb.

Gauen himself had a stack of scanners on his desk, but since there were over 100 police municipalities in St. Louis, it was impossible to monitor all police radio traffic, and Gauen didn't try. Kirkwood was a reliably quiet little community, and Gauen's scanners tended to be tuned to St. Louis' larger, busier police departments. Yet now, even Gauen's scanners were beginning to come alive with shouting voices. Gauen recalls:

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[14]   Pam Maples, "Using Twitter in news and community reporting: the St. Louis example," *Lunch over IP* [weblog], February 2, 2008, http://www.lunchoverip.com/2008/01/using-twitter-i.html.

> The professionalism was ratcheted down. We were getting yelling and excited voices. I was getting talk of shootings… [People saying]: We need more help. We need this. We need that. So this is reinforcing in my mind that this is real. Whatever this is, it's big.

But Gauen could not decipher anything more specific than that shots had been fired. It was unclear whether anyone had been hurt or killed, who the shooter was, and whether that person was at large. "We still had no idea of the magnitude," he says. "We didn't know anything."

Metro Editor Adam Goodman was concluding an evening meeting when he heard the commotion in the newsroom. As he rushed to join the others in the Metro section, his first instinct was to find out whether the *Post-Dispatch* had a reporter at the Kirkwood City Council meeting. The paper very well might not. The Metro coordinator, Carl Green, was in charge of assigning freelance reporters—also called "stringers"—to attend such meetings, but the paper did not cover all of them. Green, who maintained the freelancer schedule, was nowhere in sight. So Goodman quickly sifted through the papers on Green's desk in search of the assignment calendar, finding at last that the *Post-Dispatch* did have a stringer at the meeting: Janet McNichols.

McNichols was a part-time reporter who had spent a 20-year career in public relations at Anheuser-Busch, an enormous commercial brewery based in St. Louis. Now retired, she devoted a few hours a week to writing and reporting for the *Post-Dispatch*, and by 2008 had covered city council meetings in Kirkwood and other St. Louis neighborhoods for several years. She had written hundreds of stories for the newspaper, mostly short dispatches from council meetings about zoning changes, public works projects, and development. In all of that time, she had filed stories by phone and email; consequently, none of the Metro editors had actually met McNichols.

Now she could be in serious danger. She had not contacted the newsroom. Editors did not know whether she—or anyone—had survived the reported attack. But she was also their best hope of finding out and reporting on what had happened. Night Metro Editor Eisenhauer retrieved McNichols' cell phone number from the freelancer schedule and dialed.

Race to the Web

It was immediately obvious to both Gauen and Goodman that the story was destined for the Web. By now, the *Post-Dispatch* had a strong online culture, and the staff viewed the Web as the natural home of breaking news. The question was not whether to tell the story online, but how, especially given how little information they had. Traffic on the police scanners was frantic and confused. But that, to Gauen, was confirmation enough that the situation in Kirkwood was serious—and it was news. After dispatching two police reporters to the scene, he composed a brief Web update. He explains:

> We didn't say anybody was shot… I left it really in the terms that I knew it… Something to the effect of, police from several jurisdictions were responding to Kirkwood City Hall tonight on a report that shots had been fired… I'm trying to hold down the level of hysteria. It's much easier to escalate than to de-escalate. I don't want to be wrong.

Gauen emailed the update to the Web staff with instructions that it be posted immediately. "That was done within five minutes of the time we heard about it," Gauen says. But another problem emerged immediately: Because STLtoday.com's traffic dropped dramatically after the end of the workday, the paper devoted far fewer resources to the website in the evening. Gauen notes:

> One of the problems with our online operation was that at night it was run by not necessarily trained journalists. They're more clerical people who knew how to post things and who were taught how to post things off the wire… But in terms of doing critical editing or critical journalism on a deadline, they weren't really trained to do that.

Gauen, Goodman, and Eisenhauer would have to monitor carefully what their reporters sent to the Web staff for posting. For now, they scrambled to coordinate reporters. Metro Editor Goodman decided that the police reporters on the scene should concentrate on gathering information rather than writing. He directed Greg Jonsson, a night general assignment reporter, to remain in the office and gather other reporters' dispatches from the scene to write—as quickly as possible—a description of the event for STLtoday.com. Jonsson had worked the night shift for several years and was accustomed to tight deadlines. He was often charged with rushing breaking news stories into print in the short time period between when his shift began and when the newspaper went to press. In this case, Night Metro Editor Eisenhauer fielded phone calls and emailed relevant information to Jonsson, so that he could write uninterrupted.

But what form should the story take? Should it be a series of short, breaking updates, one detail at a time, like Gauen's update? Was this the right story to cover with a blog? Jonsson decided simply to write the story as an article that would grow and change, with more details inserted and different ones emphasized as he learned more about the situation. He would, he says, "Write, write, write, reach a natural stopping point, send it to the web, write some more, insert paragraphs, patch and fill."[15]

Goodman considered assigning another reporter to write the print story as Jonsson wrote the Web story. The first edition of the newspaper was due at the presses in only three and a half hours. But Jonsson felt it would be more efficient simply to rework the final version of the Web story himself for the print product. That way, reporters on the scene would not have to contact two

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[15] Author's interview with Greg Jonsson, on June 24, 2008, in St. Louis, Missouri. All further quotes from Jonsson, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

different people each time they learned a new detail. Further, it ensured that one person would be responsible for all the outgoing information. Jonsson explains:

> Otherwise, you'd have two people writing at other ends of the room, and maybe somebody's going further than the other person thinks we should be going yet or vice versa. At least that way, there's one person who knew where we were at each point as far as naming people or as far as different details.

As to what should go in the newspaper, Jonsson would think about it later. The print deadline was fast approaching, but the Web deadline was immediate and constant.

Janet McNichols

Eisenhauer had reached McNichols, who was unhurt and sounded quite calm—so calm that Eisenhauer feared she was in shock. McNichols was still in City Hall, in a side room into which police had ushered the witnesses from the crime scene. She was waiting to give her report to the police. She explained that she had tried to call her daughter, but had forgotten how to operate her phone. She had wanted to call the *Post-Dispatch* as well but, she recalls: "I couldn't handle that either."[16]

"She picked up right away," says Eisenhauer. "I said, are you at the Kirkwood City Council Meeting? Yes. Did a bunch of people just get shot there? Yes."[17] Eisenhauer passed the phone to Jonsson, who asked McNichols what had happened. McNichols recollected the events she had witnessed as best she could. The meeting had just begun, she recounted, and she heard someone charge through the front doors, shouting—in a voice she recognized immediately—about shooting the mayor.

That voice belonged to Charles Lee Thornton, a man known around the neighborhood as Cookie. In her years covering Kirkwood, McNichols had become well-acquainted with Thornton, a frequent and contentious presence at City Council meetings. Thornton owed the city thousands of dollars in parking tickets from his asphalt and demolition business, charges that he thought were unfounded and racially motivated. He had sued the city numerous times for reprieve, and had two weeks earlier lost his latest legal battle with Kirkwood. "I knew who he was the minute I heard that voice," McNichols says. "He came to Council meetings all the time and yelled and carried on."

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[16] Author's interview with Janet McNichols, on June 25, 2008, in St. Louis, Missouri. All further quotes from McNichols, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

[17] Author's interview with Lisa Eisenhauer, on June 24, 2008, in St. Louis, Missouri. All further quotes from Eisenhauer, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

McNichols had been in the second row of the meeting room, and Thornton had come in from behind her. She did not turn to see him but watched in horror as Officer Tom Ballman, a Kirkwood police officer she held in high regard, reached for his weapon and was immediately shot in the head. In the row directly in front of her an instant later, Kirkwood Public Works Director Ken Yost crumpled to the floor, also shot. McNichols only heard the rest as she took cover under her chair. Along with the sound of gunfire, she heard Yost struggle to breathe as she waited in fear that Thornton would get her next. She heard the shooter approach the dais where the Council sat, then heard more shots fired but did not see the other victims. Moments later, the police came in shooting, soon afterwards announcing that Thornton was down. "It probably didn't take more than about a minute and a half," recalls McNichols. "It was over pretty quick."

Step by step, Jonsson coaxed as many details as he could from a still confused and shaken McNichols. He asked whether the shooter was already in the meeting or had come in from outside. McNichols said that Thornton had entered after the meeting began. He asked if she had seen people shot, and she confirmed Officer Ballman and Public Works Director Yost, but was unsure who the other victims were. She had known by the way Thornton was shouting that he intended to shoot the mayor. But as she left the meeting room, she was afraid to look back. She did not want to see acquaintances and friends of hers lying dead or injured on the floor. "There were a lot of things that were unclear at that point, but [I was] just trying to run her through," Jonsson recalls. "She didn't know the answers to everything because she was in a situation where gunshots were flying, so she pretty rapidly was not a reporter anymore and was just a person."

Jonsson had finished asking his questions, and McNichols had a few minutes to spare before she had to give her report to police. So Jonsson ran through his list of questions again, in case she remembered new details or changed others. He was trying, he says, to establish "the category of things we don't know… the category of things we know… [and] the category of things we believe, based on what evidence." He continues:

> It's just hard to divide, sometimes, between what people know and what they're assuming. So I just wanted to make sure we weren't making any assumptions that would maybe go beyond what she'd actually seen.

What to Write

Jonsson knew who the shooter was, as well as the names of two victims, though Thornton had almost certainly shot more people. McNichols did not know how many victims there were in total. Nor could she say for certain whether they were dead. While she did know from the police that Thornton himself had been shot, his status, too, was unclear. "Normally you would not get information like that very quickly from the police about who the shooter was," says Metro Editor

Goodman. "So we talked to her very carefully, and there was no doubt… But the first question became, were we going to identify him?"[18]

It was Goodman's decision, and he made it quickly. McNichols, though stunned, seemed "an incredibly solid eyewitness." She even had a kind of confirmation from police that Thornton was shot. There had been no official press conference, but McNichols was a reporter, and she had heard police announce while she was crouched under her chair that the shooter had been hit. Further, Goodman and Jonsson felt it was important to make it clear that the shooter was not at large. Thornton's family might not yet have been notified of what had happened, but that seemed of secondary importance.

When it came to naming Thornton's victims, Goodman and Jonsson were less sure of themselves. McNichols had seen Yost and Ballman shot, and they trusted her account. But she had heard other names of victims from other witnesses while being ushered into a side room by police. Among those were Councilwoman Connie Karr, a close personal friend of several at the newspaper as well as the ex-wife of a *Post-Dispatch* sports writer. McNichols had also heard that Kirkwood Mayor Mike Swoboda and Councilman Michael H.T. Lynch had been hit.

But she had not personally seen Thornton shoot them. Whereas she had witnessed the shooting of Yost and Ballman, she had a different role as far as Thornton's other victims were concerned. In those cases, she was acting as a reporter interviewing eyewitnesses. How should Goodman and Jonsson weigh the different kinds of information? Should they trust others' eyewitness accounts as much as they did McNichols'?

The newspaper found itself in an unaccustomed position. Explains Public Safety Editor Gauen:

> Ordinarily we're on the outside banging on the door trying to get in and looking for every morsel that we can get. And here we have a situation where in a sense we knew too much. We knew so much that we've got to decide on how to self-censor… [Usually] the cop tells you you've got three people dead in here, that's in the public domain and everybody's pretty comfortable in using that and attributing it. In a case like this… it's a question of how much do we trust what we've been told by our own people and how much do we want to [use]?

Other reporters had begun to return to the newsroom, either summoned by editors or as volunteers after seeing the STLtoday.com update. Goodman and Eisenhauer directed two reporters, Doug Moore and Tim O'Neil, to research a profile of Thornton. The two began looking through the *Post-Dispatch*'s electronic archives, and those of Kirkwood's neighborhood newspaper,

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[18]   Author's interview with Adam Goodman, on June 23, 2008, in St. Louis, Missouri. All further quotes from Goodman, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

the Webster-Kirkwood *Times*, for Thornton's name. The editors dispatched another reporter, David Hunn, to the hospital to await word on the victims. They directed several other reporters to begin researching the victims' backgrounds to write brief profiles of them which, depending on what they learned later in the evening, might serve as obituaries.

Jonsson meanwhile worked on a fuller Web update. He called McNichols several times over the next half hour, double-checking facts and firming up details. He says:

> I was just trying to talk to her… [and] just go through it again and again, and try to get a little more detail each time. And then, sometimes, you ask other questions you can think of, and then you write it up, and then, you hit a point where, oh, I didn't really ask this and maybe I assumed that such and such was happening but let's check.

Only about 20 minutes had passed since the *Post-Dispatch* had first learned of the shooting, and now their police reporters had arrived on the scene. Local television news reporters were also present, having learned of the incident on their own police scanners or from STLtoday.com. But all members of the major media—except McNichols—were held back blocks from Kirkwood City Hall by police tape. There was not much any of them could do but wait for the police to hold a press conference, and it was unclear when they would. McNichols at that point knew more about the shooting than any other member of the major St. Louis media organizations.

What, Metro Editor Goodman wondered, was the *Post-Dispatch*'s responsibility as the only large news organization with access to the scene? Was the paper obliged to publish all of what it knew? Was it responsible to print the names of victims before they knew who, if anyone, was dead—or should they wait for official confirmation or family notification? There was scarcely any time to consider. Goodman asked McNichols whether she felt she could come back to the office, and after she left the police station, she climbed into her car and began heading east down the highway, back to the *Post-Dispatch* newsroom.

Jonsson sent his first update to the Web staff at around 7:50 p.m., about half an hour after Gauen had posted the initial announcement of the shooting. Jonsson named the shooter as well as the victims McNichols had identified. He phrased his brief piece carefully. "Among those hit," he wrote, "in addition to the police officer, were Mayor Mike Swoboda, Council members Michael H.T. Lynch and Connie Karr and Public Works Director Kenneth Yost, McNichols said. Conditions were not known for any of them."[19]

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[19] Email from Greg Jonsson to *Post-Dispatch* Web editors, February 7, 2008, 7:48 p.m.

Outside the Newsroom

In addition to the main article describing what happened, Gauen, Goodman, and Eisenhauer quickly planned other aspects of the story to pursue. Gauen says:

> To me the imperatives were, find out what the officials have got to say. Find out what the witnesses have got to say. And then start tracking down the threads of the victims and the killer.

Reporter Stephen Deere had grown tired of waiting at the crime scene for a police announcement and thought he could learn more elsewhere. He called Gauen and offered to go to Thornton's house to see if he could find and interview the shooter's family members. Gauen was nervous. He knew that the shooter was down, but he did not know whether Thornton had acted alone. He also did not know whether any member of the Thornton household knew what had happened. Gauen recalls: "I don't know if his 10-year-old daughter is going to answer the door to a reporter who says, well, your dad just shot up City Hall, and he's dead."

Urging Deere to be careful, Gauen tracked down Thornton's address on the Internet, and Deere drove the short distance there from City Hall. Thornton's brother Gerald answered the door, and Deere told him what had happened. Gerald Thornton registered little surprise. He invited Deere into the house.

Over the next hour, Gerald Thornton discussed his brother with Deere, before the police and other media arrived, showing Deere framed family photographs and explaining Charles Thornton's long battle with Kirkwood. "He went to war," Gerald said of the killings.[20] Deere could hear the news on in another room from which, eventually, Thornton's mother emerged. She too seemed unsurprised at the news. By the time television crews arrived, Deere had collected the quotes and background he wanted. He phoned it in to the newsroom and left.

Maples and McNichols

Managing Editor Pam Maples had just walked into her house when her cousin called to tell her about the shooting and that Connie Karr, a friend of the Maples family, had been shot. "I turned around and got my keys and said to my husband, 'I'm going to work,'" Maples recalls. She called her cousin back from the car and asked how she knew about Karr and whether she could email Maples the names and phone numbers of people who knew Karr well. When Maples returned to the newsroom, she immediately found Metro Editor Goodman and asked where she could be of use.

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[20]   Doug Moore and Stephen Deere, "Assailant had history of disputes with city," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 8, 2008.

The Web story was already well underway, so Maples and Goodman discussed what they should do with McNichols once she got there. Goodman thought she might be able to write a first-person account of the shooting. Or perhaps, he suggested, she should do a video for STLtoday.com describing her ordeal. That would give readers an eyewitness account, with the added advantage that the *Post-Dispatch* could distribute the video to national media so that McNichols would not have to describe her ordeal again. Maples liked the idea but wanted to make sure McNichols was comfortable with it.

They needed a text account for the newspaper, however. Goodman and Maples decided against asking McNichols to write it herself, instead directing an experienced reporter and fast writer, Steve Giegerich, to interview her and write a description of the events from her perspective.

McNichols arrives. At 8:50 p.m., Jonsson filed a second update, adding details from other reporters about Thornton's history with Kirkwood, but still only allowing that Thornton had shot "several people." He did not give a total number of those shot or their conditions, but again listed the names of the shooting victims McNichols had confirmed. In his view and Goodman's, there was not yet adequate confirmation—either from police or the families of Thornton's victims—to begin reporting deaths.

Meanwhile television news reporters—still cordoned off blocks from the scene—had resorted to filming STLtoday.com. This only intensified the pressure on *Post-Dispatch* reporters and editors to get the news fast, but above all to get it right. The rest of St. Louis' media was relying on the paper for information, and if the *Post-Dispatch* made a mistake, other news organizations would repeat it. Says Gauen: "We had a huge amplifier attached to our product."

Then at 9:13, minutes after Jonsson had posted his second update but before the police had made any official announcement, local Fox affiliate KTVI reported that there were six dead from the attack, including Kirkwood's mayor.[21] Goodman and Jonsson decided not to repeat the claim. They were confident that Fox's sources knew no more about the attack than did their own. Finally, shortly before 9:30, the police convened a press conference. Fox had gotten it just about right—there were six dead. But the police did not release any names, saying only that the six were two police officers, three Kirkwood officials, and the shooter. There was no explicit mention of the mayor.

Matching McNichols' information with the police announcement, Jonsson and *Post-Dispatch* editors could infer who was dead. Two police officers—that meant it was likely that the officer McNichols had seen shot, Tom Ballman, was dead. The three Kirkwood officials were probably the three McNichols had named: Connie Karr, Mike H.T. Lynch, and Public Works Director Kenneth Yost. In that case, it seemed that the mayor had survived.

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[21]   "Six Dead, Including Mayor, In Missouri City Hall Shooting," *Fox on the Record*, February 7, 2008.

But was this inference adequate confirmation—even if it was drawn from an eyewitness account and an official announcement? Goodman and Jonsson remained cautious. If anything, the police press conference had complicated matters rather than clarifying them. The *Post-Dispatch* could simply report McNichols' claims side by side with the police announcement. But then readers might infer who was dead. Goodman felt uncomfortable publishing material that could push them toward a conclusion which might prove wrong.

McNichols arrived in the newsroom at around the same time. Managing Editor Maples escorted her into her office and shut the door. Maples recalls: "I said, first of all… how are you doing? What do you need? We are here for you… We want to be sure you're OK." Then she asked McNichols for an interview, and secured the stringer's permission to videotape the interview. Maples vacated her office to allow reporter Steve Giegerich and a videographer a quiet space in which to interview McNichols.

In the Cold

Meanwhile, reporter David Hunn had arrived at St. John's Mercy Hospital, where ambulances had taken the shooting victims, shortly after 9 p.m. He entered the building and inquired about the status of those shot, but the hospital's press secretary refused to tell him and insisted that he could not remain in the waiting room to interview visitors. Hunn took up a post in the parking lot, hoping to encounter visitors as they left.

He waited for close friends or family members of those hospitalized, but it proved difficult to find them. Hunn was not sure which of the hospital's visitors knew the victims, so he tried to catch up with and question all who left. Many people refused to speak to him, accusing him of being insensitive to families' grief.

Even those who did talk to him often would not give their names. Hunn recalls that he was reluctant to quote in a news story an "unknown family member [of a victim] or unknown friend of [a victim's] family… It's so unreliable, you don't know the person's name, you might not even know their relationship to the situation."[22] Several such sources gave Hunn names of fatalities, but he did not even relay them to the newsroom because he judged the information too suspect.

Among other problems, it was not clear where they got their information. It seemed quite likely that the hospital visitors were simply repeating what they saw playing on television news in the waiting room—which meant the news was already on STLtoday.com, or was speculation from the TV newsroom. Hunn did not want to get caught in the trap of creating a self-referential news cycle. He did not quote the anonymous hospital visitors.

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[22] Author's telephone interview with David Hunn, on June 13, 2008, in New York City. All further quotes from Hunn, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

First Edition

Shortly after 10 p.m., as the newspaper's first-edition deadline neared, Councilwoman Karr's ex-husband, a *Post-Dispatch* sports reporter, contacted the newspaper. He confirmed that hospital officials had notified him of Karr's death. The paper had received no word from family members of other victims on their conditions.

Now editors faced the urgent question of how to handle their print product for the next day. Should they view it simply as one version of the online edition, subject to change? How could they serve equally those who had watched broadcast and online accounts of the shooting, as well as those who relied exclusively on the paper *Post-Dispatch* for their news? How could they write their print stories in language that, in an ever-changing situation, would not leave them behind the news—or worse, wrong—in the morning? Jonsson summarizes the problem:

> We make an effort to try to give [readers] something a little bit different in [both the website and the newspaper]… [We] try to freshen it up and have it be different because the whole time, you're thinking, well, some people only read the Web. Some people only read the paper. Some people read both. Some people are seeing the TV version of the story and then want to come to the paper and not see the exact same thing they just heard. They want to get different information… It's always a struggle, though… [deciding] how much we give online so the people that read the next day aren't getting the exact same thing, but that we're not holding back from either reader.

Given how late the shooting had occurred, how reasonable was it to look for second-day angles on a story still unfolding? "It's such a huge story and it's happening at an hour when… people the next morning are going to absorb everything again," Maples reflects. "If it happens at 9 in the morning, you have to think about the next day… You can't just report that it happened." What should the editors put in the next day's paper?