

To the judges of the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics:

Weeks after one of the nation's deadliest school shootings, authorities continued hiding the truth about the police response when a man with an AR-15-style rifle killed 19 students and two teachers in Uvalde, Texas.

But the original narrative that police acted heroically, putting themselves between the gunman and children, had begun falling apart. In a turning point in the nation's understanding about that day, investigative reporter Tony Plohetski, who works jointly with the Austin American-Statesman and ABC affiliate KVUE-TV, became the first journalist in America [to obtain an image](#) from inside the school in June. [It showed](#) officers amassed with assault weapons and protective gear 19 minutes after a gunman entered but not intervening for an hour.

Plohetski's subsequent dogged reporting brought the final collapse of the story of police heroism, revealing one of the most epic law enforcement failures in history. He obtained a full 77-minute video from Robb Elementary showing in wrenching, real-time detail officers pacing, checking their phones – but not entering the classroom.

We believe the work marked a defining moment in American journalism and the nation's understanding of what went wrong in Uvalde. At no point in history has similar footage shown such a consequential policing breakdown.

The ability to obtain the crucial information was the culmination of more than two decades of local journalism by Plohetski often focused on law enforcement accountability, propelled by deep sourcing among an audience whose trust he has repeatedly earned through investigative reporting. But the decision to publish and broadcast the video brought an editorial and ethical minefield that we navigated carefully.

1. Name and contact information of the nominator and relationship to the story:

- Manny Garcia, Executive Editor, Austin American-Statesman
mrgarcia@statesman.com
[REDACTED]
- Andrew McKibbin, Interim News Director, KVUE-TV
amckibbin@kvue.com
[REDACTED]

2. Names and emails of the reporting team that produced the report:

- Tony Plohetski, investigative reporter, Austin American-Statesman, and senior reporter at KVUE-TV;
tplohetski@statesman.com and tplohetski@kvue.com;
- The staffs of the Statesman and KVUE.

3. Brief description of the story and link to it online:

After obtaining the video, the Statesman published it online July 12 in multiple formats. Plohetski authored a narrative story, describing what the video showed and the public demand for transparency in the flawed law enforcement response. Our digital team also produced an edited 4-minute video embedded in this report: <https://www.statesman.com/story/news/2022/07/12/uvalde-school-shooting-video-of-robb-elementary-shows-police-response/65370384007/>

Additionally, Statesman Executive Editor Manny Garcia described the Statesman's decision to publish the video in a letter to readers. That article can be accessed by: Username: StatesmanJudge@gmail.com; PW: ContestJudge
<https://www.statesman.com/story/opinion/columns/2022/07/12/uvalde-shooting-video-austin-american-statesman-editor-investigation-publish/65371937007/>

As both outlets published online, KVUE interrupted regular programming at 3:10 p.m. to bring viewers a nearly 20-minute special report. The breaking segment was anchored by Bryan Mays and Ashley Goudeau, with Plohetski on set to provide context and analysis. We carefully guided viewers through our decisions and what we would air.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjRKJcn84lw&t=73s>

4. Description of conflicting values encountered in reporting the story:

A [Vanity Fair article about our reporting](#) of the Robb Elementary School video concluded: “The list of mass shooting has grown since Uvalde; so, too, the list of editors wrestling with the coverage debate.”

For two months, investigators shielded the truth about the botched law enforcement response, providing multiple misstatements and hailing police as heroes. Officials, ranging from U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, [who said law enforcement put themselves](#) between the gunman and the children, and Gov. Greg Abbott, who said the tragedy could have been worse without swift police action, used their megaphones to advance the flawed narrative.

The video offered a clear, unabridged version of the tragic events that impeached previous official accounts. At the same time, we recognized that that such striking images and footage would undoubtedly further inflame emotions in the traumatized community, particularly among victims’ families.

The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics directs journalists to minimize harm, and to “balance the public’s need for information against potential harm or discomfort.” We carried the grief of victims’ families front in our minds as we proceeded.

Once we obtained the 77-minute hallway video, our conversation focused on attempting to reach family members of the 21 victims to ensure that they knew we would soon be publishing the information.

Unfortunately, but understandably, many of them had not yet developed public voices and had not availed themselves of interviews. Over the span of two days, we made efforts to reach those with whom we had previous contact, but we ultimately arrived at a point in our reporting when it became clear that we would be unable to notify each family.

As we worked through family notifications and editorial decisions, [multiple news outlets](#) published reports about [the demand](#) of the video’s release, further intensifying public interest in the footage. The calls also came from several government leaders, including by Abbott, who [appeared on KVUE](#) the evening before we aired the video and said, “That video needs to be released.”

As we moved forward, we faced an array of other difficult questions: Whether to show the gunman entering the school and walking down the hall, whether to air the sound of gunfire from the AR-15-style weapon, and perhaps the most difficult of all, whether to air the sound of screaming.

Hours before we published, the leader of a Texas House committee investigating the Uvalde shooting issued a statement saying that he planned to release portions of the video five days later.

5. Options considered to resolve the conflicts.

When it became clear that Statesman and KVUE journalists would not be able to reach as many families as we had hoped, we expanded our effort to ask reporters at KVUE sister stations KENS in San Antonio and KHOU in Houston to assist. Although we made advancements, we still were unable to reach all 21 families.

Regarding specifics from the video, we considered not showing the gunman at all, not airing the sound of gunfire and not broadcasting any screams – in short, showing the video with muted audio.

Once we learned that the Texas House committee investigating the shooting planned to release a portion of the video five days later, some at our editorial table questioned whether we should allow government officials and politicians the opportunity to conduct the public roll-out of the material, including a private family viewing -- a possibility we debated.

However, we also recognized that government officials had not been honest with the Uvalde community at this point by informing them of the full account about what happened May 24. As Bill Carter, who covered the television news industry for 25 years for the New York Times and is now a CNN media analyst, [said the following Sunday](#) on Reliable Sources, referring to our decision: “I am for transparency, in general, but radical transparency when someone is trying to do everything they can from keeping you from the truth. You have to at least then approach it with total skepticism and believe they won’t do the right thing.”

6. Final decisions and rationales behind them.

We ultimately agreed that we had a public duty to report information that was the source of public demand and clarified vital questions about the Uvalde shooting. In short, we decided that the video constituted “news” and squarely fit the SPJ’s ethics code to “seek truth and report it.” We did not believe withholding such publicly demanded information – “sitting on it” for five days -- served the public or the mission of journalism.

We still faced layers of editorial decisions.

Law enforcement frequently insists the media not show the face or say the name of mass shooters, fearing it might spur the next violent act. But how the Uvalde gunman entered was the source of police misstatements. We deemed that portion critical to showing the truth. We also decided visuals of a man in a hallway wielding an assault rifle gave a haunting and necessary glimpse into the terror of school shootings.

We debated whether to include the sound of the gunman’s barrage of 300 rounds. Some at our editorial table remarked they had not fully grasped the sound of a rapidly firing assault rifle and the speed it inflicted death. We published the gunfire.

One of the most painful points was whether to include sounds of screaming. We omitted those, filling a family’s request that they not hear a child’s final cries. Some gun reform activists [criticized us](#), saying the nation must fully understand the trauma of such violence.

Five days later, the House committee released a portion of the video – with no audio. There were no sounds of the gunfire, or the image of the gunman in the hall. To this day, no government entity has released the full video.

Our work stimulated a national conversation about the difficult ethical decisions journalists face.

[A Slate article](#) concluded: “The video clarifies a part of the story about which the authorities have been neither credible nor consistent, a story on which it’s been shown that we cannot trust the authorities’ word. It has immense news value.”

[Associated Press media writer](#) David Bauder quoted Poynter’s Kelly McBride: “The news outlets could have waited, but they wouldn’t have been acting in the best interests of the public,” the story says.

Natasha Alford, VP of digital content at TheGrio, [said on CNN’s Reliable Sources](#): “I have a lot of empathy for these families...but two things can be true at the same time, that we need videos like this to create accountability.”

RTDNA President and CEO [Dan Shelley Tweeted](#): “The RTDNA code of ethics says extreme care must be used when reporting on vulnerable people, e.g. victims of a horrific school shooting. KVUE and (the) Statesman did that. They deserve thanks, not condemnation.”

Thank you for considering our work for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.