



# When Tragedy Hits — A True Story

*This is a role-playing exercise for the whole class. Please be sure to review all of the material before introducing it to your students. Its subject — a mass shooting on a college campus — is sensitive. You may decide that it is too difficult for some students, especially younger ones or others who may have a personal connection to the tragedy.*

*We have chosen the mass shootings at Virginia Tech (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University) on April 16, 2007, because of the range of journalism and ethics issues that coverage of the event raised — from the role of technology and citizens as journalists, to where to turn for credible information, to racial identification of a suspect, to NBC's airing of the gunman's videotaped rantings, to the saturation coverage and media intrusiveness. If anything rose above the grief that day, it was the consuming desire, on the part of the university community and the nation, to know details. Where people turned for information, where information was exchanged freely and where it was impeded shaped the perceptions and emotions surrounding the deaths of 32 students and faculty, the wounding of 17 others and gunman Seung Hui Cho's rampage and suicide.*

*Although this case study is based on actual events, the characters are fictional to give students the freedom to make decisions as they would in the roles and not necessarily as events actually unfolded.*

## How to use the role-playing exercise

The activity is designed for the class as a whole. It encourages students to explore the complex interaction among media, the public, law enforcement officials and others when an important news story breaks. Its aim: To help students understand how seemingly simple decisions about coverage can take on major significance as a story unfolds. The activity will work best when your students have completed a discussion of media ethics.

Students will play the following roles:

1. A reporter for a local newspaper
2. A prominent network news director
3. A student journalist
4. The president of the university
5. A law enforcement official
6. A member of the general public

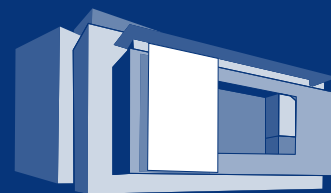
When you introduce the activity to the class, remind students that an overriding concern in a situation like this is hunger for information. News organizations want to be first with information and analysis. Readers and viewers want to know who is involved, who's been hurt — or if a tragedy like this can happen near them. Law enforcement officials want every scrap of information leading to the arrest of the perpetrator or to advance the investigation, and they want to maintain calm among the general public. Other officials want to know why the tragedy happened and how to keep it from happening again.

Thus the pressure is on for all the players. As they go through this exercise, students should be mindful of the way they have behaved in the face of other breaking stories. As they play their roles, students should understand: People *want to know* what happened; they have a *right to know* — and often have an overriding *need to know*.

## Objectives

At the conclusion of this activity, students should be able to:

- Discuss the tensions that exist among officials trying to ensure that justice is served, a public hungry for information and media outlets competing to cover a breaking news story.



## In the Newseum

The News Corp. News History Gallery features newspapers and items highlighting historic events. The Internet, TV and Radio Gallery includes the cell phone a graduate student used to capture the sound of gunfire and video outside Norris Hall.

- Analyze the difficulties inherent in news coverage of a violent event and its aftermath and explore the effects of news coverage on the families of those involved, on the suspects and on local citizens.
- Evaluate the performance of various media outlets in covering a tragic event, with a view toward improved understanding of the role and responsibilities of a free and fair press.
- Understand the broader implications of even simple decisions made on deadline.

### **Grade level**

Middle school and high school, Advanced Placement

### **Time required**

90 minutes +

### **Materials needed/Preparation**

Duplicate the student handouts (download). You should make enough copies of the page “Setting the Scene” (download) to allow each student to read the material and understand the basics of this activity. Cut apart the

role cards and place them in a hat or bowl.

### **Procedure**

Divide the class into six groups and ask one member of each group to draw a role card. Have the students, in their groups, discuss the roles they are playing. Ask students to think about the following questions as they prepare to play their roles:

- What are the motivations, needs and interests of the person we are representing and others who are like that person?
- What are some ethical issues that might arise for the person we are representing? (Consider privacy, fairness, sensationalism, news judgment, etc.)

Once the students are familiar with their roles, have them read “Setting the Scene.” Then read each installment of the scenario (download) and discuss the questions, giving each group a chance to respond.