

# Surviving and covering a mass shooting

*The State News, Michigan State University*



# Introduction/purpose

**On Feb. 13, 2023 we faced a breaking news responsibility with a frightening, personal component.**

- Three students were killed in a [mass shooting on our campus](#). Five more were injured. We were responsible for keeping our campus informed and safe.
- Our newsroom sits across the street from Berkey Hall, the site of the first shooting. The gunman was not in custody. We also had to keep ourselves safe.

We didn't have a plan on how to deal with a mass shooting. We still don't. What we do have is our experience and the ability to look back on what we did, evaluate it and share it with you. We hope to illustrate that there is no right way to deal with this. If it happens, you will make mistakes and face surprising hurdles.

You just have to get through it. Journalistically, physically and emotionally.

- ***The State News staff***

# Responding to breaking news

At approx. 8:18 p.m., in the midst of cooking dinner, finishing homework and relaxing after Monday's classes, The State News student staff began receiving texts about a shooting at Berkey Hall. In usual breaking news fashion, staff volunteered to go to the scene. We imagined this was a completed incident, so we sent staff to cover.

Then MSU sent an email with the words "Run. Hide. Fight" and we knew we all needed to head to the office. We would all go on to doubt our own personal decisions many times when we learned we all drove — or even rode a bicycle — on a campus with an active shooter. As more police information came in later, we realized many of us could have come in contact with the shooter as his route off campus and our routes to our office crossed.

*"In the days that followed I would slowly come to understand that we weren't in a wholly safe position, but I also came to see even more importance in us being there. Because that first-hand experience wasn't just useful for that one story that night, our perspective informed our newsroom's questions about, and understanding of, what happened that night going forward."*

- Administration reporter Alex Walters, who responded to the scene on bicycle.

# That night in the newsroom

- Our locked newsroom became a safe space for many students fleeing from Berkey Hall. While we were in the middle of newsgathering, multiple people we do not know walked into our newsroom. With the staff on edge, every person became suspicious as our door alarm continued to sound each time the door opened.
- Knowing our doors were locked provided us with minimal comfort. Every sound of a closing door sounded like a gunshot to us. Every bit of news shouted across a newsroom seemed like a scream. We made an effort to watch our volume.
- One of the students our general manager brought in the building was Jin Du, a student who escaped the shooting in the classroom by jumping out a window. He stood with us most of the night with a bleeding and iced foot.
- We had to interview an eyewitness — we're a news organization —, but there was the argument for waiting to talk to him the following day.
- Instead, we compromised: Wait a few hours and approach him with care — let him know the ramifications of using his name in a national news story. Tonight required a little extra care for our sources.

## The State News

news / campus

### Student escapes shooter in Berkey Hall through window

Morgan Womack  
February 14, 2023



Police stand outside of the Union after an active shooting on Michigan State University's campus on Monday, Feb. 13, 2023.

— Photo by Audrey Richardson | The State News

Jin Du was sitting in his class in Berkey Hall on Monday, Feb. 13, when he said he heard shots coming from the back of the room.

He saw a classmate shot.

# Making news decisions in fear

The campus was on lockdown. We had no ability to go across the street and actively cover what was happening. We had 3 students on the scene, but they were quickly locked down in a building near the scene.

We relied on tweets from MSU, MSUPD and other agencies to put together a story. We also took information from MSU emails and other alerts. Much later in the evening, MSU started holding livestreamed news conferences.

We all know police scanners are merely vessels to collect reports which then would be verified. We intellectually know this, but this night was different. We tweeted information from the scanners because we had a greater duty to our MSU community that night. We still used news judgment where we could, avoiding big claims that did more damage than help. But we needed students and faculty/staff indoors and safe. **We succeeded at that.**

Some people hated our decision and lectured us on the proper use of scanner information. State News alumni and local media slammed us on Twitter. The night was absolutely unprecedented — and we were operating as journalists while going through it:

*“The night of the shooting was the scariest night of my life. I’m sure the rest of the editorial board was just as scared as I was, but there was a shared understanding between us that our work was more important than that fear. Thousands were looking to us to know what happened next. In between breaks huddled in the corner of my advisors office, I shoved that fear back down and jumped up to write every update that came our way.”*

- Miranda Dunlap, former Culture Editor

# After it all died down...

We decided there was little more we could do at about 3 a.m., so we all headed to our cars.

We made a point to walk to our cars in groups. We knew the threat was over since the shooter killed himself. This was strictly emotional, moral support.

***“I remember feeling lost. The responsibility of being editor in chief has never been lost to me, but when all the sirens died down and I finally left the newsroom, I remember thinking that this job felt bigger. I was scared knowing I had such a larger responsibility to our staff, the MSU community and to myself. I didn’t know how to even begin to process everything that just happened. I didn’t know how the rest of the year, my FINAL semester, would look. I was just scared and overwhelmed.”***

**- Sa’Mya Overall, Editor-in-Chief**

# The following days

The same core group of about 10 people who had little to no sleep were in the next morning at 8 a.m. Same for the following days.

It was all hands on deck. Editors were writing articles, reporters were taking photos, photographers were updating stories. We adapted, but we were tired.

Our adviser made a plea to other staff members to aid the original group if they were able.

- Some students simply were not emotionally able to work and didn't come in for a week.
- Some tried to come in, but had to leave because they weren't emotionally able to cope with the grueling work.

It was hard for a team who worked almost all night to comfort others when they were barely holding it together. Our policy that week was simple: for everyone, it was always **OK to go back home.**

# Dealing with other media as “sources”

As the only student paper at Michigan State University, we found ourselves on the other side of media requests.

- We decided to designate our editor-in-chief and our managing editor as the two people authorized to do interviews.
- There were at least 100 requests and we ended up only doing a few.

One newspaper reporter was quite aggressive and shaming when neither the EIC or ME wanted to be interviewed the day after the shooting. He said that part of our job was public service and it was terrible that we wouldn't talk.

Let us be clear: Our public service was to **our State News campus community and newsroom staff.**



# Working ‘too much’

Exhaustion hit our newsroom fairly quickly, but our diligent staff still wanted to work, or felt they had to. We don’t typically have a schedule by shifts here, but we made one so that people could have days off. **And we strongly enforced it.**

- Two or three editors would work morning shift, the other two or three editors would work evening shift.
- When you were not on shift, your Slack notifications were to be muted. No exceptions.

We learned that some of us just **needed** to work. That was the way we coped. Our adviser reminded us we all felt powerless so the last thing we should do is take power from someone else.

*“The days following the shooting felt like they blended together. I felt like I had to get up to work every day. When we’re producing constant follow-up shooting coverage, you can’t really escape it in your mind. A day after I hit my breaking point, Sa’Mya (Overall, Editor-in-Chief) created a schedule and gave the editors days off. That’s when I realized how much it had taken a toll on me. After my day off, I came back refreshed and in a better mood. I didn’t really get it before because I love my job, but work-life balances are crucial. Especially during tragedies.”*

- Morgan Womack, Campus Editor

# Mental health care for newsroom staff

From our professional staff to our students, we're trained journalists. But none of us were mental health experts, and we needed those experts.

Our general manager contracted a counseling service that provided 3 on-site professionals to work with us. They were available to us the entire semester by Zoom or telephone and in person on Fridays.

Dealing with a shooting on campus is tricky. Many of us found we weren't just **facing and reacting to the shooting**. The shooting itself brought up other issues for some.

# Need for new policy and conversations

Before, the decision to send reporters to a breaking news scene is obvious. It's what we do.

The shooting changed that. Even weeks later, there was dissension between editors on the fact that we sent reporters to the scene of the Feb. 13 shooting. To this date, there is ongoing discussion of a new policy.

**Everyone was on edge.** We saw each other more. We annoyed each other more. Some of us were more aggressive, some checked out. Some walked out of meetings when it became too much. We judged each other's work and dedication.

And yet, by the end of the semester, we were still the strong team of reporters, editors, photographers and social media journalists that we were at the start. It was no more than **a rough patch.**

*“This staff, particularly the editor team, worked overtime both physically and emotionally, to thoroughly cover this shooting. Of course we argued. Of course our tempers were shorter. None of us asked to be put in this position, and while we knew we had a bigger responsibility to our campus, we're only human. We had to give each other a lot of grace, and at the end of the day, we still respected and cared for each other after this tragedy.”*

*- Sa'Mya Overall, Editor-in-Chief*

# How we approached content post-shooting

We had to make a **conscious decision** to go back to regular coverage. You have to make a concerted effort to do this or you'll just cover the shooting. Moving on coverage wise can be healing for your staff and your community.

We made sure to continue due diligence. The MSU Police Department gave us updates on the shooting but we looked everywhere for information, including basic places like The Clery Report.

We made a plan to not cover 100 percent of the firehose of news coming out of MSU, but to focus on true campus and student-based news. We had a limited amount of dedicated but tired staff; we had to be smart in our story pursuit. Our goal was to **tell the stories of our student body audience during and after the shooting.**

Still, it was important to watch our Detroit-based competitors, so we did designate a shooting coverage editor who watched for those stories and coordinated our original coverage.

# (Some of ) Our strong student-first shooting content

[Student escapes shooter in Berkey Hall through window - The State News](#)

['Only the beginning'; MSU mass shooting survivor opens up about his experience - The State News](#)

['Three minutes can change so much': Berkey Hall professor reflects on grief, return to class following shooting - The State News](#)

[MSU students return to somber campus after mass shooting - The State News](#)

[The three that we lost: Arielle Anderson, Brian Fraser, Alexandria Verner - The State News](#)

[Student workers at MSU Union given help to find other jobs on campus - The State News](#)

[Fans enjoy sense of comfort in Michigan State mens' basketball's first home game since shooting](#)

[Students lead second vigil to mourn classmates as classes resume - The State News](#)

[After shooting, dorm RAs grapple with loss, uncertainty in their position - The State News](#)

[Students sit down at 'Skip Class, Stand Up' protest - The State News](#)

# Our readers

- We knew this shooting called for slightly different, enhanced personal and advocacy journalism at times.
- Practically, we made a section where all shooting stories were housed.
- Our editor-in-chief wrote a column about leading a newspaper in these circumstances.
- And we upped our game in editorials saying MSU wanted us to go back to class too early and needs to do better on emergency alerts.
- We also knew the community needed a voice so we added an area where they could contribute essays, poems, etc.

## Staff's anger and social media presence following the shooting

The national media, of course, came to MSU that week. In one of our less proud moments, some staff criticized them on social media. Even though those posts were removed, it had **unintended consequences**.

There was a lot of debate about the removal of the posts and not everyone was happy.

Partly due to our staff tweets, MSU announced a 'no media' sign offering. Students who were approached by the media — including by The State News — could hold up the sign instead of simply saying they did not want to be interviewed.

We expressed our anger on this but nothing happened. Now we all have them on our desks as bad mementos.

# Donations to The State News

Even in our most exhausted and sad days post-shooting, many people stepped up to support us, which is beautiful.

People sent us dinners, cookies, coffee and lots of love. We could barely keep up with people wanting to arrange nice things for us.

An MSU journalism professor shared the EIC's Venmo account widely. We earned a lot of donations — so many that her Venmo was shut down for a bit because it looked suspicious. We quickly got the word out about our general State News Venmo.

All the generosity allowed us to give bonuses to staff. It didn't make the event nonexistent, but it was a positive in all of the negative during the weeks that followed



# Final words of wisdom

Our experience after the shooting isn't a play-by-play of your newsroom during a similar tragedy. You won't face the same problems, and you won't have the same triumphs.

We hope that this guide can be a light during a dark time, and we encourage others to make their own guides as time passes.

We live in a world where school shooting happen; we can never been 100% prepared for this. But we can find solace in other student papers who have gone through the same thing.

*“...But standing in that newsroom with our staff that had just reported on perhaps the scariest night of their lives, their eyes hollow and their expressions blank, I was stumbling to find answers to all their problems. What did it say about me as their editor-in-chief if I couldn't fix this? But there were no answers. I could not give them their sense of security back. I could not fix this. And since I earned this position in May 2022, that was the scariest realization I came to.”*

**- SaMya Overall, former Editor-in-Chief in COLUMN: There's no book on how to be editor-in-chief during a mass shooting - The State News**