



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

Late in the evening of February 7, 2008, Metro Editor Adam Goodman, Public Safety Editor Pat Gauen, and Night Metro Editor Lisa Eisenhower worked quickly to lay out the next morning's newspaper. They decided to take a comprehensive approach to the newspaper coverage. Thus, they would report the shooting for those readers who had not read about it on the Web. But they would wrap that somewhat dated news in "second-day" coverage of the victims, the shooter and any other context they could give to the rampage.

Goodman had earlier assigned some reporters to compose short descriptions of each shooting victim for inside the paper. The challenge was to verify which of those shot had died. Stringer Janet McNichols had told reporter Greg Jonsson that she had seen two people—Kirkwood Police Officer Tom Ballman and Kirkwood Public Works Director Ken Yost—shot in the head. She had also told Jonsson what she had learned from other witnesses as soon as the gunfire ended—that City Councilwoman Connie Karr, City Councilman Michael H.T. Lynch, and Mayor Mike Swoboda had been shot. She did not know whether any of them had survived. The Kirkwood Police Department had confirmed that six had died in the shooting: two police officers, three Kirkwood officials, and the shooter himself. The Police Department gave out no names, however.

By the time the first edition was due to be printed shortly after 10:00 p.m., reporters had solid confirmation of only one death: that of Councilwoman Karr, ex-wife of a *Post-Dispatch* sportswriter. For the first edition of the paper, editors noted in a headline above Karr's short profile that she was "known to be dead"; they marked the rest of the profiles as describing people "known to be shot" and left them in the present tense. By 1:00 a.m., as the deadline for the paper's final edition approached, editors and reporters had confirmed, through Kirkwood officials and next of kin, the identities of several more of the dead: Officers Tom Ballman and William Biggs of the Kirkwood Police Department, and Kirkwood Public Works Director Yost. There remained confusion only about whether Councilman Michael H.T. Lynch and Mayor Mike Swoboda were dead or only injured.

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On the front page, editors put Jonsson's account of the shooting, to which Jonsson had added details online throughout the evening. Another reporter, Doug Moore, reported and wrote a brief profile of the shooter and his tumultuous history with the city of Kirkwood; Moore's story also appeared first online and then in the paper. Late in the evening, reporter Stephen Deere returned to the *Post-Dispatch* newsroom from his visit to shooter Charles "Cookie" Thornton's family; he contributed additional detail to Moore's profile. "[Thornton] went to war" against Kirkwood, his brother Gerald had told Deere.

Post-Dispatch reporters and editors did not find out until the next day that Councilman Lynch had died of his gunshot wounds. Mayor Mike Swoboda survived. He recovered enough by April 2008 to return to work, but soon took a turn for the worse. The mayor died of complications related to his wounds in September 2008.

Managing Editor Pam Maples was pleased with her staff's work. "It was organic," she recalls, continuing:

It wasn't like [reporters] sat down and said, OK, here's the print plan, now here's the online plan. They were thinking, get this story, get this story, get it up, get it up. And then somewhere in all the messiness, we were talking about, OK, how do we organize it for print?

Maples found, however, that it was easier to achieve a Web-first mindset in the midst of a big, breaking story. In the months that followed, she often reminded reporters to update their online stories, even if only with a few paragraphs, to keep STLtoday.com's content fresh. "We're still getting people used to the idea that [a Web update] doesn't have to be a whole new story," she says. "It doesn't have to be 15 inches. It can be three paragraphs of new information."

Editors continued to search for ways to integrate the *Post-Dispatch* newspaper more fully with its website. In the summer of 2008, the Web staff physically relocated from a corner of the newsroom to its center. Editors also moved the daily Page One meeting from 10:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. Says Public Safety Editor Gauen:

The principal reason for doing that isn't that the deadlines for the paper have changed any. It's because there's an increased awareness in that meeting of the synergy between online and in the paper, and they want an earlier start to thinking and planning online, both for the rest of the day and for the next day... That's for the benefit of online. And it used to be the stories that were discussed there were about the paper, and online was an afterthought. Now that meeting begins with a discussion of, what have we got online now? What are we going to have online for the rest of the day?