

1 About 7:15 a.m. on Monday, April 16, 2007, Seung Hui Cho shoots a woman in the West Ambler Johnson residence hall on the Virginia Tech campus, just after her boyfriend had dropped her off. Cho also shoots a resident assistant who may have gone to investigate. Both die from the wounds. At 7:20, the Virginia Tech Police Department gets the first call from a student who heard a noise and thinks that someone might have fallen out of a loft bed. At 7:24, Virginia Tech police arrive and find the victims. Cho is back in his room, where he changes out of his bloody clothes, accesses his university email account and erases files and the account. Police begin looking for the woman's boyfriend after a friend mentions that he likes guns. About 7:57 a.m., police notify university officials, and they meet to develop a response. Classes begin at 8 a.m. Word has begun to get out to students who share information through email, text messages and cellphones. At 9:26, the university sends out the first email about the shootings in the residence hall. Local reporters hear of the story on police scanners and make plans to cover the story.

2 At 9:05 a.m., a second period of classes begins. Police locate the first victim's boyfriend driving home, and, by the side of the road, administer a test to check for gunpowder residue; it is negative. At about 9:40, Cho begins shooting in Norris Hall, going from classroom to classroom and executing students and professors. Some people try to barricade doors. Others try to escape by jumping out windows. Victims call 911 on cellphones. Just three minutes after receiving the first 911 call, police arrive at Norris Hall to find three of the doors to the building chained. They cannot shoot the chains off to get inside. Police inform the university president of the shootings. Cho continues to attack. At 9:50, police manage to get into Norris Hall through a fourth door that was locked but not chained. They follow the sounds of gunshots to the second floor, where they find victims. They begin rescue and triage, sending out calls for ambulances and alerting hospitals. Local reporters and photographers arrive on the scene. University officials send out a second email, this one announcing: "A gunman is loose on campus. Stay in buildings until further notice. Stay away from all windows." Loudspeakers broadcast the message, too. At 10:08, police find Cho's body in a classroom. They suspect he is the shooter because he has a self-inflicted gunshot wound and weapons near him. In about 11 minutes inside Norris Hall, Cho has fired nearly 200 of shots, killing and wounding many students and teachers.

- What actions would you expect from the person you are playing?
- Ask students who are playing members of the local media or student press what they would do. Do they go to the scene yet? Wait for more information? Do you have enough to report something?
- Where do you go for more information?



- Police, university officials and the news media all need to get information to the public as well as students and staff. But their messages and goals differ. Think about the role you are playing. What information is most important? Where do you get this information; are your sources reliable? How do you shape your response? What information do you share at this point?



3 At 10:17 a.m., university officials send out another email canceling classes and telling people to stay where they are. At 10:52, they email students and staff reporting “a multiple shooting with multiple victims in Norris Hall.” The email says the shooter has been arrested (he is, in fact, dead) and that police are looking for a possible second shooter. Students locked down in a media writing class begin to use computers and cellphones to report the story for a student-run news website, planetblacksburg.com, feeding information to the webmaster locked down in another building. Local media report the story on their websites. *The Roanoke Times* reports multiple victims; the student paper, *The Collegiate Times*, reports one dead. The university holds a press conference and president Charles Steger says there were two shootings, one in West Ambler Johnson residence hall and another in Norris Hall. He says the number of fatalities is unconfirmed. He says the shooter in Norris Hall is dead. However, police separately tell reporters that there are at least 20 dead, and a local hospital reports at least 21 wounded. Calls are flooding in from news media across the country to the university, police and hospitals as the nation focuses on the story. The White House deputy press secretary reports that President George W. Bush is “horrified” by the news. Eventually, the university sets up a command center on campus to handle news media and family. Although some university staff go to the hospitals on their own to check on staff and students, the university doesn’t send an official representative, leaving hospitals to handle family and media inquiries on their own. News media from around the world arrive on campus and begin interviewing students and staff and anyone who will talk to them. Campus parking lots are filled with television trucks.

4 A graduate student submits video he took with his cellphone outside Norris Hall to the CNN I-Report. Gunshots are heard in the background. CNN obtains the rights and broadcasts the video. CNN and other media organizations interview the student, Jamal Albarghouti, about his footage. Throughout the day, he is an ongoing presence in all coverage of the events.

- Members of each group should report to the class, *in the roles they are playing*, their feelings and thoughts about the media onslaught.



- What’s reasonable and responsible in reporting the story? Is it fair to approach students? Survivors? Victims? Should reporters interview people in the hospital? Should photographers or TV camera operators take photos of the injured or dead?

- What issues should you think about in deciding whether to air the footage? When Al-barghouti shot the video with his cellphone, police were ordering people out of the area. Does airing the footage encourage civilians to put themselves in danger for news?



- What is the value of the footage to the public? How might airing it affect perceptions or the investigation and how should officials respond to it?

5 Several news outlets identify the shooter as an “Asian man.” Bloggers perusing online social networking sites find an Asian student at Virginia Tech whose Facebook.com profile emphasizes his love of guns. They erroneously identify him as the killer, and Fox News’ Geraldo Rivera reports the same. The student first figures something is up when traffic to his page spikes and people begin posting angry and worried comments. He posts a notice saying he is not involved. The public and news media search social networking sites for information about victims and the incident.

6 The next day, nearly 24 hours after the shootings in Norris Hall, Virginia Tech police identify the killer as Seung Hui Cho, who grew up in Virginia after immigrating from South Korea when he was 8. They confirm 33 dead, including Cho, in the two shootings. The university cancels classes for the rest of the week to allow students time to grieve and recover. Names of some of the dead are being released as families are notified. Unofficial lists are posted online; most news media list only those names officially released or names that they are able to confirm independently. A convocation is held in the afternoon. Virginia Tech professor and poet Nikki Giovanni is among the speakers, giving a motto to survivors, students and the university community: “We will prevail. We are Virginia Tech.” That evening a candlelight vigil is held. News media cover both events.

- When is it appropriate to identify the race of a suspect? Does a broad description — like Asian or black or white or Middle Eastern — with no further information serve a purpose?
- Information posted on the Internet is shared quickly — useful when the information is correct and troublesome when the information is wrong. *In your role*, how do you discern whether the information you get is credible? How does your perspective — as a member of the public or the press — affect where you look for information?



- What level of coverage is appropriate at this point? What does the public want to know? What information do police and university officials want to get out?
- How should media cover the events of the day? Is it reasonable to take pictures of people grieving? Does it make a difference where the pictures are taken – for example, at the public convocation, a hospital or even at a victim’s family home?



7 Two days after the shooting, NBC News in New York receives a package containing what it calls “a multimedia manifesto” from Cho. It contains a document, photos and 28 video clips. The postmark indicates the package was mailed between the shootings two days earlier; it was sent overnight mail, but delivered a day late because the address was incorrect. After reviewing the contents, NBC gives the materials to the FBI and makes copies for its own reporting. What to do with the package and concerns over appearing insensitive to the victims and their families stir newsroom debate. Police officials ask NBC to delay showing the material out of concern it might jeopardize the investigation. Around 6 p.m., police give the go-ahead for airing, and NBC prepares to show the video on its 6:30 p.m. nightly news program. At the university, news media had already gathered for a scheduled press conference. University officials, however, want time to digest the news of the package and prepare a reaction. They cut the press conference short, without taking questions. Officials leave the room while reporters shout questions at them.

8 Anchor Brian Williams leads the “NBC Nightly News” with the Virginia Tech story and Cho’s package. He tells viewers of the newsroom discussions about airing the video and acknowledges that NBC News is aware that it is “airing the words of a murderer.” The first 11 minutes of the 30-minute news program are devoted to the package, including showing the videos, photos and discussing Cho’s writings. The reporting also includes commentary from a former FBI profiler speculating on Cho’s motivations and reporting from the scene on police reaction. Other stories covered that day include a Supreme Court decision on abortion and brief mentions of the war in Iraq, a drop in the stock market and actress Kitty Carlisle Hart’s death. These stories are interspersed with stories from the Virginia Tech tragedy with heavy emphasis on Cho’s package. In all, the program devotes more than half its time, nearly 17 minutes, to Cho and Virginia Tech. Other stories take up just about four minutes of the broadcast and commercials, including promotions for the Cho story, take up a little more than nine minutes. Reaction to the broadcast is loud, but mixed. Many reviewers complain that the airing was insensitive. On the campus of Virginia Tech, reaction is also varied, with some students saying they were offended by the broadcast and others saying they needed to see Cho’s comments to understand the events. Other media outlets also broadcast the videos, and much of the criticism eventually focuses on the saturation coverage.

- What do you think about the university’s reaction? What responsibility do officials have to get information out?

- *Based on your role*, what do you want NBC News to do with the package’s contents? How might it affect your work or your perspective?



- Is the time devoted to the story reasonable, given that NBC News had information that no other organization had?

- How do you react to the news? If you lead another news organization, do you broadcast the video after NBC News makes it available and requires its logo be superimposed on it?

- How do you respond to people who suggest that airing the video might encourage copy-cat killings?



9 Fatigue begins to set in on the campus. Although some students say that they found the chance to discuss the shootings with reporters helpful and comforting, others say they found the media intrusive. Some signs appear on campus saying “VT stay strong. Media stay away.” The media’s role becomes the new angle for journalists, newspaper columnists, bloggers and the public who debate saturation coverage. A poll by The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press suggests that most people found what they wanted in the coverage, with 56% saying Virginia Tech was the single story they followed most closely that week. Two-thirds of the public gave the press excellent or good marks in covering the story. Twenty percent said the job was fair, and only 10% rated the media’s work as poor. Half the public said the story was overcovered, while 40% said the story had the right amount of coverage.

- *In your role*, what do you think about the coverage? Too much? Too little?
- Looking back, what would you have done differently in this scenario? Would you have covered other stories, shared more information, sought information in other places?

