

**The School as a “High Risk Area:”**

**Crisis Communication in the Wake of the Tragedies at Columbine and Virginia Tech**

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## Table of Contents

<b>CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>CHAPTER II: CRISIS AT COLUMBINE</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>PRE-CRISIS PERIOD</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>ALARMED DISCOVERY</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>EUPHORIC ENTHUSIASM</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>THE REALIZATION OF THE COST OF SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS AND THE GRADUAL DECLINE IN PUBLIC INTEREST</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>CHAPTER III: TRAGEDY AT VIRGINIA TECH</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>PRE-CRISIS PERIOD</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>ALARMED DISCOVERY</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>EUPHORIC ENTHUSIASM</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>THE REALIZATION OF THE COST OF SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS AND THE GRADUAL DECLINE IN PUBLIC INTEREST</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>CHAPTER IV: LESSONS LEARNED</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>CHAPTER V: THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>87</b>

## Chapter I: Introduction

As breaking news details the latest school-shooting over our television, computer, and cellular phone screens, a sense of urgency compels institutions to reexamine their notion of safety. Multiple audiences demand answers, and the questions they ask are not easily satisfied.

Crisis events such as the 1999 large-scale homicide at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado and the 2007 massacre at Virginia Tech command the attention of administrators and demand that they ask themselves, “Could this happen here?” Immediately following such a crisis, universities are bombarded with telephone calls from the media, parents, students and neighbors, all asking the same question. All too often, the answer is “yes, this could happen here.”

At 11:10 a.m. on Tuesday, April 20, 1999 Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris walked into lunch period at Columbine High School and embarked upon a shooting rampage, killing twelve students and a teacher, and injuring 23 others. Following the Columbine shooting, schools across the United States instituted new security measures such as see-through backpacks, metal detectors, and security guards. Some schools implemented door numbering to improve public safety response, and some required students to wear identification badges. Police departments reassessed their tactics and standardized training for school shootings after criticism over their slow response.

Eight years later, at 7:15 a.m. on Monday, April 16, 2007, Seung-Hui Cho, a senior English major at Virginia Tech, began the nation’s deadliest school-shooting spree in history, leaving 32 students and faculty members dead. The massacre impelled

immediate changes in Virginia law that had allowed Cho, adjudicated as mentally unsound, to purchase handguns, and it also led federal lawmakers to take up the issue of strengthening the National Instant Criminal Background Check System. The Virginia Tech crisis assured Universities across the country that they were absolutely not immune massive school-shootings like the one at Columbine High School. Since the event, they have been scrambling to reevaluate their policies and procedures regarding school safety.

This study of crisis communication at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech will serve to analyze the behaviors and policies utilized in these two crisis situations, assess their efficacy, consider their short and long-term effects, and examine the media's role in each crisis, as journalism ethics were called into question in both situations, in an effort to help institutions to better handle these crises in the future.

### **Methodology**

Public policy and administration scholar Anthony Downs introduced the issue-attention cycle into crisis communication literature, in his 1972 "Up and Down with Ecology: The 'Issue-Attention Cycle,'" recognizing that the American public and media have a relatively short attention span, and focus on most crisis events in a relatively predictable pattern. He notes that during a crisis, problems leap into prominence, remain there for a short time, and then gradually fade away from the center of public attention. The likelihood of causing effective change depends on how long public attention remains sufficiently focused on the given issue.

The types of crises that are likely to experience the issue-attention cycle include those where the majority of persons in society are not suffering from the problem nearly as much as some minority, where sufferings caused by the problem are generated by social arrangements that provide significant benefits to a majority or powerful minority of the population, and those problems that have no intrinsically exciting qualities—or no longer have them.

There are five stages of the issue-attention cycle, beginning with the pre-problem stage. In this stage a problem already exists, however the majority public is not aware of it, or simply not talking about it. Similar to Steven Fink's notion of the "prodromal" stage of a crisis, and Gerald Meyers' "pre-crisis period," this part of the cycle is full of warning signs which may foreshadow what is to come. When these ominous signs are overlooked, the next stage of the issue-attention cycle comes into play.

During the alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm period, the focusing event, or crisis, has occurred. The warning signs of the pre-problem stage have escalated in intensity from an undisclosed problem to a "receptacle of attention." (Fink) The general public is made aware of the important issue at hand, and is energetically motivated to fix the problem. The media's coverage is at its peak, pervasively talking about the issue, which makes the public feel the need to take action. The community is excited and determined to make a major change that will remedy the conditions that got them into trouble. This stage prompts public policy changes and discussion and if this stage lasts long enough, valuable changes may be made to solve the problem, in the form of new institutions, programs, and policies.

Unfortunately, this stage all too often does not come to a fruitful conclusion. In most cases the public realizes the immense cost of significant progress, and their energy ultimately wanes. People recognize that the money, time, and energy to cover the cost of fixing the problem are not readily available, and often are not willing to displace resources already committed to their other wants and needs.

After the discovery of the colossal cost of significant progress, the public eye drifts elsewhere, and there is a gradual decline in public interest. The third and fourth stages of realizing the cost of significant progress and decline in public interest often happen simultaneously. People do not want to focus on something that is seemingly impossible to change, and other breaking news usually distracts community members, because by this time another issue is entering phase two and focus shifts there.

In the post-problem stage, new institutions, programs, policies have either been created to help solve the problem, or another problem has moved in and taken its place, leaving society with no solution to their original issue. Even if there has been significant policy change to remedy the situation, leaders must recognize that the issue-attention cycle is an on-going process, and they must be perpetually on the lookout for new “warning signs.”

In Thomas Birkland’s *After Disaster: Agenda Setting, Public Policy, and Focusing Events*, he outlines his focusing events approach to examining crisis situations based on the agenda-setting function and public policy implications of a crisis situation. He defines a focusing event as “an event that is sudden, relatively rare, can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms, inflicts harms or suggests potential harms that are or could be concentrated on a definable

geographic area or community of interest, and that is known to policy makers and the public virtually simultaneously” (Birkland, 1997). These events happen suddenly, with little or no warning, and are unpredictable and unplanned. They affect a large number of people whether they are in the same geographic area or simply connected through a community with a vested interest in a particular policy issue. He cites the example of an airplane crash as a focusing event, and notes that we can assume that an airplane will crash somewhere at some time in the future, but it is impossible to predict the wreck of a particular flight at a particular place and time. The inability to predict focusing events tends to increase society’s fear of such disasters.

Since the public and the most informed members of the community learn of a focusing event simultaneously, “issue containment strategies” must be employed immediately. Often these focusing events provide an opportunity to enact policy change, because public policy is often based upon or spearheaded by a dramatic news event, and the media’s coverage creates an urgency to correct the problem. Traditionally less powerful groups can advance their proposed policy changes by taking advantage of the media’s attention to the issue.

According to Birkland, there are three types of focusing events. First, “normal” focusing events are events that “can be expected to happen sometime, given the complexity of technology or our propensity to live and work in risky areas” (Birkland, 1997) and include natural disasters and nuclear plant accidents. Second, “new” focusing events are those that have never happened before, or, if it has, happened so long ago as to have faded from memory. These “new” focusing events happen because of change in technology or change in society, and include the loss of space shuttle *Challenger* in 1986

and the terrorist bombing in Oklahoma City in 1995. The third type of focusing events are “common events under uncommon circumstances,” and are accidents that “gain greater attention due to some unique and unusual feature of the event that makes them newsworthy and worthy of greater government attention and potential policy change” (Birkland, 1997, p. 28). Examples of the third type include some political scandals and violent crimes.

In the short-term following the focusing event, the news media immediately respond to the crisis situation, covering the details of the incident, and this gives way to a longer-term reaction by policy-makers to the political factors associated with the event. The long-term reaction is dependent on the rarity and scope of the event as well as the amount of news coverage, the extent to which the attitudes of the important members of society influence attention to the problem, and the extent to which group mobilization influences attention to the problem.

Greater levels of news coverage are closely associated with greater levels of institutional attention to public problems (Birkland, 1997), and there are three elements of focusing events that are most likely to induce media coverage. The first element is the number of people affected by the event. Events that strike highly populated areas also strike where there is a high concentration of media reporters. The second element is the amount of harm done by the accident that is visible and highly tangible. Media outlets are always looking for a powerful visual symbol to illustrate the crisis situation in a neat package. They use the symbols and images associated with the event because they are easily used to get a message across without having to delve into complex and subtle descriptions of problems and possible solutions. The third and final factor in the

potential magnitude of media coverage is the rarity or novelty of the event, since everyday accidents are unlikely to gain much attention.

According to Birkland, groups that want policy change must exploit the focusing event to keep the issue fresh and high on the agenda. Marginalized groups have the opportunity to be heard following a focusing event, and can point to the event itself as a powerful symbol an accurate description of an underlying problem with the status-quo. Advocacy coalitions will seek to depict damage in a manner that is most consistent with their policy goals. The public cannot help but pay attention to the issue since major events occupy a certain amount of agenda space.

The school shooting crises at Columbine and Virginia Tech have respectively gone through and are currently going through the stages of Down's issue attention cycle, and can both be considered "new" focusing events. As these school shootings have become more and more common, however, they may be considered "normal" focusing events, those we can predict will happen with some degree of certainty, without knowing where, when, or to what magnitude.

## **Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis consists of six chapters as outlined below with the first chapter serving as the introduction chapter. The remaining chapters are:

### **Chapter II: Crisis at Columbine**

Chapter two focuses on the crisis at Columbine High School, examined through the lens of Anthony Downs' issue attention cycle framework and through Thomas Birkland's focusing events approach.

### **Chapter III: Tragedy at Virginia Tech**

Chapter three assesses the tragedy at Virginia Tech through Downs' issue attention cycle framework and through Birkland's focusing events approach.

### **Chapter IV: Lessons Learned**

Chapter four addresses the lessons that we have learned from these events, and how universities nationwide are responding, paying particular attention to the response at Boston College.

### **Chapter V: Media Mayhem**

Chapter five examines the role of the media coverage associated with these crises, and the ethical considerations that arose in both cases.

**Chapter VI: Conclusion**

Chapter six will conclude the thesis and offer a new framework through which to consider school-shootings.

## Chapter II: Crisis at Columbine

Tragedy seemed unlikely for the upper-middle-class, suburban city of Littleton, Colorado, home of a high school with a 90% graduation rate, with most graduates going on to college (Weintraub, 2001), and when two students went on a shooting rampage that became the nation's third deadliest school killing in history on the morning of April 20, 1999, the community was shocked to its core. That Tuesday morning, the cafeteria was buzzing with gossip about who went to the prom with whom on Saturday night and humming with seniors' theme song, *The Way You Look Tonight*. The biology class was worrying about its test on the digestive system, the choir was rehearsing for its afternoon concert, and it was finally warm enough outside to wear shorts. (Gibbs, 1999).

The passive buzz came to a sudden halt at 11:10 a.m. when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold marched from the parking lot to the cafeteria during lunch period "A." When their home-made bombs failed to detonate, they removed their shotguns from their trench-coats, and embarked upon a shooting spree, leaving nine injured and three dead. They then proceeded to enter the library and tortured students, teachers and librarians for almost twenty minutes, killing ten and injuring dozens. Klebold and Harris committed suicide at 12:08 p.m. in the library, and an hour after the shootings had ceased, two SWAT teams entered the building, helping students, teachers and faculty leave the building and reunite with their families. A total of 38 individuals sustained injuries, primarily from gunshot wounds: the 12 students and one teacher who were killed, the two gunmen who committed suicide, and another 23 individuals, mostly students, who

survived their injuries. At least several of the injured were critically wounded, and some were left with permanent disabilities (Weintraub, 2001).

Through Downs' issue-attention cycle framework and Birkland's focusing events approach, we can analyze the events at Columbine High School by examining the pre-problem period, the alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm stage, the realization of the cost of significant progress, the gradual decline in public interest, and the post-problem stage, as well as investigate how the Columbine High School tragedy fits into Birkland's focusing event definition.

### **Pre-Crisis Period**

Leading up to the event, warning signs were loud yet largely overlooked by the community at Columbine High School. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had seemingly normal childhoods, both coming from stable households with two parents and older brother. Throughout their youth they participated in team sports such as baseball and soccer, and when the pair met in middle school, they bonded over a shared interest in computers. The two grew close as they worked together in a local pizza parlor and frequently played the computer video game, Doom.

When they began high school at Columbine, Harris and Klebold experienced difficulty fitting into any of the cliques. Immediately following massacre, many people believed that the two were members of a group called the "Trench Coat Mafia," because they donned trench coats the day of the attack. In reality they were not affiliated with the group, and were only friends with a few members. On the day of the murders, Klebold and Harris wore the trench coats strategically in an effort to conceal their weapons

(Rosenberg, 1999). Unable to fit in with a circle of friends, Harris and Klebold and were frequently picked on by athletes and other more “popular” students.

Harris and Klebold were no ordinary pair of awkward teens, and they had several run-ins with the Jefferson County Juvenile Justice System. They had been suspended from school for hacking into Columbine High School’s computer programs and in March of 1998 the pair was charged with first-degree criminal trespass and theft for breaking into a van and stealing tools. They were then placed in a juvenile-diversion program, completing the program in February 1999. According to the Columbine Report, a comprehensive review of the tragedy, commissioned by Colorado Governor Bill Owens and former Chief Justice of the Colorado Supreme Court, William H. Erickson, in 2001, on several occasions while they were being dealt with by Jefferson County authorities, the two gave significant indication that they were dangerous. A failure among authorities to share the information they had about Harris and Klebold allowed them to conceal their deadly intentions from law enforcement officials, prosecutors, school teachers and officials.

In 1996, Eric Harris developed a seemingly innocent personal webpage to host video game levels that he and Klebold had created. He also posted a blog which included instructions on how to cause mischief, and even information about how to build explosives. This “innocent” site went over the edge in 1998 when a Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office investigator, Michael Guerra, was notified of the site after the parents of Brooks Brown, a classmate of Harris and Klebold, discovered that Harris had posted death threats aimed at their son and other students and teachers at Columbine High School.

A deep hatred toward society had welled up inside of Eric Harris, and through his website he expressed his desire to kill those who annoyed him, which amounted to almost everyone:

You know what I hate? Star Wars fans: get a friggin life, you boring geeks. You know what I hate? People who mispronounce words, like 'acrost,' and 'pacific' for 'specific,' and 'expresso' instead of 'espresso.' You know what I hate? People who drive slow in the fast lane, God these people do not know how to drive. You know what I hate? The WB network!!!! Oh Jesus, Mary Mother of God Almighty, I hate that channel with all my heart and soul (Cullen, 1999).

As April 20, 1999 neared, Harris updated his site with the progress he had been making on the pipe bombs, a running count of the guns he had acquired, and a “hit list” of individuals he intended on targeting. Because Klebold and Harris were minors when they sought firearms for their deadly plot, they turned to friends older than 18 to help them. Robyn Anderson, seven years older than the boys, attended the high school prom with Klebold days before the massacre, and bought two shotguns and a carbine for the pair in November 1998, a legal practice in Colorado, as it was lawful for adults to transfer long guns to juveniles. A co-worker, Philip Duran, purchased a 9 mm handgun for them, and another friend, Mark Manes sold the pair an assault pistol. Duran and Manes were charged with illegally providing a handgun to a minor, and were the only two people charged with any crimes directly related to the Columbine High School tragedy.

After seeing the site, Guerra intended on writing an affidavit for a search warrant of the Harris home, however, the affidavit was never filed. Investigators did, however, meet with school administrators at Columbine and warned them that Eric Harris may have been making pipe bombs. According to a school district official, Sally Blanchard, the school had no reason to look into the matter further:

The deans were told that there was an investigation under way, that they weren't to do anything. That it was informational on their part, only. So they actually took no action because certainly they wouldn't have wanted to interfere with an ongoing investigation (60 Minutes II, 2001).

Administrators at the high school were given another opportunity to intervene, however, to no avail. In February of 1999, two months before the shootings, Dylan Klebold turned in a story he wrote about an assassin in a black trench coat who shot down students and bombed a city. "The man unloaded one of the pistols across the fronts of [the] four innocents," Klebold wrote. "The...streetlights caused a visible reflection off of the droplets of blood...I understood his actions." Klebold's teacher later called it "the most vicious story she had ever read," and voiced her concerns about it to Klebold's parents and his school counselor, yet no school official ever looked into the matter (60 Minutes II, 2001).

In addition to their writings, Klebold and Harris made a series of homemade videotapes in the weeks preceding the massacre. The videotapes detail how and why they were to storm the school, displayed an arsenal of weapons, and acted out a mock assault on Columbine High School. They rambled on about their hatred for classmates who had offended them, and "absolved their friends and families of any knowledge or involvement in the massacre" (Columbine Report, 2001).

The community surrounding Columbine High school was composed of upper-middle class, two parent family households. One has to wonder where Harris and Klebold's parents were during the many months of weapon accumulation and preparation for the attack. Their parents have never spoken out to the media, but in police interviews they claimed they had no idea about the arsenal of weapons their sons were amassing in

their bedrooms—including knives, guns, cans full of gunpowder, coils of bomb fuse, and more than 100 pipe bombs, propane bombs and homemade grenades (60 Minutes II, 2001).

On a calendar entry in Eric Harris' agenda, dated April 20, 1999, the time 11:10 is written across the top (The Denver Channel, 2006). After a year of planning, during which they assembled bombs, practiced target shooting with their firearms and fueled one another's "apocalyptic vision of revenge," the two seniors, due to graduate in just three weeks, launched their attack on Columbine High School on the morning of April 20, 1999.

### **Alarmed Discovery**

The first suspicion that something at Columbine High School was terribly wrong came at 11:21 a.m. when 911 emergency calls were made to the Jefferson County Sherriff's dispatch center describing a "female down" and "possible shots fired" (Columbine Report, 2001). The dark smoke, loud explosions and sound of gunfire within the school gave evidence that catastrophic events were taking place inside. Jefferson County Deputies Neil Gardner and Andy Marton were among the first officers to arrive on the scene. When Gardner exited his patrol car he and Eric Harris locked eyes and Harris fired approximately ten rounds in Gardner's direction, until his gun apparently jammed and Harris ran into the school. Police from Jefferson County and Denver quickly arrived on the scene.

Instead of immediately following the gunman into the school, the police established a security perimeter around the school so that the shooters could not escape,

following their protocol, exactly what they had been trained to do. A perimeter was to be set up because entry into the school was to be carried out by SWAT teams. At 12:06 p.m. members of the SWAT team entered the school amidst a chaos of police, SWAT officials, students and bystanders surrounding the area. Because there were so many students, faculty and staff inside the building at that point, the SWAT teams moved slowly through the building as they tried to secure a safe escape for those they came across in the process (Columbine Report, 2001).

The SWAT teams' pace was also impeded by their complete lack of knowledge about the school's layout—relying heavily on hasty sketches drawn for them by local officers. Their slow movement can also be attributed to a strong concern that the gunmen had planted bombs that were set to explode, and the lack of knowledge they had as to where more than ninety bombs were placed. Communication was also difficult between the officials because of the deafening fire alarm that had been activated and ringing for six hours, and because the large buildings, like the Columbine High School building, tend to break up digital radio signals, making communication with those outside the building nearly impossible. A great deal of conflicting reports of what was actually happening inside the building added to the difficulty that the responders faced. It took hours for them to locate bodies, help victims and evacuate students, not reaching the library, the site of the most devastating carnage wrought by the two killers, until approximately 3:30 p.m. (Columbine Report, 2001).

Authorities struggled with reuniting students with their families. The students who had escaped the massacre were transported to nearby Leawood Elementary School, and through the media, informed parents to go directly to Leawood to find their children.

Many waiting parents did not even find peace of mind at the end of the day on April 20—their children had yet to appear at the elementary school. No definitive identification of the victims came until late on April 21, because the coroner was not permitted to move the bodies of those victims outside of the school, or remove bodies from the interior of the school until almost 24 hours after the tragedy.

The media's role in the crisis was unprecedented. Reporters flocked to Littleton, Colorado from nearby Boulder—reporters were on the scene there covering the JonBenét Ramsey murder case and were able to broadcast the terrifying images that surrounded the school on April 20, 1999. People across the country were glued to their television screens, watching the intense footage as the tragedy unfolded.

The tragedy at Columbine would certainly fall under Thomas Birkland's definition of a "focusing event"—a sudden, relatively rare, harmful event concentrated on a definable community of interest that is made known to policy makers and the public virtually simultaneously. Although in retrospect we can recognize warning signs, the massacre at Columbine happened suddenly, and was unpredictable and unplanned. The event affected the nation at large—every parent and child around the country was shocked to see the events of April 20, 1999 unfold before their eyes, and the public, the authorities, and the media were all made aware of the event simultaneously.

Birkland asserts that public policy is often based upon or spearheaded by a dramatic news event because the media's coverage creates an urgency to correct the problem. Television coverage brought the tragedy of Columbine into living rooms across the country and crystallized the urgency to either prevent or better prepare for something of this magnitude.

The crisis at Columbine can be considered a “new” focusing event, not because this was the first documented case of school-violence, but because previous instances had faded from memory, evidence of the accuracy of Downs’ issue-attention cycle, and because a school massacre of this magnitude was unprecedented.

In the aftermath of the massacre, thousands mourned the tragic deaths at religious services in the metropolitan Denver area, President Clinton called for a moment of silent prayer at the White House, attempting to unite the country in this time of crisis. “We see, in a moment of agony, what is best in our community and in our country” he declared on national television. “We all must do more to recognize and look for the early warning signals that deeply troubled young people send, often before they explode into violence,” he continued. “Surely more of them can be saved and more innocent victims and tragedies can be avoided” (Obmascik, 1999). In Rome, the Pope condemned the violence at Columbine High School, expressing that he was “deeply shocked” by the rampage, and expressed hope that the American society would react by “committing itself to promoting and transmitting the moral vision and the values which alone can ensure respect for the inviolable dignity of human life” (Obmascik, 1999).

### **Euphoric Enthusiasm**

During the Columbine High School crisis, a combination of “children in the crossfire, a comfortable suburban venue, vivid and memorable images, and an unpredictable drama played out in real time before local and national network cameras (Trigoboff, 2000). The tragedy called into question the adequacy of school warning systems and pre-planned responses to crises, and immediately following the events of

April 20, 1999, the community was confident that it could make a difference and prevent a crisis like this from ever happening again.

Law enforcement strategy and training was influenced by the tragedy at Columbine—the sheer scale of the lethal violence provided the needed stimulus to move law enforcement in new directions. Training in rapid deployment instructs officers who may first respond to a crisis situation to assemble into teams for immediate entry when, in a situation like that at Columbine, one or more active perpetrators are in control of a large building where a number of potential victims are also present. These officers are also trained to move around bombs and other devices that may pose a threat to them or other persons in the building. Immediate deployment by teams of responding officers to locate and subdue armed perpetrators seems the best alternative among a set of risky and imperfect options in a situation like that at Columbine (Columbine Report, 2001).

Effective communication was also at issue at the Columbine crisis. Since police agencies are now expected to use rapid deployment teams, the need for strong communication facilitation is urgent. After the tragedy, the community called for immediate steps to be taken to improve the effectiveness of police radios for use in large public buildings. On January 28, 2000, in response to the events at Columbine, the Governor of Colorado, Bill Owens, appointed Hon. William H. Erickson, former Chief Justice of the Colorado Supreme Court, to chair the Columbine Review Commission, a commission to conduct an independent review of the tragedy that occurred on April 20, 1999. The Commission recommended that school districts where local police agencies broadcast on a certain bandwidth consider the installation of transmission repeaters in large schools and other public buildings, and that until radio communications are

improved to the point that digital communications from inside large structures can be transmitted effectively to outside receivers, transmission repeaters should be considered necessary safety equipment like fire alarms and sprinkler systems.

The mental health of the students was of utmost concern to the community following the disaster as showcased by a massive outpouring of support and offers of assistance from all segments of the community. The Victim Assistance program, administered by the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, served as the lead agency in coordinating the victim assistance response (Weintraub, 2001). The number of victims in the Columbine tragedy, however, far exceeded their response capacity. The 2,000 victims they responded to on the day of the massacre were the equivalent of their average yearly victim count, so the program relied heavily on volunteer efforts. Under the Victim Assistance Compensation program, there was no charge to patients for psychiatric services and needed treatment. To fund the large number of individuals requiring attention, the Victim Assistance program received a grant from the federal government.

The local Jefferson Center for Mental Health also reached out to the victims and provided a crisis call center, and a Columbine Crisis Chat Line on their website. They provided a wealth of information to the public about trauma symptoms to watch for and how to access services. They also mailed a crisis booklet entitled "A Partner for Parents: A Handbook for Healing" to every parent in the school district. The booklet included information on how to talk to one's child about the Columbine tragedy, the identification of signs of children's stress reactions, and warning signs of possible severe psychopathology in youths at risk of suicidal or homicidal behavior, and emphasized the importance of parents taking care of their own emotional needs so they could be most

supportive for their children. A unique and high level of fear permeated the community long after the attack, partly due to the fact that there was no single definitive explanation for why Klebold and Harris committed the crime, and no one had any answers on how to prevent a similar event from happening again (Weintraub, 2001).

Schools had finally become aware of significant dangers of bullying—a persecution that both Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were subject to. One of the changes brought about by the Columbine tragedy was the implementation of a law in May 2001 by Colorado Governor Bill Owens in an effort to prevent bullying in schools. The law requires school districts to adopt policies against bullying and provide yearly progress reports to the state. Many districts adopted a “no-tolerance policy” or “one-strike” rule against bullying.

The effects of the 1999 tragedy at Columbine High School were not simply contained to the surrounding area. High school communities across the country felt a devastating blow that day, and many school officials were left thinking, “thank God it wasn’t us.” Countless Littleton-esque suburban communities, which never had to deal with such violence in the past, were shocked to their core, and were required to consider the fact that a similar tragedy could strike their very own neighborhoods. If it could happen at Columbine, it could happen anywhere. In the eight days following the deadly rampage at Columbine, panic swept across schools in nearly every state as administrators and teachers scrambled to deal with hundreds of copycat incidents—bomb threats and scares, and acts of violence (Cooper, 1999).

Communities across the United States demanded a critical focus on school-safety, and a push for school officials to intensify security measures. Committees were

organized, phone trees were enacted, and meetings were arranged, where brainstorming sessions led everyone to believe that they were on the right track to preventing another disaster.

Parents kept a closer eye on their children in the immediate aftermath of the crisis, as they wondered how on Earth the Klebold and Harris families did not notice warning signs in their boys. In their *Strategies for the Prevention of Youth Violence in Chicago Public Schools* (2001), Drs. Carl Bell, Sue Gamm, Paul Vallas and Phillip Jackson agree that lack of parental monitoring, represented at its extreme by neglect and poor discipline methods and conflict about discipline, has been related to participation in delinquent and violent behavior for a range of populations.

Many school communities were excited by the ideas of mandatory metal detectors to screen for potential weapons or dangerous materials. Some school districts called for students to wear clear or mesh backpacks so they could not conceal harmful objects. Employment of professional armed security personnel to respond immediately to problematic behavior and the installation of security cameras and surveillance systems to monitor student activity seemed like promising precautions.

Some public schools considered dress codes that would require students to tuck in their shirts, so that weapons could not be hidden in waistbands, and even mandatory school uniforms—at least partly because officials believe that uniforms deter gang activity and help administrators determine who belongs on their campuses (Sack, 1999). Pushes for more stringent gun-control laws, and bans on violent video games were also popular.

Parents and psychologists called for special counseling services to better serve the needs of the students and catch potential crisis situations before they arise, and the implementation of community-building activities to prevent social-ostracism and make “outsiders” feel included. The importance of crisis communication plans to better disseminate information and keep disastrous situations under control was also stressed during the aftermath. For most of these communities, however, their plans never led to concrete realities.

Birkland’s focusing events approach considers the fact that during the short-term following the focusing event, the news media immediately responds to the crisis situation, covering the details of the incident, giving way to a longer-term reaction by the policy-makers to the political factors associated with the event. This long-term reaction is dependent upon the rarity and scope of the event, the amount of news coverage, the extent to which attitudes of the important members of society influence attention to the problem, and the extent to which group mobilization influences attention to the problem.

Greater levels of media attention are closely associated with greater levels of institutional attention to the public problem, and Birkland outlines three elements of focusing events most likely to garner significant media attention. The Columbine crisis certainly encompassed all three elements.

The first element is the number of people affected by the event, since highly populated areas tend to also have an abundance of available media reporters. Not only were there many media reporters on the scene from nearby Denver, but the community affected was composed of nearly all persons in the United States. The media had a captive and extremely interested audience. Second, the more tangible and visible the

amount of harm done by the accident, the more media attention likely to exist. The events at Columbine were widely broadcast, and the images of fleeing students, wailing parents, and traumatized bystanders were chiseled into the minds of the thousands glued to their televisions. The images of Columbine took the place of feelings impossible to articulate. The third factor in the potential extent of media coverage is the rarity or novelty of the focusing event. Columbine was certainly an extraordinary event, as it was the largest school shooting in the history of the United States.

Since the community affected by the tragedy was so large and the media coverage so widespread, the ability to enact real change in public policy seemed achievable. Although there were concrete changes made in many areas of the country, a foolproof scheme to prevent school violence and mitigate its harmful effects proved virtually impossible to achieve.

### **The Realization of the Cost of Significant Progress and The Gradual Decline in Public Interest**

Increased disciplinary actions, arrests, and changes in school security were certainly implemented in most areas across the country—at least for a brief time period following the massacre at Columbine. As the time passed, however, many school administrators cautioned against going too far in tightening security and creating an atmosphere only “marginally safer but completely sterile.” Paul Houston, the executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, contended that “the problem is that in an open society, no matter how much security you provide, those who are bent on destruction—particularly where it involves self-destruction—cannot be stopped” (Cooper, 1999).

Two months after the Columbine incident, the FBI's National Center for Analysis of Violent Crime sponsored a national conference addressing the large number of shootings perpetrated on school campuses over the preceding decade. The conference offered school systems an outline for dealing with potential campus violence, including the identification of common factors among previous assailants. The FBI conceded that although it excels at profiling potential terrorists, it experiences great difficulty instituting its outlined method of preventing school violence.

While it identified common characteristics among perpetrators, including being victims of "bullying bordering on harassment, symptoms of depression often coupled with thoughts of suicide, and an unhealthy fascination in violent media," it asserted that a great number of students in the American school system fit its dangerous profile, creating an "over-profiling" situation where a school may generate an unmanageable list of possible threats. Paralyzed by their overwhelming list, a school may disastrously opt to do nothing (Collins, 2007).

While many parents called for the installation of metal detectors at schools, administrators weighed the options and decided that a more efficient, and clearly economical, response would be to simply reduce the number of unlocked school doors, or adopt new policies requiring visitors to show identification or get passes. A plan that would truly deter future violence at schools became a virtually impossible notion. Administrators in Coweta County, Georgia, for example, were not naïve enough to think that they conquered all school violence by prohibiting students from carrying book bags other than clear or mesh backpacks. They argued, however, that "at least it's something."

School administrators across the country felt pressure to do “something” that would ease the anxieties of students and parents.

The cost of implementing all of the ideal precautions that the community called for would be colossal. Often, administrators had to recognize that their only feasible plan of action in deterring future school violence would be in the form of small, incremental changes.

As the tragedy moved away from immediate attention, civil liberties activists came to the forefront, arguing against many of the proposed changes, as they stifled many freedoms that our country is grounded upon. Supreme Court precedents allow modest restriction of disruptive student speech and give school officials significant leeway to conduct random searches; however the American Civil Liberties Union was disturbed by the infringement upon students’ rights in the wake of the tragedy at Columbine High School. They particularly took issue with the stringent disciplinary actions against students for wearing or saying things that school officials deemed “inappropriate.” “Every time there is a violent or tragic incident, the first reaction of public officials is to scapegoat civil liberties,” Nadine Strossen, president of the A.C.L.U. asserted. (Sack, 1999).

According to Downs, as public interest gradually fades due to the significant cost of progress, another issue is usually leaping into prominence and entering the alarmed discovery phase. Downs’ theory holds true in the case of the Columbine High School crisis, when the public’s eye shifted toward the immense issue of national security after the events of September 11, 2001. The importance of children carrying mesh backpacks

waned as the image of commercial planes thundering into the twin towers was chiseled into the eyes of Americans.

It appeared that terrorism trumped school violence in the minds of United States citizens after September 11, and school-safety bills and proposals took a backseat to the raising of American flags, the passing of the Patriot Act, and the War on Terror. In spite of attempts by school officials, police, and legislators to prevent the reoccurrence of such vile acts as those perpetrated at Columbine, the real legacy of that atrocity is the fear, and almost certainty that such violence will happen again. (Watson, 2002).

### Chapter III: Tragedy at Virginia Tech

Almost exactly eight years following Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold's harrowing massacre at Columbine, Virginia Tech senior English major Seung Hui Cho embarked upon a two-part killing spree, murdering 32 students and teachers, injuring many more, before finally committing suicide. On April 16, 2007, Cho rocked the Virginia Tech campus, a beautiful, sprawling site near the Blue Ridge Mountains in southwest Blacksburg, Virginia with the deadliest school-shooting in United States history. The crisis sparked national debate and criticism of U.S. gun laws, mental health policy, privacy laws, journalism ethics, and gaps in the responses of college administrations.

At approximately 7:15 a.m. Seung Hui Cho entered West Ambler Johnston residential hall, made his way to room number 4040 and proceeded to shoot Emily Hilscher, a 19 year old freshman—an injury that proved fatal. When Ryan Christopher Clark, Hilscher's resident assistant and neighbor, entered her room to investigate the commotion, Cho murdered him. Cho fled the scene, returned to his dorm room, changed his clothes, and deleted several files from his computer.

At 9:01 a.m. he entered the nearby post office and mailed a package of writings and video recordings to NBC News in New York. His package contained pictures of himself holding weapons, an 1,800 word rambling diatribe, and video clips in which he expressed rage, resentment, and a desire to get even with oppressors (Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007). The video clips alluded to a coming massacre, and were created by Cho in the previous weeks. The video clips also featured performances of the enclosed writings. When he left the post office and headed toward Norris Hall, the Engineering

Science and Mechanics building, he carried a backpack full of chains, locks, a hammer, a knife, two guns, and copious amounts of ammunition.

Approximately two hours after his initial shootings began, Cho entered Norris Hall, chained the three main entrance doors shut, and placed a note on at least one of the doors, claiming that attempts to open the door would cause a bomb to explode. At 9:40 a.m. Cho began his second shooting rampage in room 206, where he killed a professor and eight graduate students, and wounded three other students. He then traveled down the hall terrorizing students in classrooms 207, 205 and 211 for eleven minutes, firing 174 rounds, killing 30 people in Norris Hall and wounding 17. Cho turned his gun on himself just as police reached the second floor of the building.

Looking at the Virginia Tech crisis through Downs' issue-attention cycle framework and Birkland's focusing event approach by examining the pre-problem period, the alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm stage, the realization of the cost of significant progress, the gradual decline in public interest, and the post-problem stage, as well as investigate how the Virginia Tech tragedy fits into Birkland's focusing event definition will serve to analyze the crisis response thus far.

### **Pre-Crisis Period**

The warning signs started almost from the outset for Seung Hui Cho who was born to a family living in a small two-room apartment in Seoul, South Korea in 1984. He proved to be a shy, quiet child who posed no genuine problems for his family until the serious health problems he encountered from 9 months to 3 years old. After experiencing many unpleasant medical procedures, he generally did not like to be touched. When Cho

was 8 years old his family emigrated from Korea and settled down in Fairfax County, Virginia.

Throughout his childhood he continued to be very withdrawn. Several teachers called conferences with his parents concerning his antisocial behavior. In the summer before his seventh grade year he received counseling at the Multicultural Center for Human Services to address his shy, introverted nature, which was diagnosed as “selective mutism” (Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007). His parents attempted to socialize him more by encouraging extracurricular activities; however, he remained visibly withdrawn. By his eighth grade year, suicidal and homicidal thoughts were identified by his middle school teachers in his writings, in which he referenced the Columbine High School shootings frequently. The school requested that his parents ask a counselor to intervene, and this led to a psychiatric evaluation at the Multicultural Center for Human Services. Cho was prescribed antidepressant medication, and began to respond well to the drugs. He was taken off of these drugs about one year later.

Throughout high school, Cho was enrolled in an Individual Education Program to deal with his shyness and lack of responsiveness in a classroom setting. He continued therapy at the Multicultural Center for Human Services, and experienced no real behavior problems, becoming what both the guidance office in school and his therapist considered a “success.”

Upon his graduation with honors from Westfield High School, Cho decided to enroll at Virginia Tech, against the advice of his parents and counselors, who considered Virginia Tech to be too large of a school for him, a school where he would not receive enough individual attention. Despite their warnings, Cho entered Virginia Tech as a

business information systems major in August of 2003, and was given the name of a contact at his high school in case he needed help in college—a phone number to which he, sadly, never availed himself. His freshman and sophomore years at Virginia Tech went by without significant incident. His parents visited him weekly, he maintained good grades, and switched his major to English in light of his growing passion for writing.

Serious warning signs began in Cho's junior year at Virginia Tech. His sister noted that his correspondence with this family significantly tapered, and he became less enthusiastic with writing and school in general. Cho led an extremely quiet and solitary life. During all of his 23 years of life, the most frequent observation made about Cho was that he had no social life. During all of his school years he had no real friends, and had no interest in being with others. His few attempts to reach out to females at college were inappropriate and frightened them. One of the big problems associated with being a loner, according to Dr. Roger Depue (2007), a 21 year veteran of the FBI, is that one does not get helpful reality-checks from people who can challenge disordered thinking. Once a loner cuts off outsiders, Depue notes, he automatically takes himself out of the game where he could grow, with help, out of his problems. He inadvertently condemns himself to "ongoing inadequacy and compensatory fantasies." His suitemates attempted to include him in social activity, and even brought him to a party in the fall of 2005. At the party, however, he stabbed at the carpet of a girl's room with a knife.

His teachers noted problems as well. Cho's poetry professor was concerned about significant violence in his writings, and even had to ask him to stop taking pictures of classmates from a camera he held under his desk. She had him removed from her class, and the English department chair began tutoring Cho one-on-one. He refused to attend

counseling and his refusal was reported to the Virginia Tech Division of Student Affairs, the Cook Counseling Center, the Schiffert Health Center, the Virginia Tech police, and the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences.

That same semester, various female residents at Virginia Tech filed reports with the Virginia Tech Police Department and campus authorities indicating that Cho had made “annoying” contact with them on the Internet, by phone, and in person. The female students failed to press charges, but the investigating officers referred Cho to the school’s disciplinary system where he was required to call the Cook Counseling Center where he was given a preliminary screening over the phone.

When Cho was told that he could not have any further contact with the females lodging the complaints, he sent an instant message to one of his suitemates reading, “I might as well kill myself now,” causing alarm. The suitemate alerted the campus police and a magistrate issued a temporary detaining order, sending Cho to Carilion St. Albans Psychiatric Hospital for an overnight stay and mental evaluation. The independent evaluators concluded that Cho did not present a danger to himself or others, and the staff psychiatrist dictated in his evaluation summary that there was “no indication of psychosis, delusions, suicidal or homicidal ideation” and found that his “insight and judgment are normal” (Virginia Tech Review Panel). Outpatient counseling through Virginia Tech was recommended, and no medication was prescribed. However, when he returned to campus after winter vacation, no action was taken by the Cook Counseling Center or the Care Team at Virginia Tech to follow up on Cho.

That spring, Cho’s technical writing professor asked him to withdraw from his class after inappropriate outbursts in class and choice of writing assignments. Cho

proceeded to follow the professor to his office and raise his voice angrily. The professor failed to report the incident to university officials. Cho also posed problems in his creative writing class, when he wrote a paper about a young man who hates the students at his school and plans to kill them and himself. His writing contained many parallels, and acted as somewhat of a foreshadowing event to the tragedy that unfolded on April 16, 2007.

Cho began his senior year in the fall of 2006, and just two weeks into classes, one of his writing professors alerted the Associate Dean of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences about him, but the dean found “no mention of mental health issues or police reports” on Cho (Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007). His professor urged him to attend counseling with her, but he refused.

In February of his senior year, Cho ordered a .22 caliber handgun online and picked it up from the pawnbroker across the street from the university. In March he rented a van from Enterprise Rent-A-Car which he kept for almost a month and used it to tape some of his video recorded rants. He also bought a 9mm handgun and a box of rounds at Roanoke Firearms. He waited the thirty days between gun purchases, as required in Virginia, and when the store initiated the required background check, they found no record of mental health issues. Throughout the next three weeks, Cho purchased several rounds of ammunition and practiced shooting at an indoor range.

On April 8, Cho spent the night at a Hampton Inn in Christiansburg, Virginia and videotaped segments for his “manifesto-like diatribe,” and on April 15, the night before the attack, Cho placed his weekly Sunday night call to his family in Fairfax County.

They reported that the conversation was normal and that Cho had said nothing that caused them any concern.

The Care Team at Virginia Tech was established as a means of identifying and working with students with problems, yet it was ineffective in connecting the dots or heeding the red flags that were highly visible in Cho. The Care Team is comprised of the Dean of Student Affairs, the director of Residence Life, the head of Judicial Affairs, Student Health and legal counsel. Other agencies from the university are occasionally asked to participate, including the Women's Center, fraternities and sororities, the Disability Center, and campus police. If these agencies, especially the police department, had been regular members of the Care Team, perhaps the red flags would have been more obvious. The Virginia Tech Police Department knew that Cho had been twice cautioned against stalking, had threatened suicide, that a magistrate had issued a temporary detention order, and that Cho had spent a night at St. Albans as a result. The Care Team, apparently, did not know the details of all of these incidents.

Residence Life knew that there were multiple reports and concerns expressed over Cho's behavior in the dorm, but this too was not brought up to the Care Team. The academic component of the university warned of a sullen, foreboding male student who refused to talk, frightened classmates and faculty with chilling writings, and refused to get counseling, however since the Judicial Affairs committee and the Cook Counseling Center asserted that Cho's writings were not actionable threats, the Care Team was satisfied that private tutoring would resolve the problem. They never sought to revisit Cho's progress the following semester (Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007). The Care Team was hindered by overly strict interpretations of complex federal and state privacy

laws, a decentralized corporate university structure, and the absence of someone on the team who was experienced in threat assessment and knew to investigate the situation more broadly, checking for additional information that would help determine if this individual actually posed a risk or not.

According to Dr. Roger Depue (2007), experts who evaluate possible indicators that an individual is at risk of harming himself or others need to seek out many sources for clues and red flags that merit attention. He notes that a single warning sign by itself usually does not warrant overt action by a threat assessment specialist, but if a cluster of warning signs are present, more fact-finding is warranted to determine if there is a likelihood of danger.

Depue (2007) cites violent fantasy content in writings and drawings, anger problems, fascination with weapons, boasting and practicing of fighting and combat proficiency, loner tendencies, suicidal and homicidal ideation, stalking, non-compliance and disciplinary problems, imitation of other murderers in dress, appearance or possessions, interest in previous shooting situations, victim/martyr self-concept, strange behavior, paranoia, violence and cruelty, inappropriate affect, acting out, history of contact with police, mental health history related to dangerousness, expressionless face, unusual interest in police, military, and terrorist activities, and the use of alcohol or drugs as warning signs associated with school shootings in the United States. Cho clearly demonstrated several of these warning signs, including violent fantasy content, anger problems, loner tendencies, suicidal and homicidal ideation, stalking, non-compliance, interest in previous shooting situations, strange behavior, history of contact with police, and a serious mental health history.

### **Alarmed Discovery**

At 7:20 a.m. on April 16, 2007, just five minutes after Cho maliciously murdered Emily Hilscher and Ryan Clark in room 4040 of West Ambler Johnston residential hall, the Virginia Tech Police Department (VTPD) received a call advising that a female student in room 4040 of West Ambler Johnston residential hall had possibly fallen from her loft bed after a neighboring resident heard the noise. After VTPD was notified, they notified the Virginia Tech Rescue Squad and dispatched an officer to the room. The officer and rescue squad arrived at the scene four minutes later, discovered the two bodies, and called for backup. At 7:30 a.m. the additional officers secured the crime scene around room 4040 and started the preliminary investigation, which was slow, due to the fact that none of the neighboring residents were able to provide a suspect description.

When Hilscher's classmate arrived at her room, in accordance with their usual routine, to walk to chemistry class, she informed the police that Hilscher usually was dropped off by her boyfriend on Monday mornings, and that he was an avid gun user. This information led the police to consider Hilscher's boyfriend a "person of interest" and potential suspect and Virginia Tech and Blacksburg Police Department officers began their search for him. At 8:00 a.m. university classes commenced, and it was not until 9:26 a.m. that the Virginia Tech administration sent an e-mail to campus staff, faculty, and students informing them of the dormitory shooting. Around this same time, a Virginia State Police trooper pulled over Hilscher's boyfriend and performed a gunpowder residue field test on him, which produced a negative result.

Cho began his shooting rampage in Norris Hall at about 9:40 a.m., and one minute later a Blacksburg Police Department dispatcher received a call regarding the Norris Hall shootings, and contacted the Virginia Tech Police Department at 9:42 a.m. Just three minutes later, the first police officers arrived at Norris Hall and rushed toward one entrance, then another, and then a third, only to find all three chained shut. The police used a shotgun to open the ordinary key lock of a fourth entrance to Norris Hall and immediately followed the sound of gunshots. Cho shot himself in the head just as police reached the second floor. Investigators believe that the police shotgun blast alerted Cho to the arrival of the police.

At 9:50 a.m. a second e-mail was sent by the administration to all Virginia Tech e-mail addresses announcing that “A gunman is loose on campus. Stay in buildings until further notice. Stay away from all windows.” Four outdoor loudspeakers broadcasted a similar message.

At Norris Hall the first team of officers began securing the second floor, triaging the 48 gunshot victims, coordinating rescue efforts to remove the survivors, gathering preliminary suspect or gunman descriptions and determining if additional gunmen existed. At 10:08 a.m. the police team discovered a deceased male student who they suspected to be the gunman. At 10:17 a.m. a third e-mail from the Virginia Tech administration cancelled classes and advised all persons to stay where they were. Within the hour all wounded from Norris Hall had been transported to a hospital or treatment unit. At 10:52 a.m. a fourth e-mail from the Virginia Tech administration warned of “a multiple shooting with multiple victims in Norris Hall,” saying the shooter had been arrested and that the police were searching for a possible second shooter.

At 12:42 p.m. University President Charles Steger announced that police were releasing people from buildings and that counseling centers were being established, and at 4:01 p.m. President George W. Bush spoke to the country from the White House regarding the shooting. Even by that evening the first and second shootings were not definitively linked, as a search warrant was served for the residence of the first victim's boyfriend and investigators continued to investigate whether he was linked to the first crime.

After Cho had committed suicide and the scene was finally cleared by the police to allow EMS units to move in, the grim reports began to emerge, as the numbers of dead and injured rose as each new report was released. Parents, spouses, faculty, students and staff clamored for information that would assure them that their loved ones were safe. University leaders, faculty, staff and law enforcement worked together to monitor the rapidly changing situation and set up the local Inn at Virginia Tech as a place where families could assemble and reunite.

The following day, the VTPD released the name of the shooter and confirmed that there were 33 fatalities between the two incidents. Virginia Tech announced that classes would be cancelled for the remainder of the week to "allow students the time they need to grieve and seek assistance as needed." A family assistance center was established at The Inn at Virginia Tech, and a convocation ceremony was held for the university community. Speakers included President George W. Bush, Governor Tim Kaine, who had just returned from Japan, Virginia Tech President Charles Steger, Virginia Tech Vice President for Student Affairs Zenobia L. Hikes, local religious leaders, University Provost Dr. Mark McNamee, Dean of Students Tom Brown, Counselor Dr. Christopher

Flynn, and poet and Professor Nikki Giovanni. That night a candlelit vigil was held on the Virginia Tech drill field. Thousands of candles were lit in quiet testimony of the shared mourning and stones were placed in a semicircle to honor the victims. Mourners wrote condolences and expressed their grief on the message boards that filled the area, while flowers, stuffed animals, and other remembrances were left in honor of the professors and students who lost their lives on April 16.

The Inn at Virginia Tech became an information center and a family assistance center where families could find lodging, and support. However, there was little organization and almost no verifiable information for hours after the shooting ended. Families were anxious, afraid and frantic to find out what was happening. Disaster plans for the past several decades have highlighted the importance of designating one public information officer to serve as the reliable source of information during emergencies; however, the public information officer serving at the family assistance center was inexperienced and overwhelmed by the event, and subsequently unable to adequately field the questions being thrown at him. Help from the state did arrive later, yet repairing the damage caused by the lack of information, and at times, misinformation, was impossible. Since there was no adequately staffed formal public information center, the ability to maintain a steady stream of updates, control rumors, and communicate messages to all of the families simultaneously was seriously hindered.

A variety of formal and informal methods were used to assist surviving victims and families of deceased victims. There were University-based liaisons, individuals who were assigned two or more families to provide direct support for victim survivors. They worked out the details of transportation, benefits from federal and state victim's

compensation funds, coordination with the Red Cross, travel arrangements for out-of-country relatives, and arranged participation in commencement activities where deceased students received posthumous degrees. The liaisons worked tirelessly as the weeks following the tragedy stretched on.

The university established a 24-hour call center where volunteers from the university and staff from the Virginia Department of Emergency Management responded to the abundance of calls coming into the school.

Virginia Tech's Cook Counseling Center led efforts to provide additional counseling resources and expanded psychological assistance to students and others on campus by extending their hours of operation and focusing special attention on those individuals who lived at the West Ambler Johnston dormitory, surviving students who were in Norris Hall at the time of the incident, roommates of deceased students, classmates and faculty in the other classes in which the victims were enrolled, and classmates and faculty in the various extra-curricular groups with which the victims were associated.

The immediate outpouring of media attention was almost too much for many to stomach. Every network and cable news channel marketed the massacre with unique graphics. During "Anderson Cooper 360," for instance, CNN's animated "MASSACRE AT VIRGINIA TECH" logo "throbbed and twirled with all the subtlety of an 'American Idol' bumper." The word "MASSACRE" was in a stark typewriter font in white against a blood-red background, with the words "AT VIRGINIA TECH" in black typewriter type below. "A gaudy, twitchy animation effect caused the 'MASSACRE' type to briefly explode out of its red box, as did the 'VIRGINIA TECH' type a moment later"

(Dumenco, 2007). In the background of the logo was a gun sight's crosshairs in white against a blood-red background. The nation was glued to their television screens, and bombarded with various similar logos. The imagery was powerful, and united a nation in shock and mourning.

The crisis at Virginia Tech certainly qualifies to be what Birkland would call a “focusing event,” as it was a sudden, relatively rare, harmful event concentrated on a definable community of interest that was made known to policy makers and the public virtually simultaneously. The massacre at Virginia Tech was unpredictable and unplanned, despite the various warning signs that we recognize in hindsight. The tragedy affected the entire nation, especially those with connections to Universities—parents, students, teachers, and their communities, and the public, the authorities, and the media were all made aware of the event within a very small time-frame.

Birkland notes that although many times a crisis can be devastating, it can also bring about effective change in society. Public policy is often spearheaded by a dramatic news event because the media's coverage creates an urgency to correct the problem at hand. The media onslaught stemming from the Virginia Tech tragedy forcibly craned policy-makers' necks toward the various issues surrounding this deadly school-shooting, and made clear how urgent the need was to prevent or better prepare for a tragedy of this degree.

Like Columbine, Birkland would likely classify the Virginia Tech massacre as a “new” focusing event because it was the largest U.S. school mass-murder to date. No one could have expected a tragedy of this magnitude to take place on a college campus. Previous instances had faded from memory, and many University authorities never

considered Columbine's tragedy to strongly influence a higher education community, and all university officials across the country simultaneously took a gigantic sigh of relief and thought, "Thank God it didn't happen here."

Two days after the tragedy, local police announced that NBC news in New York received by mail a package containing images of Cho holding weapons, his writings, and his video recordings. NBC immediately submitted this information to the FBI, and chose to air pieces of the video clips and photos, as they considered Cho's video newsworthy "by any conceivable standard," according to anchor Brian Williams (Tyndall, 2007). Audiences were shocked by the harrowing images that were subsequently broadcast over cable news channels, where it was "practically unavoidable for hours," according to ABC's Dean Reynolds.

### **Euphoric Enthusiasm**

Although we are only eight months into what Downs would call the "euphoric enthusiasm" period, significant progress is being made and important conversations are taking place.

Three days after the attack, Virginia Tech announced that all students who were killed in Cho's rampage would be granted posthumous degrees in the fields in which they were studying. These degrees were subsequently awarded to the families at the regular commencement exercises, at which the Cook Counseling Center provided fifty mental-health professionals, recognizing that the commencement would be a particularly difficult time for many in the community.

On April 19, Virginia Governor Kaine selected an independent Virginia Tech Review Panel to detail the shootings of April 16, 2007, and on April 20 declared a statewide day of mourning. University President Steger, Governor Kaine and Attorney General McDonnell visited injured students in area hospitals to reassure them of the university's and Commonwealth's utmost concern with their recovery.

Over the next several weeks, the review panel members and staff held at least thirty meetings with families of the murdered victims and with injured student and their parents in an effort to accumulate information to examine the facts surrounding April 16. According to the Virginia Tech Review Panel (2007), family members of homicide victims of mass fatalities tend to view their experiences and the impact of the crime from three different perspectives. The first concern they experience is the problems associated with thinking of the victims as one whole unit. Frequently, the victims become categorized as a group rather than individuals, and the particular needs of each victim are overlooked as the public perceives them as a unit rather than as individuals with distinct circumstances. Victim survivors look for resources that can adequately respond to their needs and answer their own unique questions and concerns.

The second perspective from which victim survivors tend to view their experiences and the impact of the crime is the fact that death notifications have long-term impact on victims. Survivors generally remember the time, place and manner in which they first learned of the death of their loved ones. Third, victim survivors are looking for justice. They look to the criminal-justice system to hold the murderer accountable for the crime. In this instance, by ending his life, Cho denied the criminal justice system and its participants the ability to achieve the justice that comes from a conviction and sentencing.

Several grievances were shared widely among victims' families. First, they were concerned with the facts and details of the first responder and the university response to the first shooting, including the decision, process, timing, and wording of the first alert. Second, they wanted to know what the assumptions regarding the relationship between the first two victims were, why they were made, and if these assumptions affected the nature and timeliness of the subsequent first alert. Third, the families demanded to know the facts and details of the first responder and university response when the shooting at Norris Hall began. Fourth, the families wondered why Cho was still living in the form and allowed to continue as a student in good standing with so many red flags flying about Cho over a long period of time. They questioned why the dots were not connected during the pre-crisis period.

Fifth, the families wanted to know why there was no central point of contact or specific instructions for families of the victims at the Inn at Virginia Tech. Sixth, they were concerned with the delayed identification and release of the remains. Seventh, they were concerned with the mismanagement of the media and the difficulty they experienced finding an authoritative source of information. Finally, the victim survivors were concerned with the extent Virginia Tech's changes to policy and procedures about warnings after the massacre (Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007).

School security was clearly at the forefront of many concerned parents, students and administrators' minds in the wake of the tragedy. A key element in the security of Virginia Tech is its police department, considered among the leading campus police departments in the state. While many campuses employ security guards, the Virginia Tech Police Department is an accredited police force, with officers who are trained as a

full-fledged police department with an emergency response team, similar to a SWAT team. The mission statement of the Virginia Tech campus police is found in the university's Emergency Response plan, and reads: "The primary purpose of the VTPD is to support the academics through maintenance of a peaceful and orderly community and through provision of needed general and emergency services."

Certain campus security measures were in place prior to the events of April 16, 2007. The residence halls on campus require placing a student or staff keycard in an electronic card reader in order to enter between 10 p.m and 10 a.m., and a student access card is valid only for his or her own dormitory and for the mailbox area of another dormitory if one's assigned mailbox is located there. Most school buildings, however, are considered public spaces and are open 24 hours, and most classrooms have no locks. There were no guards at campus buildings or cameras at the entrances or in hallways of any buildings. Some buildings were equipped with loudspeaker systems intended primarily for use of the fire department in an emergency, a concept that gained popularity in other university settings after the attack.

Many different levels of campus security existed at colleges and universities across the nation on April 16, 2007, but the level of security at Virginia Tech was quite typical of many campuses across the country in rural areas with low crime rates. Different institutions provide more or less security, often based on their locations, size, complexity, and resources. April 16 became the 9/11 for colleges and universities, and in response many have reviewed their security plans, accelerating the installation of security systems already planned or in progress.

If the events that unfolded on April 16 had not occurred, it is doubtful that security issues would be on the minds of parents and students more than at other universities, where the most serious crimes tend to be rapes, assaults, and dangerous activity related to alcohol or drug abuse by the students. Since that fateful day, however, authorities at colleges and universities across the country have been scrambling to redefine their notion of what it means to be safe on campus by devising plans that attempt to prevent or better prepare themselves for another “Virginia Tech.”

Media coverage of the event was rampant, and many factors that Birkland outlines contributed to this phenomenon. Birkland asserts that during the short-term following the focusing event, the news media immediately responds to the crisis, covering the details of the incident, giving way to a longer-term reaction by the policy-makers to the political factors associated with the event. The long-term reaction depends upon the rarity and scope of the event, the amount of news coverage, the extent to which attitudes of the important members of society influence attention to the problem, and the extent to which group mobilization influences attention to the problem.

Greater levels of media attention are directly associated with greater levels of institutional attention to the public problem, and the Virginia Tech crisis fits into all three of the elements of focusing events most likely to garner significant media attention that Birkland outlines. Firstly, the more people affected by the event, the more media attention the event will receive. The Virginia Tech Review Panel Report (2007) cites ten groups of people directly affected by the tragedy.

They first cite family members of the murdered victims, often considered “co-victims” due to the tremendous impact of the crimes on their lives. Second, they named

physically and emotionally wounded victims from Norris Hall and their family members who, while grateful that they or their loved ones were spared death, faced injuries that may have a profound effect upon them for their lifetime. Third cited were witnesses and those within a physical proximity to the event and their family members. Fourth were law personnel who faced life-threatening conditions and were the first to respond to Norris Hall and among the first to respond to West Ambler Johnston dormitory. These officers encountered a scene few officers will ever see, and their families surely felt the complicated effects of the events. Fifth were emergency medical responders who treated and transported the injured, and their families who also share in the complexity of reactions experienced by the emergency medical responders.

The sixth group listed was everyone from Virginia Tech who was part of the immediate response to the two shooting incidents and the aftermath that followed. Seventh listed were medical health professionals, and eighth were funeral home and hospital personnel. Ninth listed were volunteers and employees from surrounding jurisdictions and state agencies who worked diligently to provide support in the first hours and days. Finally, the last group listed included the Virginia Tech campus population of students, faculty, staff and their families. These ten groups were clearly affected by the tragedy of April 16, 2007, but the massacre's wake did not stop there. Communities across the nation were also left reeling and searching for answers to difficult questions.

Generally, highly populated areas also tend to have an abundance of media reporters. Blacksburg, Virginia was not exactly "easily accessible" on the morning of April 16, 2007. Nasty weather up and down the east coast left networks scrambling to

shift personnel and equipment to the scene (Broadcasting & Cable, 2007). With the weather-induced closure of New Jersey's Teterboro Airport, a regular departure point for media charters, networks were rushing for alternatives. Meanwhile, various amateur video tapes were being recorded from students and bystanders on the scene—recordings upon which the news media relied heavily.

Birkland's second factor determining the amount of media coverage is the visibility and tangibility of the amount of harm done by the event. The more visible and tangible the event, the more media attention it is likely to garner. The chaos on the University's campus was extremely visible as people fled Norris Hall and scrambled around the scene. Emotions went wild, as traumatized bystanders recounted their stories, and the media had a field day.

Birkland's third factor determining the potential extent of media coverage is the rarity or novelty of the focusing event. The massacre at Virginia Tech was, fortunately, an example of an extremely rare event. It was the most deadly school-shooting in the history of the United States.

Groups that want to bring about effective policy change must exploit the focusing event to keep the issue fresh and high on the agenda, according to Birkland (1997), and in the euphoric enthusiasm stage of Downs' issue-attention cycle, marginalized voices receive greater attention as focus is shifted upon the issue at hand. It is during this time that policy-makers can shape society beneficially in an effort to fix the problem that caused the focusing event.

National attention focused on the Blacksburg tragedy, and President George W. Bush charged the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of

Education, and the Department of Justice to travel to communities across the United States to meet with a wide range of leaders on the broader issues raised by the tragedy. Secretary Leavitt, Secretary Spellings and Attorney General Gonzales met with leaders in a dozen states between April 26, and May 4, 2007. They reported back their findings, on June 13, 2007 in their “Report to the President: On Issues Raised by the Virginia Tech Tragedy,” which included recommendations for how the Federal government could help avoid such tragedies in the future.

The meetings served to underscore that universal, “one-size-fits-all” solutions are unlikely to be helpful. Appropriate responses to the issues must be tailored to fit a wide range of circumstances, depending on whether the context is a college or university, elementary or secondary school, whether the area is urban or rural, a single building, an expansive campus, etc.

In each state the mental health experts asserted that most people who are violent do not have a mental illness and most people who have a mental illness are not violent. State and local leaders pointed out that the issues raised reside primarily with states and localities, yet the committee concluded that there are several things the federal government can and should do to help and identified steps that the three federal agencies can take to ensure federal law and progress supports state and local efforts to deal with the complex issues raised by the tragedy (Report to the President, 2007).

The report’s key findings include five significant assertions: critical information sharing faces substantial obstacles, accurate and complete information on individuals prohibited from possessing firearms is essential to keep guns out of the wrong hands, improved awareness and communication are key to prevention, it is critical to get people

with mental illness the services they need, and where we know what to do, we have to be better at doing it.

First: critical information sharing faces substantial obstacles. Education officials, healthcare providers, law enforcement personnel, and others are not fully informed about when they can share critical information on persons who are likely to be a danger to themselves or others, and the Report to the President asserts that the resulting confusion may chill legitimate information sharing (Report to the President, 2007). Privacy laws and laws designed to protect individuals from discrimination on the basis of mental illness seemed to have a chilling effect on the amount of information disclosed about potential dangers. In a number of discussions, participants reported circumstances in which they incorrectly believed that they were subject to liability or foreclosed from sharing information under federal law.

Also of great importance is the ability to recognize when individuals pose a real threat to themselves or others, and when intervention to pre-empt the threat is appropriate (Report to the President, 2007). The committee in charge of the Report to the President, certainly in the euphoric enthusiasm stage, was sure that effective change could be made and made recommendations on state and local levels as well as the federal level.

As far as state and local legislatures are concerned, the committee recommended an “increase in information sharing and collaboration among state and local communities, educators, mental health officials, and law enforcement to better provide care and detect, intervene, and respond to potential incidents of violence in schools and other venues.” Next, they recommended the provision of accurate information to “ensure that family members, educational administrators, mental health providers, and other appropriate

persons understand when and how they are legally entitled to share and receive information about mental illness, and appropriately do so, particularly where college and school-age children and youth are involved, for the protection and well-being of the student and the community.” Finally, the committee suggested that along with reviewing federal laws that may apply, state and local authorities should “clarify and promote a wider understanding about how state law limits or allows the sharing of information about individuals who may pose a danger to themselves or others, and examine state law to determine if legislative or regulatory changes are needed to achieve the appropriate balance of privacy and security” (Report to the President, 2007).

The committee recommended that the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education should develop additional guidance that clarifies how information can be shared legally under federal law and disseminate it widely to the mental health, education and law enforcement communities, that the Department of Education should ensure that parents and school officials understand how and when post-secondary institutions can share information on college students with parents and finally, that they should examine the existing law and make sure the interests of safety, privacy and treatment are balanced. Second, the committee recommended that the Department of Education should ensure that its “emergency management grantees and state and local communities receiving training have clear guidance on the sharing of information as it relates to educational records and federal law.”

The committee advised federal agencies to continue to work together, alongside states and appropriate partners, to “improve, expand, coordinate and disseminate information and best practices in behavioral analysis, threat assessments, and emergency

preparedness for colleges and universities.” The committee also called for the exploration of research of targeted violence in higher education institutions and the continuation of sharing existing threat assessment methodology with interested institutions by the Department of Education in collaboration with the U.S. Secret Service and the Department of Justice (Report to the President, 2007).

The committee’s second key finding was that accurate and complete information on individuals prohibited from possessing firearms is essential to keep guns out of the wrong hands. Current state laws and practices do not uniformly ensure that information on persons restricted from possessing firearms is appropriately captured and available to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (Report to the President, 2007, p. 2). Many participants in the Report to the President suggested the need to evaluate the existing approach in their state to sharing mental health information and how their state regulates access to firearms by persons with mental illness who are at risk of injury to themselves or others.

On the state and local levels, the committee recommended the prioritization and examination of “legal and financial barriers to submitting all relevant disqualifying information to the NICS (the National Instant Criminal Background Check System), and other crucial inter-agency information sharing systems to prevent individuals who are prohibited from possessing firearms by federal or state law from acquiring firearms from federally licensed firearms dealers” (Report to the President, 2007, p. 10).

On the federal level, the committee advised the U.S. Department of Justice to “reiterate the scope and requirements of federal firearms laws, including guidance on the federal firearms prohibitions in the Gun Control Act of 1968 and how to provide

information to the NICS on persons whose receipt of a firearm would violate state or federal law.” They also recommended that the U.S. Department of Justice continue to “encourage state and federal agencies to provide all appropriate information to the NICS so that required background checks are thorough and complete.” Finally, they urged the U.S. Department of Justice to work with states to provide appropriate guidance on policies and procedures that would ensure that relevant and complete information is available for background checks (Report to the President, 2007, p. 11).

The third key finding of the committee was the assertion that improved awareness and communication are key to prevention. It is important that parents, students, and teachers learn to recognize warning signs and encourage those who need help to seek it, so that people receive the care they need and that our communities are safe (Report to the President, 2007, p. 2). The participants in the committee’s meetings discussed ways to address school cultures, including tacit “codes of silence,” that impede the identification of and response to those in crisis.

On the state and local level, the committee suggested the development of cultures within schools and institutions of higher education that promote safety, trust, respect and open communication, the creation of environments conducive to seeking help, and the development of culturally appropriate messages to de-stigmatize mental illness and mental health treatment. They also advocated the education and training of parents, teachers, and students to recognize warning signs and known indicators of violence and mental illness and to alert those who can provide safety and treatment. Finally, they recommended the establishment of a mechanism to report and respond to reported threats of violence, and stressed the importance of creating wide publicity for this mechanism.

On the federal level, the committee advised the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to “work through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s 10 Academic Centers of Excellence on Youth Violence Prevention and to collaborate with the U.S. Department of Education to identify opportunities to expand the CDC’s ‘Choose Respect’ initiative so that it includes efforts to develop healthy school climates and prevent violence in schools.” They also suggested that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services include a focus on college students in its mental health public education campaign to “encourage young people to support their friends who are experiencing mental health problems.” Finally, they urged the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice to continue to “work together and with the states and local communities to improve and expand their collaboration on their ‘Safe Schools/Healthy Students’ program” (Report to the President, 2007, p. 13).

The committee’s fourth key finding was that it is critical to get people with mental illness the services they need. Meeting the challenge of adequate and appropriate community integration of people with mental illness requires effective coordination of community service providers who are sensitive to the interests of safety, privacy, and provision of care (Report to the President, 2007, p. 2).

On the state and local levels, the committee suggested the evaluation of state and local community mental health systems to ensure their adequacy in providing a full array and continuum of services, including mental health services for students, and the integration of mental health screening, treatment and referral with primary health care. They also advocated the review of emergency services and commitment laws to ensure the standards are clear, appropriate, and strike the proper balance among liberty and

safety for the individual and the community. Finally, they advised that where a legal ruling mandates a course of treatment, to make sure that systems are in place to ensure a thorough follow-up (Report to the President, 2007, p. 15).

At the federal level, the committee urged the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to assemble the directors of state and mental health, substance abuse, and Medicaid agencies and constituent organizations to explore ways to expand and better coordinate delivery of evidence-based practices and community-based care to adults and children with mental and substance abuse disorders. They suggested that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should examine current strategies for implementing innovative technologies in the mental health field to enhance service capacity, through such means as telemedicine, electronic health records, health information technology, and electronic decision support tools in healthcare. Lastly, they recommended that the interagency Federal Executive Steering Committee on Mental Health led by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should promote federal agency collaboration to support innovations in mental health services and supports for school aged children and young adults in primary care and specialty mental health setting using evidence-based programs and innovative technologies (Report to the President, 2007, p. 15).

The committee's fifth key finding was that "where we know what to do, we have to be better at doing it." For the many states and communities that have already adopted programs, including emergency preparedness and violence prevention plans, to address school and community violence, the challenge is fully implementing these programs through practice and effective communication (Report to the President, 2007).

Many states and schools, including institutions of higher education, have developed protocols and strategies for preventing and responding to emergencies as a product of previous experience with natural disasters and school violence, “as well as a more general emergency preparedness in a post-September 11 world” (Report to the President, 2007, p. 16). According to the Report to the President (2007), the U.S. Department of Education has created guidance on emergency management planning for the K-12 school community, but institutions of higher education face unique challenges, such as the age of the students (most being adults), the size of the student body, and the physical layout of campuses. Thus, the smaller-scale K-12 response plans may not make sense when extended to institutions of higher education.

Even when a plan does exist, it is easier said than done to actually follow the plan. Everyone in the relevant community needs to be aware of the plan, and ready to follow it. In the case of institutions of higher education, the need for continuous and ongoing education of students is of utmost concern, due to the fact that the student body is constantly changing. These institutions are more and more reaching out to advancements in technology to reach their constituents effectively. However, as is the case with most “new technology,” challenges and problems arise in establishing and maintaining the systems.

The Report to the President (2007) asserts that campus police are often the first responders to campus violence, however some campus law enforcement teams are understaffed and lack resources for training, which leaves them “less than ideally prepared for crisis incidents on campus” (p. 17). The treatment of victims and others impacted by the event must also be part of an institution’s crisis protocol, including

longer-term follow up and mental health support to reduce the residual impact of tragic situations.

On the state and local levels, the committee recommended the integration of comprehensive, “all-hazards” emergency management planning for schools into overall local and state emergency planning, the institution of regular practice of emergency management response plans and their revision as issues arise and circumstances change. They also advocated the communication of emergency management plans to all school officials, school service workers, parents, students, and first responders. They stressed the importance of the development of a clear communication plan and tools to communicate rapidly with students and parents to alert them when an emergency occurs, and the utilization of technology to improve notification, communication, and security systems. They suggested that state and local authorities ensure the actual and perceived effectiveness of campus law enforcement through enhanced professionalism of campus police forces and joint training with federal, state and local law enforcement. Finally, they urged the state and local authorities to be prepared to provide both immediate and longer-term mental health support following the crisis event, and evaluate events and the response to them in order to gather lessons learned and implement corrective measures (Report to the President, p. 17-18).

On the federal level, the committee advised the U.S. Department of Education to review its information regarding emergency management planning to ensure it addresses the needs of institutions of higher education and then disseminate it widely. They recommended that the U.S. Departments of Education, Homeland Security, and Justice collaborate and be proactive in helping state, local, and campus law enforcement receive

desired training and making them aware of federal resources on behavioral analysis, active shooter training, and other research and analysis relevant to preparedness and response. The committee suggested that the U.S. Departments of Homeland Security and Justice, jointly and separately, and in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education, consider allowing existing grant programs to be used to facilitate joint training exercises for state, local and campus law enforcement. Finally, the committee urged the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Homeland Security to examine their community preparedness grants to state and local communities, which include an emphasis on early detection of hazards through information sharing, to clarify the grants that are available for the prevention of and preparedness for violence in schools, offices and public places.

These changes have not yet been implemented, and policy-makers must act quickly to assure that effective changes will be made before public interest declines and another crisis leaps into prominence.

### **The Realization of the Cost of Significant Progress and the Gradual Decline in Public Interest**

Throughout the remainder of 2007 and now into 2008, universities across the country are attempting to prepare themselves for a similar crisis situation. Along with questions about underage drinking, unique facilities, and academic rigor, parents demand responses about the genuine safety of the students at institutions. These parents are the ones who are making the financial decision about where their child goes to college, and their questions must be met with sufficient answers. For the institution of higher education to survive financially, they must take certain precautions that will set the minds

of the parents at ease, and unfortunately, these protective measures do not come inexpensively or easily.

We are less than a year out of the April 16, 2007 massacre, and the public's interest has clearly not waned yet, as universities are still in the process of implementing new procedures and protocols. We can assume, however, that many of the lofty ideas put forth by various authorities will not come into fruition due to either sheer cost, decline in interest, or the emerging prominence of a newer problem according to Downs' issue attention cycle pattern as evidenced in the Columbine tragedy.

## Chapter IV: Lessons Learned

Eight years after the Columbine tragedy and less than one year after the massacre at Virginia Tech, it appears that little effective change has taken place, as evidenced by the relative frequency and normalcy of these types of tragic violent eruptions at schools nationwide. Between the events of April 20, 1999 and April 16, 2007 there were 21 separate fatal school shootings in New Mexico, Michigan, Georgia, Florida, California, Indiana, Texas, Virginia, Arizona, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Tennessee, Vermont, North Carolina, West Virginia, Colorado, Wisconsin, and Washington in elementary, middle, and high schools, undergraduate institutions, and graduate schools in urban, rural and suburban areas. (Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007)

This is not to say that studies are not currently being conducted, and schools are not implementing plans, because they clearly are; but it may be prudent to consider these school crises in the same manner as we contemplate natural disasters. We can say with relative certainty that they will occur with some frequency, but their time, place and scope cannot be predicted accurately. Warning signs and red flags seem to be crystal-clear after a tragedy, and although it may be difficult to prevent such an occurrence, schools and communities can take action by constructing emergency management plans to mitigate the damage associated with one of these violent rampages.

The United States Department of Education through the Emergency Response and Crisis Management Technical Assistance Center issued a series entitled, “Lessons Learned From School Crises and Emergencies” in 2007, in which they stressed the importance of creating emergency management plans. Key components of these plans

include: “establishing and institutionalizing an Incident Command System, providing continual training to staff members and volunteers, collaborating with community partners to develop policies and protocols, and conducting routine exercises and drills” (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

The Department of Education outlines steps for developing a school emergency management plan. First, the development of crisis response teams is key. A school district crisis response team should be responsible for: “initiating, building, and maintaining relationships with community partners, conducting safety and security needs assessments, establishing and updating the emergency management plan, assisting in the establishment of individual school-based crisis response teams to include community partners and school-based personnel such as facilities managers, cafeteria managers, nurses, disability specialists, counselors, teachers and administrators, and developing training activities and conducting emergency exercises to support and improve the plan” (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

The Department urges schools and school-districts to coordinate their emergency management activities, plans, and resources with federal, state and local agencies to ensure alignment with and compliance to certain policies, initiatives and programs. It also recommends that crisis response teams should conduct assessments to identify and prioritize risks and hazards to the school community, appraise the conditions of school buildings on campuses, assess the social and emotional culture at the school, identify gaps in security policies and procedures, identify and obtain community and staff resources and identify specific concerns for individuals with disabilities and special needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Communication plans are important to establish. At a minimum, according to the Department of Education, schools and school district emergency plans should create policies and plans for communicating emergency information with the public, develop procedures for maintaining communication among administrators, staff, students, community partners, parents and the media, establish alternative communication devices and methods not connected to the main power source, and identify a public information officer who will serve as the primary spokesperson to the media and the public during a crisis.

Emergency preparedness plans should also include a student-parent reunification plan, have a place for emergency kits and supplies, provide training to faculty and staff, conduct functional emergency exercises, and most importantly publish and disseminate the plan to appropriate stakeholders using common language, clear instructions and useful formats such as posters, flip-charts and formal announcements, providing information about the plan in multiple languages as needed, and posting critical procedures prominently throughout the school in classrooms, offices, faculty meeting rooms, cafeterias, gymnasiums and auditoriums for students, staff and visitors (U.S. Department of Education 2(1), 2007).

Schools across the country are still scrambling to create the most effective crisis management plans possible. Virginia Tech solidified in their minds that they needed to take action, and not just stand around dumbfounded at the great tragedy. School authorities realized that they had to invest in emergency preparedness technologies and training to satisfy the demand of parents that their children be as safe as possible on campus. For the purposes of this analysis, we will examine the response tactics

employed by Boston College, a private university in suburban Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts.

In the months following the Virginia Tech tragedy, Boston College hired an outside agency to evaluate the current emergency response plans and offer suggestions on how to improve them. The role of the independent agency review is crucial because many times it is hard for those so immersed in a culture to notice what might be obvious problems to an outsider. The impartial agency provides a set of “fresh eyes” and offers a new perspective on campus security.

Boston College’s Director of Public Affairs, Jack Dunn, has put together a team of people striving to create a working emergency preparedness plan. According to Dunn, “Boston College has embarked on a comprehensive emergency preparedness program in the wake of the Virginia Tech tragedy that its organizers hope will enable administrators to respond quickly and effectively in the event of an emergency situation” (Dunn, 2007). An Emergency Response Team was created, headed by the Executive Vice President Patrick Keating. The Team includes representatives from the Boston College Police Department, the departments of Residential Life, Public Affairs, Facilities Management, Student Services, and Information Technology.

The team worked tirelessly throughout the summer vacation to create an emergency preparedness website, add mass voicemail, e-mail and text-messaging capabilities and establish a 1-800 emergency hotline to help promote the safety of students, faculty and staff (Dunn, 2007). The emergency preparedness website, <http://www.bc.edu/prepared>, includes information for students, parents, faculty and staff detailing the Boston College operating status, i.e. open, closed, emergency, the Homeland

Security Threat Advisory Level, what happens when an incident occurs, communication protocols during an emergency, services available for students, ways to prepare yourself, special information for students with disabilities and students who live off-campus, and provides important phone numbers and links to additional internal and external websites. The site serves as the primary source of news and information for the Boston College community in the event of an emergency.

When creating an emergency preparedness plan, it is crucial that schools look to how their students receive and seek out their information. Although land line phone outlets are provided in most rooms, a very small population of students actually connects a phone to their outlet. Students prefer to use their personal cell phones to make calls, and rely on the internet and e-mail for much of their information. Students have a world of information at their fingertips at all times and it is now absurd for most to consider having to sit in one spot to talk on a phone, receive messages and connect with friends and the latest news. For an emergency plan to revolve around old, dying technology would not be effective. Crisis management teams must be constantly up to date with the latest ways of disseminating crucial information.

Boston College contracted with national vendor 3N/Qwest to provide the latest technology in instant text-messaging and blast voicemail and e-mail notification, enabling the University to sent messages with vital information via cell-phone, land phone and e-mail in the event of an emergency. The text messages include those for weather closings and delays, hazardous material spills, school shootings, bomb threats, street closures and fires.

Boston College Vice President Keating notes that, “what Virginia Tech proved was that you really need to be able to communicate instantaneously with students” (Lyons, 2007). The University has been collecting phone numbers from all students, faculty and staff, and according to Vice President Keating, as of Fall 2007, 11,000 of Boston College’s 14,500 students had already provided their cell phone numbers to avail themselves of emergency notification technology. The school has not yet, however, tested the technology as promised, as there has been no “EMERGENCY: THIS IS A TEST” mass text, and on a day when the school experienced a weather delay, no appropriate text message was sent.

The problem of overcrowded phone lines has been documented in the past, as many parties seeking information flood the lines with calls at the exact same time. A normal local line is not sufficient to withstand a great influx of simultaneous calls. Cell phones are not immune either. When a huge number of cell phones are being used at the same time, the provider’s service can shut down, making communication impossible. The Emergency Response Team at Boston College contracted with Verizon Business to create a 1-800 emergency hotline to provide individuals on and off campus with a means of obtaining updated information in the event that Boston College land and cell phone lines become overwhelmed (Dunn, 2007). This line can withstand a great influx of phone calls with no problem.

The Emergency Response Team at Boston College is evaluating a siren/public address notification system to see if it would be an effective emergency communications tool for the Boston College campus. At the University of Florida, this type of system is

already in place for use in hurricane warning efforts. Boston College needs to consider the particular needs of its campus and if a siren system is appropriate.

Boston College is currently in the process of hiring a full-time director of emergency management, who would be in charge of the emergency response effort. In addition, the University is also creating an on-campus Emergency Operations Center to provide a designated location for emergency operations. These will be effective tools in managing crisis situations because there will be an obvious location to look to for information and leadership instead of scrambling for any kind authority figure one can find. According to Dunn, a constant stream of communication is what makes people feel safe, and Boston College's efforts have been made with this in mind.

It is vital for emergency management teams to be in a constant state of self-evaluation. The rapid speed of changing technology today affects both a school's potential available crisis management tactics and resources, and those tactics and resources available to the potential school shooter/terrorist. A crisis management team needs to concede that although their plan might be considered best for right now, it may be obsolete in a year, a month, or even a week from now. Authorities must be properly trained, and this training must happen continuously due to the ever-changing nature of a school campus.

Boston College Vice President Keating stands confident in his institution's plan. "At the recommendation of our security consultants, our Emergency Response Team continues to meet regularly to assess risks, conduct training exercises and to prepare ourselves for any unforeseen circumstances," says Keating. "This team, coupled with BC's 53 highly trained, professional police officers, nearly all of whom have completed

crisis intervention and Homeland Security Training and annual hazardous materials and firearms training, will help us to respond to any emergency situation we may face. My hope is we will never have to activate our Emergency Response Team, but if we do, we have well trained professionals who are ready to respond as needed,” (Dunn, 2007) although he concedes that a tragedy like the one at Virginia Tech is something that you can never feel fully prepared for (Lyons, 2007).

One issue surrounding the Virginia Tech tragedy was the lapse in mental health services, which the Virginia Tech Review Panel asserted could have done more to help Seung Hui Cho. Executive Vice President Keating explains that Boston College has a behavioral evaluation team that meets regularly and has the ability to intervene to help students or faculty members that have raised concerns and he hopes that the University is able to be “proactive in interceding in cases where a student might be in trouble” (Lyons, 2007). University Director of Public Affairs, Jack Dunn, confirms that “in an odd case, the University reserves the right to take action on a student that is deemed in need of medical attention,” the right to require students to actually leave campus and get help, which he asserts did not happen at Virginia Tech (Lyons, 2007).

An article entitled, “In Light of Virginia Tech, Counseling Unchanged,” was written in *The Heights*, the Boston College student newspaper, in January, 2008, criticizing Boston College’s University Counseling Services’ failure to make changes to expand their services in light of the Virginia Tech tragedy and the Virginia Tech Review Panel’s recommendations. Dr. Thomas McGuinness, Boston College’s University Counseling Services director states, “we didn’t add anything [since the incident at

Virginia Tech], there were already procedures in place that addressed the issues” (Belsha, 2008).

At Virginia Tech, the director of the Cook Counseling Center, Dr. Christopher Flynn, has taken many of his committee’s suggestions to heart and has enacted several of them by adding the recommended case managers, hiring additional counselors and psychiatrists, and extending support services for troubled students as the number of students seeking help increased by approximately 35% in the past year, and is likely to increase still (Belsha, 2008).

Flynn spent a day with Boston College’s University Counseling Services staff in October 2007, looking at the aftermath of the tragedy at Virginia Tech and implications for counseling services and universities. All full-time students at Boston College are eligible to use the counseling services at no cost, and frequently consult with the University Counseling Services for a wide range of problems and concerns including difficulties in adjustment, relationship problems, depression, eating disorders, anxiety, and substance abuse (Belsha, 2008).

Dr. McGuinness states that the University sees more students each year, “but there hasn’t been a surge of any kind. There has been a steady increase in students that visit and the complexity of their problems, but that is consistent with the national standards.” The reasons for the increase include better knowledge of mental disorders and the way in which they are diagnosed, and the decrease in the stigma associated with seeking help, and the increased stress in the environment for young adults, especially among competitive students such as those at Boston College (Belsha, 2008).

Along with general appointments and consultations, the University Counseling Services provides for psychological emergencies with their “Psychologist-on-Call” service available 24 hours a day 365 days a year. This service fields around 400 emergency calls annually from parents, students, faculty and resident assistants. Most students who call for a consultation with the University Counseling Services are seen for short-term counseling, but unlike at other universities, there is no limit at Boston College as to how many times a student may be seen (Belsha, 2008).

Boston College has not yet implemented, and has no set plan to implement, an online screening module like the one Virginia Tech recently employed. Students can use this module freely and anonymously to screen themselves for depression, alcohol use, eating disorders, and anxiety as a preliminary test to find out whether consultation with a professional might be helpful. Although Boston College may have not changed their counseling service protocol in the wake of the crisis at Virginia Tech, they certainly have examined and evaluated their procedures and have come to the conclusion that they are the best possible options for the University at this time.

The utilization of Downs’ issue-attention cycle framework to analyze the events surrounding the tragedies at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech makes it clear that after a crisis situation leaps into prominence, communities rally around a common cause and attempt to enact change. Once the community realizes the significant cost of legitimate progress, public interest wanes and their attention shifts elsewhere as another problem comes to the forefront. Substantial effective change is generally unlikely unless the public’s attention is focused on achieving the common goal no matter what the cost, and this scenario does not happen very often.

Universities and other large institutions across the country continue to brainstorm and implement changes in the wake of tragedies such as those at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech. Birkland's categorization of a school shooting as a "new" focusing event may need to change as school shootings continue to arise with great frequency. Putting school-shootings in the "normal" focusing event category may be more accurate. Just like natural disasters, school shootings can be expected to happen with some type of regularity, but exactly where, when and to what extent, we cannot be sure. Authorities may have to realize that it is likely not possible to prevent every potential crisis situation, and their efforts should turn from crisis prevention to crisis mitigation and response plans must continue to be refined.

## Chapter V: The Role of the Media

In the wake of tragedies like the ones at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech, while thousands mourn the deaths of loved ones, there is one immense power cashing in on the catastrophe. That force is the media. In a quest for the highest ratings, newspaper and magazine sales, and hits on websites, many media outlets scramble to cover any and all aspects of a school-shooting that they can get their hands and cameras on, often without regard to the respect and sensitivity that ought to accompany such issues.

No one network wants to miss out on what a competitor might be covering, and each outlet strives to capture the latest breaking details, no matter how delicate the information may be. In their rush to cover the story, many news organizations do not contact the appropriate authorities, and even if they do attempt to reach out to them, they often find that it is difficult to reach the proper authorities in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, and subsequently run whatever story they can get their hands on. *Seattle Times* television columnist Kay McFadden notes that “in trying to beat the pants off the competition, most seem to forget that being a news leader incurs responsibility” (Vest, 1999).

After the tragedy at Columbine, in total, ABC, CBS, and NBC aired 53 stories covering the incident during the first week following the crisis. These 53 stories constituted nearly four hours of coverage on evening newscasts. Columbine was the lead story for all 20 newscasts that week. Remarkably, on Tuesday, the first night of reporting the story, ABC, CBS, and NBC devoted seven minutes 30 seconds, eleven minutes

20 seconds, and 16 minutes, respectively. The next evening drew even more expanded coverage with ABC, CBS, and NBC committing 17 minutes ten seconds, thirteen minutes 50 seconds, and 17 min, respectively. This is an extraordinary level of coverage given the fact that evening newscasts run 30 minutes in length with only 21 minutes actually set aside for news with commercials and promotions account for the remainder of time (Maguire, Weatherby, & Mathers, 2002).

The combination of children in the crossfire, a comfortable suburban venue, vivid and memorable images and an unpredictable drama playing out in real time before local and national network cameras, created an indelible image for television (Trigoboff, 2000). The massacre prompted a new level of debate over the influence of television on such tragedies. News director for WTAE-TV Pittsburg, Bob Longo, asserts that “Littleton crystallized across the country that news directors had better prepare for something like this” (Trigoboff, 2000). President of the Radio-Television News Directors Association adds, “it was a signal to everybody that this kind of story could happen anywhere, that there were some things news people would have to decide instantaneously. It led to modifications in the way stations have covered subsequent events. Many stations have used our guidelines [sent out by RTNDA following Columbine] and have developed their own written plans” (Trigoboff, 2000).

Dangers of live television coverage were highlighted by the events of April 20, 1999. One image that was played over and over across all news stations was that of student Patrick Ireland falling out of the library window. Bob Steele, a media ethics and crisis coverage for broadcasters specialist at the Poynter Institute was concerned, not with the gruesomeness of that image, but with the danger that the gunmen could be watching

television and use that information to shoot at escaping students. Stations were careful not to reveal tactical police positions when shooting with helicopters and long lenses, but they did show escaping students, and aired cell-phone calls with students, sometimes revealing their locations within the school and potentially exposing them to additional danger (Trigoboff, 2000).

In the days and hours following the shootings, Littleton was flooded with reporters, and many students and their families were exploited by the media, using an assumption of a reciprocal relationship after inundating families with flowers, fruit baskets and “good wishes.” They hounded kids at their homes and at funerals, hoping to get an interview (Trigoboff, 2000).

Images of Klebold and Harris inside the school on April 20, 1999 clad with guns and combat boots became public after tapes from a surveillance camera were incorporated into a public safety film and shown to a crew from KRQE-TV Albuquerque, New Mexico. The crew released the images to CBS and CNN in October of 1999. In July 2006, the writings of Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were released. Hundreds of pages of hate-filled diary entries, maps and documents were released after The Denver Post sued to force their release. The Colorado Supreme Court left the decision up to the sheriff’s office, and the Harris and Klebold families did not challenge the decision (TheDenverChannel.com, 2006).

At Columbine, media coverage was, perhaps, more sensitive because of the minors involved in the shooting. Most United States daily newspapers gave the story prominent play, but ethical considerations played a role in choice of photos, story placement, and headlines. Some newspapers went for the most shocking photos, while

others avoided them. The *Chicago Sun-Times* chose not to run the Littleton, Colorado shooting on its front page, instead covering the story on pages 2, 3 and 4. According to the editor-in-chief Nigel Wade, the paper made its decision because they were “concerned that such treatment could harm or frighten vulnerable children. [They saw] a danger that publicity surrounding such attacks could be contributing to the phenomenon” (Fitzgerald, Moses & Strupp, 1999). Newspaper editors were faced with the choice of which images to use to capture the events. The Raleigh, North Carolina *News & Observer* chose to run an overhead photo of the school instead of an image of screaming children that was widely used in other newspapers.

Ohio’s *Columbus Dispatch*, on the other hand, ran a wire photo of a dead student on its front page and Denver television station KUSA broadcasted live a cell phone interview with a student hiding from the two alleged “Trenchcoat Mafia” gunmen, which received rampant criticism. The media does not seem to be very interested in a deep analysis of what drives teenagers to shoot their classmates. Instead, we have relentless coverage of the weeping friends and family members of the deceased, and a lot of talk about our violent culture that does not lead us anywhere (McKissack, 1999).

Copycat crimes are another issue that media outlets need to keep in mind. University of California’s sociology professor David Phillips contends that “you have to think of these stories as a sort of advertisement for mass murder,” and in his studies he has found that news reports—not movies or video games—are the prime media mover in begetting copycats. With hour upon hour of television coverage of the events of April 20, 1999, it appears that Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris received exactly the postmortem celebrity they desired (Vest, 1999).

This is not to say that the media should refrain from covering these types of stories altogether for fear of severe public backlash, or copycat crimes, or somehow giving the murderer some type of post-mortem satisfaction, for that would have a detrimental chilling effect, but there must be some kind of balance struck in between the quest for ratings and the refusal to cover sensitive issues in an effort to spark effective public discourse.

An unprecedented media storm erupted in Blacksburg, Virginia on Monday, April 16, 2007 as camera lenses pointed toward the panic outside of Norris Hall. Arriving media were situated in a parking lot directly across from the makeshift family assistance center at the Inn at Virginia Tech. Families seeking information at the center were forced to cross a labyrinth of cameras and microphones to reach the front desk at the inn. The impact of the media on victim survivors is enormous. In high-profile murder cases the murderer is instantaneously linked to the victims and together become household names. Some members of the press were appalled at the tactics that some of their colleagues used to gather information on campus at the family assistance center (Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007).

Competition forced networks, while attempting to balance the compassionate and the sensational, to tilt too far to the latter when it came to on-screen graphics. Words like “massacre” and “bloodbath” offset the sympathetic words of anchors and correspondents. Senior Vice President of Worldwide Newsgathering at ABC, Paul Slavin, concedes that “this story didn’t need any sensationalism, but people are always looking for that extra rating point.” By the end of the week, the networks were contemplating their exit-

strategies, and the campus was ready for them to leave. As one campus poster bluntly put it, “VT Stay Strong—Media Stay Away” (Broadcasting & Cable, 2007).

During the broadcast networks’ half-hour nightly newscasts, NBC, CBS and ABC spent 69% of their total programming on this single story. Judged by the time spent on them in a single week, the depraved exploits of the murderer, Cho, have been exceeded since 1987 only by two Gulf Wars, September 11, 2001, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the deadlocked election of 2000, NATO’s war on Yugoslavia and the flooding of New Orleans in Hurricane Katrina (Tyndall, 2007).

When the networks couldn’t find hard news on the day of the tragedy, they played up local stories, such as the Virginia woman who lived above the killer. In the absence of a political angle, the networks settled on emotional significance. They exploited Cho’s “me-against-the-world” attitude, using similar emotional appeals as they used during the crisis at Columbine High School. Anchors referred to the mentally troubled college student as a “child.” ABC’s anchor Charles Gibson stressed the difficulty that parents are faced with as they send their sons and daughters to campuses to be safe, while the campuses are open places, “open to new thoughts, open to the students, open to outsiders.” Yet Cho was no outsider and no child (Tyndall, 2007).

During the coverage of the massacre, viewers turned, as never before, to the internet. Networks flooded the web with breaking-news tickers, streaming video of press conferences and convocations, and content from viewers, such as photos of victims and message boards. MSNBC General Manager Dan Abrams notes, “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” (Broadcasting & Cable, 2007).

Along with the internet, citizen journalists played a huge role in the day's coverage, thanks in large part to CNN's procuring of cell-phone video shot by Virginia Tech graduate student Jamal Albarghouti. With all other coverage beginning after the tragedy had concluded, Albarghouti's live view offered the only scenes of the drama unfolding (Broadcasting & Cable, 2007). CNN.com's senior Vice President and Executive Producer, Mitch Gelman, asserts that "the primary way to obtain the first picture and early witness accounts were from participant observers and not traditional news organizations." CNN landed Albarghouti's pivotal clip of police officers approaching a campus building in the near distance and frightening audio of gunshots after it was submitted through their online I-Report feature. The network quickly evaluated the clip, offered Albarghouti an exclusive contract, and made a ten second piece available to affiliates and other news outlets (Broadcasting & Cable, 2007).

Cameras also turned to Virginia Tech's University President Charles W. Steger. Several hours after the last shots rang out in Norris Hall, Steger found himself at a podium answering difficult questions from Katie Couric and dozens of other reporters who wondered why he kept the campus open after two students were shot and killed early that morning in a residence hall, how the campus could be open to such violence, and what the University would do to remedy the situation. Steger's description of a tragedy of "monumental proportions" was heard and read by millions of people around the world that day.

Steger was faced with a sequence of events that no college president could possibly be fully prepared to handle, and as the event recedes in time, leaders of other colleges and universities look to Steger's performance and question the readiness of their

presidents to act like corporate executives, take visible control of the campus in crisis, manage the onslaught of cameras and microphones, and strike the right tones of both grief and confidence. Experts say that authenticity and candor are crucial when a crisis strikes a campus. That is the time, they say, to be open with students, faculty members, parents and reporters (Fain, 2007).

Public backlash to the coverage surfaced after NBC News received a multimedia manifesto/suicide note from Seng Hui Cho, which he mailed after he killed two students in the West Ambler Johnston dormitory and before his second, more extensive rampage in Norris Hall. NBC considered Cho's video newsworthy "by any conceivable standard," as anchor Brian Williams put it, and President of CBS news, Sean McManus, agreed, saying "we would have handled it the same way" (Broadcasting & Cable, 2007). NBC distributed portions of the video on Wednesday night, after superimposing their logo in the image's top left-hand corner. One airing of the video spiraled into a clip that was practically unavoidable for hours on the 24-hour cable news channels (Tyndall, 2007).

As evidenced in both the Columbine High School and Virginia Tech tragedies, the role of the media is not one to be underestimated in a time of crisis. The media can clearly help authorities disseminate information and unite community members, but it can also pose problems as they attempt to balance the sensitivity that surrounds crises like school-shootings with their duty to inform the public of breaking news. Technological developments must also be kept in mind, as demonstrated in the media's reliance on the internet, and cell-phone video enhanced citizen journalism in the wake of Virginia Tech.

It is wise for an institution to select one spokesperson to communicate with the media and disseminate information with candor, compassion and honesty. News outlets must also engage in self-reflection to judiciously choose what to air and what not to air when it comes to touchy issues, especially those involving minors.

## Chapter VI: Conclusion

After examining the tragedies at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech, through the lenses of Anthony Downs' issue-attention cycle and Thomas Birkland's focusing events approach, noting what we have learned through the crises, and analyzing the media's role in a school-shooting catastrophe, we can draw certain conclusions about the nature of school-shooting crises, and how institutions and communities respond in a cyclical pattern.

What might have been considered a "new" focusing event in the past, an event that has never happened before, or if it has, happened so long ago as to have faded from memory, school shootings may now be more appropriately considered "normal" focusing events, or those that can be expected to happen sometime, given the complexity of technology or our propensity to live and work in risky areas. Schools, unfortunately, might now be considered "risky" areas as school shootings become more and more common.

We must consider school-shootings today in the same way that we think about natural disasters. These events are bound to happen with some type of frequency, but exactly where, when and to what extent, we cannot be certain. School-shooters are not as "natural" and unpredictable as, say, a deadly hurricane, but the significant obstacles in determining which persons are "true" threats that we face today make prevention close to impossible.

According to Birkland (1997), the federal government's efforts to alleviate suffering the wake of natural disasters traditionally concentrate on disaster relief, because

these events are not preventable. Crisis management teams at schools must focus their efforts on mitigation and damage-control after-the-fact. They must create plans that focus on clear communication, reuniting of family, and restoring a school's sense of safety and security.

Birkland (1997) also notes that the challenge for policy makers who wish to raise awareness of and mitigate natural hazards is to gain the attention of potential victims and local officials before the disaster strikes. This clearly also applies to school-shooting crises. Schools need to have clear and constant communication with all of those who may be affected by a school-shooting. Information dissemination and training must be on-going due to the constantly changing nature of a school campus. Students, parents, teachers, faculty and staff must be aware of the proper protocols in the event of such a crisis in order to mitigate the damage associated with the event. Policy makers must keep in mind the constantly changing nature of technology and information retrieval on campus, and focus on providing important messages in an efficient and appropriate manner.

As we have seen, the media can both help and hurt a campus during and after a school-shooting rampage. Administrators must use the media to their advantage by selecting one authority to disseminate proper information, remain open and honest, and unite the victims of the tragedy. The media can also be used to amplify marginalized voices and get the issues at hand on the public agenda. Advancements in technology must also not be overlooked as we examine the media's role in crisis communication. As we saw at Virginia Tech, bystanders are taking the story into their own hands and recording video from their fingertips as the tragedy is breaking. At Virginia Tech,

journalists at NBC were also forced to choose what to do with the video diatribe that Cho sent to the network during his rampage. Media executives must manage this type of reporting delicately and respectfully.

Although they certainly provide a service to the community by relaying valuable information, the media can have the tendency to exploit sensitive issues in an effort to beat the ratings of their competitors. Journalists need to keep in mind the burden of responsibility they hold as news leaders. Exploiting victims of such a great tragedy may boost ratings, but at a great expense. A balance between the quest for ratings and the encouragement of effective public discourse must be made.

As we receive countless images of school violence, we must not numb ourselves to the horror and tragedy that these images illustrate. The public must use what they know to keep the issues at hand on the public agenda, develop effective crisis plans for mitigating damages, and utilize the media to help institutions better handle these disasters in the future.

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