It wasn't by accident that the Denver airwaves were remarkably free of sensationalized pictures and reporting at Columbine High School on Tuesday. TV executives said Wednesday they purposely kept much compelling videotape - the sort embraced by shows like "Hard Copy" and by newscasts in larger cities - off the air, in keeping with what they believe are viewers' expectations.

Channel 9 president and general manager Roger Ogden, said his station took "a very conservative approach." It made the decision early to show no victims, to withhold information about the scope of the tragedy, to restrict the view of the school to wide shots and to try to avoid showing anything that might aid the gunmen inside.

Channel 7 News Director Diane Mulligan said her staff knew students were dead by 2 p.m. Tuesday when helicopter footage revealed a police officer lifting, then leaving, the lifeless body of a girl in the high school's courtyard. KMGH decided to withhold information regarding fatalities until police confirmed it hours later, to avoid disrupting possible negotiations with any hostage-takers.

The sight was horrifying. Mulligan said: "We never want to see that on our air. At a different place, that would have led the newscast."

Decisions about which images were suitable changed over the course of Tuesday's events. The sight of a young woman shaking and stammering "so many   " was deemed too raw by Channel 7's Mulligan early in the afternoon. Later, in a piece putting the day's events in context, Mulligan approved the use of that video because it summarized the story.

Decisions varied among the stations as well. Channel 4, for example, showcased video of a young man throwing himself from the second-floor library window and his dramatic rescue by a SWAT team. By contrast, Channel 7 cut away as the student fell, and never repeated the footage. Because the student's name and status were not known, Mulligan thought it unseemly to broadcast the pictures.

KCNC reporter Paul Day narrated the footage through several broadcasts and "was able to put that situation in context," News Director Angie Kucharski said.

Reporters obtained the gunmen's names early in the day, but stations waited varying lengths of time before broadcasting the information. Channel 4 named the first suspect at 3:55 p.m. and showed pictures of both suspects hours before the other stations. Channel 4's Kucharski, in her second week on the job, said she felt confident enough in reporter Brian Maass' sources to state the names early. Channel 9's Ogden said KUSA placed a three-hour constraint on reporting the first name and a six-hour constraint on the second. Notes

Coverage of the shootings by KOA (850 AM) radio was picked up by the national ABC Radio Network.

TV viewership swelled. Of the homes in the Denver television market with TV sets on at 10 p.m. Tuesday, 69 percent were tuned into a news broadcast on one of the three network affiliates, compared with 55 percent the previous Tuesday.

Channel 9's coverage held the largest audience. During the noon-5 p.m. block, 35 percent of the viewing audience watched Channel 9. Channel 4 got 23 percent and Channel 7, 18 percent.

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