



MEDIA CRITICIZED FOR AIRING VIRGINIA TECH GUNMAN VIDEO

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NBC's decision to broadcast images and video of the Virginia Tech gunman raised questions about how the media cover fast-breaking news and the consequences of airing a killer's tirade.

During events such as 1999's Columbine High School killings, the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the aftermath of 2005's Hurricane Katrina, news executives have to make quick and often difficult editorial decisions about airing graphic or disturbing video.

The April 16 shootings at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Va., where an undergraduate student killed 32 people before killing himself, became one such story where news people are facing questions for decisions they made.

Consumers turn to the Web

The story quickly became one of the biggest U.S. media events since the Sept. 11 attacks, with viewers turning to television and, like never before, to the Web.

"We've gotten to a point where, when there's an enormous breaking-news story, the first place most people turn is not to their TV but to their computer," MSNBC general manager Dan Abrams told *Broadcasting & Cable* magazine.

Between Sunday and Monday, the day of the shooting -- as print-media site traffic remained flat -- broadcast television Web site traffic rose by 87 percent, according to online research company Hitwise.

CNN.com reported triple the number of visitors due in part to videos submitted by eyewitnesses like Virginia Tech student Jamal Albarghouti, whose cell phone captured the sounds of gunfire as police officers approached the site of the second set of shootings.

Despite these technological developments, it was a decision made by a television network that has drawn the most questions and criticism.

On April 18 -- two days after the shootings -- NBC announced that it had received a package containing hate-filled, rambling writing, photos of the killer gripping various weapons and a DVD containing 28 video clips.

NBC's decision to air the video

After notifying police, NBC aired parts of the multimedia manifesto of Seung-Hui Cho, the 23-year-old Virginia Tech shooter, on its evening news program, "Nightly News," earning it high ratings.

"Nightly News" anchor Brian Williams said on his video blog, "I don't know of a reputable news organization in this country that, upon receipt of that package, would have ... slipped it in a drawer and not shared its contents. It is beyond disturbing. It is beyond horrifying. It is also news, and news is our role, however unpleasant the stories are at times."

Every other major U.S. television news outlet followed, validating NBC's decision to air the tape, but with similar stated reservations.

CBS "Early Show" anchor Harry Smith told the Associated Press, "I felt manipulated by the fact [Cho] was getting exactly what he wanted. We could have used the tape more discreetly."

Deviating from its American counterparts' decisions, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's chose not to show any of the video. Its news chief, Tony Burman, called the airing of the video by American broadcasters a "mistake," warning it could lead to copycat killings.

After 1999's Columbine killing, police held back videotapes it had found of the teenage killers firing the weapons they would later use to kill their classmates for four years -- an attempt to prevent copycat killings. They continue to withhold the most graphic videos that include security camera footage from inside the school.

In 1995, a man, known as the Unabomber, who killed three and wounded 23 others with bombs sent through the mail, threatened continued violence unless the New York Times and Washington Post published his manifesto.

After the FBI asked the two newspapers to publish the long, rambling anti-technology paper, they complied. The brother of Theodore Kaczynski then saw the manifesto and helped direct authorities to his brother, who was arrested and convicted of the attacks.

Backlash against the video

Late Wednesday evening, NBC said it would restrict airing of Cho's video. By Thursday, major news outlets -- ABC, CBS, Fox -- also decided to stop or limit broadcast of the video and images.

But many critics said the damage already had been done. The rapid dissemination of Cho's images and video -- in the media but also on Web sites such as YouTube -- created a backlash: Family members of victims cancelled appearances on NBC's "Today" program in protest as MSNBC's message board received a flood of criticism charging NBC News with going too far.

"I am appalled though that the news stations/newspapers are allowing the gunman to get his last hoorah by putting his face all over the news," a person wrote on MSNBC's message board.

In the end, NBC aired about 15 minutes of the 25 minutes of Cho's video.

Al Tompkins, an ethics expert at the Poynter Institute, told the L.A. Times it would have been easy for NBC not to air the video.

"People would have said, 'Good for you.' But that doesn't illuminate us. That doesn't enlighten us. That only protects us. And the job of the journalist is not to protect us from the truth; it's to tell us the truth, no matter how repugnant it is," Tompkins said.

Kerry Redican, president of the Virginia Tech Faculty Senate, said he approved of the NBC decision to air the material. "People are trying to make some sense of this. This showed the whole thing was really planned out," he said, according to a Howard Kurtz column in the Washington Post.

-- *Compiled by Adnaan Wasey for NewsHour Extra*

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