

Journalism in the Age of Social Media:  
The Case of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* Group

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
BY

Peter Joseph Gloviczki

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Dr. Laura J. Gurak, Adviser, Dr. Shayla Thiel-Stern, Co-adviser

May 2012

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## Acknowledgements

{ I am so grateful to the many people who have supported my life and work. First, I thank Laura Gurak and Shayla Thiel-Stern, for advising my dissertation. Laura and Shayla, I am lucky to have met you both; you have prepared me for a life of scholarship. All my thanks to Kathy Hansen and Tom Misa as well, whose service on my committee is much appreciated.

I also wish to thank my parents, Marta Matray and Peter Gloviczki. Their support cannot be overstated. My parents taught me to dream; I hope they know that I share the joy of this accomplishment with them. Julia, thank you for being a wonderful example, and an even better sister. Though we were born on the same day one year apart, and I am the older one, you most certainly are the wiser one. Thanks as always for your love for me. Monika, thank you for your enduring interest in my research, and for your steadfast love for my father. Michael, thank you for never taking life too seriously. Arthur and Tim, thank you for your kindness; you are the best step-cousins.

Jennifer, thank you for your love. It strengthens me more than you know; I love you deeply. You've made me, and this dissertation, so much better. I am humbled by your love, and I only hope to return it ten-fold. Love, love, love you.

In addition to my family, I owe a great debt of thanks to the faculty and staff in the SJMC. Thank you Al Tims for your ongoing encouragement. You've made the SJMC a second home to me, and for that I will always be grateful. Thank you to Ron Faber, for accepting me into the SJMC mid-year in 2007. You made my transition from the LSE so much easier; I truly appreciate it. Thank you Brian Southwell for inspiring my creativity in terms of approaches to research. Thank you Jisu Huh for your support in helping me build the right committee for this dissertation, and for your ongoing support of my work. Thank you Nora Paul for your support of all things new media. Many thanks to my professors, inside and outside the SJMC, you've strengthened and encouraged my work in myriad ways. Heather Myers, Sara Cannon, Wally Swanson, Scott Dierks, Jan Nyberg, you've made the SJMC a great place to be. Thank you. My thanks to Kathy Roberts Forde and Hazel Dicken Garcia, for teaching me what it means to be a teacher and a scholar. Michael Stamm, Marco Yzer, Mark Pedelty, Catherine Squires, Giovanna Dell'Orto; many thanks. Thanks also to my SJMC colleagues, especially Maureen Schriener, Patrick File, Meagan Manning and Ruth DeFoster.

My thanks to Bill Sonnega, Christopher Brooks, Eric Fure-Slocum and especially David Booth at St. Olaf. David, thank you for encouraging my interdisciplinary approach from the start. Thanks Sheri Breen for teaching me how to use Endnote; you saved me countless hours. Thank you Lauren Benson, Grant Dobbe, Lauren Anderson and Jimmy Randolph.

At Mayo High School, I wish to especially thank Susan Wolfe and Jeff Lunde. I carry your lessons with me always. Thank you James Miller, for knowing—before I ever

did—just how much I loved sports. Thank you, James, for encouraging me. You helped me reach for the stars.

I wish to acknowledge my first grade teacher, Mrs. Capelle. Thank you for making the classroom a place where I was free to learn and explore. I hope to return the gift in my own teaching, and with my own students, for many years to come.

Thank you Nick Gabrielson. I'm lucky to have such a smart, talented best friend. Thank you for always being there for me. I'm excited to meet your new twins, and to watch Matthias grow up. To Nick's family and to Kris, thank you for treating me like your own son. I couldn't ask for a better second family, and I'm so grateful to know you.

My thanks to Gloviczki Zoltanne, Laszlo "Fules" Harmat, Agi Harmat, Adam Harmat, Nora Mozes and Family, Gergely Dzsinih, Mate Dzsinih and Family, Kepes Andras and family, and countless other supportive Hungarians. Thank you Istvan Kiss for your support of my work.

I wish to, finally, thank Staci Eischen and Tom Webb. Staci and Tom, thank you for those many Thursday and Friday afternoons in the gym at 3MB. Some people say that I live with a disability, but I disagree. My disability lives with me. Thank you for nurturing my physical fitness and development, for making sure that I did my stretches, and for teaching me to never quit. Thank you Kathy Tanabe for teaching me to walk. Staci, Tom and Kathy, I am so thankful for the independence that you've encouraged within me. I know now that I am capable of anything; thank you for showing the way. }

## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of Katherine Olson and Nic Harter. And, with its completion, I wish to especially remember Dr. Geza Mozes; one of the smartest people that I ever had the pleasure of knowing. To Nora and Geza's children, please know that, among many smart people, your father was brilliant. I write in memory of Katherine, Nic and Geza.

While completing this dissertation, in November 2011, I became aware of the death of another of my college classmates, Sam Lee; he was apparently murdered in Indonesia. I first learned of his death on *Facebook*. Though I did not know Sam well, I have watched those who did know him well employ *Facebook* to begin planning his on-campus memorial services. I wish to recognize Sam's life and offer my support to his family and friends during this difficult time.

I hope that communication technologies will continue to always make us more human; strengthening the quality of the connections, both physical and virtual, in our lives.

## Abstract

When a major news event unfolds in today's media environment, individuals utilize social media to discuss unfolding events. The first such instance was on April 16, 2007, when two shootings occurred on the campus of Virginia Tech. Users, especially college and university students, employed social media to discuss the shootings and their aftermath. One of the largest and most active groups at the time was the "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" *Facebook* group, which amassed 185 postings in its first 36 hours and still contains more than 3,000 members. What are the implications of the "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" *Facebook* group for journalism and mass communication?

This dissertation utilizes the case study research strategy (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) and employs content analysis (Babbie, 2010) to answer that research question. The particulars of this case open three lines of inquiry (1) studying the social media cycle in the group (2) studying the expression of public memory in the group and (3) studying the expression of emotion—in both text and images—in the group. These lines of inquiry strongly suggest that the group reflects the uses and gratifications theoretical framework in mass communication research, which "assumes that people use media purposively, selectively and actively to satisfy their needs and wants" (Hanson et. al, 2010, p. 589). This case has specific potential to shed needed light on why individuals "switch" between traditional and social media during unfolding news events (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010).

The data and analysis reveal that this case demonstrates *Facebook* as a platform for expression across a great distance during a time of crisis. Individuals have sought out the group to make sense of, and bring meaning to, the lives and deaths of the victims. Specifically, (1) The social media cycle strongly suggests an emphasis on the victims—especially on the death toll during day one and on the "We are Hokies" convocation speech on day two (2) The expressions of public memory strongly suggest users' further emphasis on remembering the victims and asserting their legacy and (3) the emotional expressions even further suggest users' shift from hurting for the victims on day one to beginning to heal together in solidarity with members of the campus community on day two. Taken together, the group employs the reaction to the news cycle, expressions of public memory and emotional expressions to recast the event from a tragedy to an opportunity for unity among college and university students around the country and the world.

This case particularly suggests three implications for journalism and mass communication: (1) Journalism has become a "conversation" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010) between traditional media and social media *and* journalism is only the catalyst for an extended conversation in the social media environment (2) Those individuals who are not actively represented in traditional media, individuals without a direct, geographic connection to the events, will employ social media to give voice to their needs and wants and (3) Individuals are specifically employing social media to make forms of expression—in this case, reaction to the news cycle, expressions of public memory and expressions of emotion—more ubiquitous and visible than in the past within a mass communication context. }

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{ "Our job is to keep an eye on the public interest. Bringing our journalistic values to these environments that have captured the imagination of millions is one of the most promising ways we have of serving that interest."

Journalism scholar Geneva Overholser on journalism in the age of social media  
Nieman Reports, Fall 2009

I.

Journalism in the Age of Social Media

## **Introduction to the Dissertation**

In November 2004, my college classmate Nic Harter died in a scuba diving accident in the Mississippi River (Kubitz, 2005). Three years later, in October 2007, another college classmate, Katherine Olson, was murdered after answering a babysitting advertisement on Craigslist (Simons, 2009). These two deaths set the stage for my interest in media and mourning—and for this dissertation. Freshman year, Nic lived across the hall from me. I remember him as helpful: When I broke my foot during the spring of my second semester, he pushed my wheelchair from class to class and across the sometimes-treacherous campus terrain. After Nic’s death, one of our professors eulogized him, saying Nic had the “heart of a Northwoodsman.” This seemed to suit him: I vividly remember seeing Nic head into the campus center in March wearing only a t-shirt and shorts. When I asked if he wasn’t cold, he simply responded, “It’s a beautiful day.” I’ve always been drawn to that kind of brazen optimism; it may have been cold, but for Nic, it was a beautiful day.

That bright spirit is also a hallmark of how I remember Katherine Olson. She had gorgeous red, curly hair and was always smiling. Like Nic, she made people feel at ease. She was an actor, runner, and someone who always raised the spirits of those around her.

This dissertation owes some of its energy to the memory of these two people, whose lives were much too short. I offer this dissertation so that the memory of their lives might, in a small way, continue to influence those who knew them personally, and those who are only now hearing their stories.

Before I graduated from St. Olaf in the spring of 2006, I had a good conversation with media studies director Bill Sonnega. That spring, I had been writing my senior

honors thesis, about the need for ethical journalism at the collegiate level. Bill knew I was headed to graduate school, and he asked what I might be interested in studying. We talked about ethics, of course, and the conversation turned to "virtual graveyards," or websites that remember people who have passed away. Virtual graveyards have since intrigued me, because they facilitate the memory of individuals who have passed away—and do so in a dynamic way—long after their deaths. Two social networks, MySpace and Facebook, were known to college students like me at that point, and that conversation sparked my imagination about the potential for studying this topic. Later that spring, when I came to visit the University of Minnesota's School of Journalism and Mass Communication (SJMC), I remember mentioning "virtual graveyards" and online memorials to Nora Paul, director of the Institute for New Media Studies. She was encouraging, and she agreed that the topic certainly sounded interesting for study.

I brought Nic Harter's story and my conversations with Bill and Nora with me when I enrolled in the SJMC's master's program in Mass Communication in January 2007. I started studying online mourning in one of my first graduate seminars, and was especially curious about mourning on an individual (non-celebrity) level. Nora Paul stopped me in the hall in April and asked if I had been following the shootings at Virginia Tech. I said I had, and she encouraged me to look into it as a possible topic for research. Following Katherine's death in late October, I logged on to Facebook and saw that a memorial group "Remembering Katherine Olson" had been formed in her memory. I began following the group, becoming a participant in online memorial groups as well as a researcher. Group members told stories about Katherine's life; they remembered particular memories they had shared with her, and wrote at length about the positive impact she had on their lives. When viewing the group, when reading about Katherine

and the memories she made with so many, I was interacting with my recent past as a college student.

In this way, my crossing into the role of group participant from group observer was notable because Facebook began as a network primarily for college students, first at Harvard and eventually around the country. The collegiate focus of the social network, especially at this relatively early moment (2007), helps explain why so many groups were formed in the wake of the April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech school shootings. Following that event, college students were logging on to discuss an event that had happened on a college campus. Though I did not participate in any Virginia Tech memorial groups and did not actively view them until I began my dissertation research in earnest, I see now that many college students were participating in those groups and using their own experiences as a lens through which to relate to the event. Just as I had related to my college experience in reading the postings in Katherine's group, many people—perhaps my age or slightly younger—were relating to their college experiences in the Virginia Tech memorial groups.

Drawing inspiration from the lives of Nic and Katherine, and motivated by strong curiosity regarding individuals' media use of Virginia Tech memorial Facebook groups, I set out to write my dissertation. I carry with me the memory of Nic and Katherine's deaths and I am struck by something that St. Olaf College dean of students, Greg Kneser, told the *Northfield News* after Nic's body was recovered from the Mississippi in March, 2005: "I've talked to a couple of Nic's friends; in general people don't know how to express themselves right now" (Kubitz, 2005). Journalism often captures the sense of shock that follows a death (Kitch & Hume, 2008). I now recognize what I saw when I began examining social media and Virginia Tech memorial groups: users attempting to



express themselves in the aftermath of the event. Since the Virginia Tech shootings, news events have unfolded in the social media environment.

### **Journalism in the age of social media**

When a news event unfolds in today's media environment, individuals use social media to discuss what happened (Pew, 2011). These users increasingly take the information they learn through print, broadcast or online news outlets and “switch” between traditional and social media to discuss its implications (Robinson, 2011). I have deliberately chosen the word users to describe the individuals in the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group. This term has its roots in human-computer interaction (Licklider & Taylor, 1968) and I have chosen it because I wish to emphasize that these users are very much interactive participants within this group. Interactivity, utilized by mass communication scholars before the emergence of social media (Ruggerio, 2000; Kioussis, 2002), today means that individuals could be listening, watching, reading and, especially, responding to communication in the social media environment. Mass communication has long been concerned with the audience (Katz & Blumler, 1974) but never before has the audience been as interactive in their mass communication as in the age of social media. These individuals are employing computers to particular ends—to engage in participation with a purpose—in a more direct way than earlier mass communication readers, listeners and viewers. Accordingly, the term users is the most appropriate for this case.

Journalism has become a “conversation” between (1) traditional media and (2) social media (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010). This dissertation examines the first major news event to unfold in the social media environment: the April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech shootings. The case of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group, which features

more than 3,000 users and amassed 185 postings in its first 36 hours, provides a robust case through which to examine the changing media environment. What are the implications of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” for journalism and mass communication? This dissertation will answer that research question.

This question is ripe for study because, in today’s media environment, journalism provides the catalyst for subsequent online discussion (Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010).

Journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosensteil (2010) write articulately about this shift and its implications, stating:

“In the broadest terms, journalism must shift from being a product—one news organization’s stories or agenda—to being more of a service that can answer the audience’s questions, offer resources, provide tools. To this degree, journalism *must* shift from being simply a lecture—telling the public what it should know—to becoming a public dialogue, with the journalist informing and helping facilitate the discussion” (p. 175, emphasis in original).

Journalism in the age of social media increasingly means that individuals use traditional media some of the time (Pew, 2011; Robinson, 2011) and social media some of the time. In the best-case scenario, traditional journalism, in the form of a few key facts about the unfolding events, drives the online conversation. In a seemingly ideal circumstance, these few key facts lead users to discuss the event, express themselves and, ultimately, begin to come to terms with the overarching significance of the event and its aftermath. Such is the case of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” and this dissertation tells its story.

Table 1: Frequency of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” Postings

Day One Postings	Day Two Postings	Total Postings
102	83	185

The case of this group especially investigates the journalism-social media relationship and the reality of two media environments: traditional media as journalism-structured and social media as user-structured.

### **The Reality of Two Environments: Traditional Media as Journalism-structured Versus Social Media as User-structured**

Studies have shown that news today unfolds in two environments: the traditional journalism environment and the social media environment (Robinson, 2011; Zelizer, 2011; Chadwick, 2011; Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). The journalism-structured versus user-structured nature of the environments is the core difference between traditional journalism and social media, respectively (Deuze, 2011; Maier, 2010; Meraz, 2010).

To my knowledge, I am among the first to employ the specific term “user-structured” to discuss users’ media use in the social media environment. This term therefore benefits from brief additional discussion at the outset. As I will demonstrate in this dissertation, “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” is a user-driven case. The users structure the group’s conversation based on their specific needs; in this case, users are selective about posted information because they are actively seeking to drive the group’s trajectory forward in a way that emphasizes (1) the victims of the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings did not die in vain and (2) the victims’ legacy is that of bolstering solidarity among college students around the country and the world. The case is, as I will demonstrate, tightly bound around these concerns, as “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users post to make sense of, and bring meaning to, the lives and deaths of the victims in these shootings. Users’ participation is squarely with a purpose in this case and, whether they draw upon news items or utilize personal expressions, users are very much “goal-directed” (Katz, Blumler

& Gurevitch, 1974) in their mass communication in this case. The fact that the April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech shootings were the first major news event to unfold in the age of social media makes this an ideal case (Yin, 2003) through which to examine the changing relationship between traditional journalism and social media.

Although traditional news organizations are beginning to make significant strides into the social media arena (Hansen, et. al, 2011), traditional media, which I define as print and broadcast outlets, retain a core journalistic structure (Gans, 1979; Schudson, 1978; Tuchman, 1978) which both permits them access to disseminate information to the masses about unfolding news events and reinforces a hierarchy that provides only limited opportunities for audience participation (King, 2010) usually through similarly structured avenues such as letters to the editor or pre-screened broadcast comments (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Conway, 2003). Despite some efforts to open traditional media's structure (Kirchner, 2011; Turner, 2009) traditional media remains, on the whole, highly-structured in organizational terms.

Notably, this structure appears to have been maintained during past international crises. Journalism scholar Eva-Karin Olsson (2009) used interviews to study how Swedish Radio and Swedish Television journalists handled the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and found that the structured nature of those journalistic organizations remained relatively constant, throughout the events of that day: "The respondents describe the everyday organization of the news desk as based on clear hierarchies, roles and rules. The organization was clearly structured alongside various desks, such as the national and foreign news desk. Furthermore, one producer was in charge of each of the broadcasts. The respondents stressed that during 9/11 they were able to use everyday procedures, and that the everyday organization provided a solid base for the response" (p.

452). Olsson concludes that this structure provides a sense of “constant preparedness” (p. 459), which allows traditional journalists to effectively cover unfolding news events, even large-scale, unexpected events, such as the 9/11 attacks.

Social media, on the other hand, is largely user-structured (Marwick & boyd<sup>i</sup>, 2011a; Marwick & boyd, 2011b; Hargittai & Litt, 2011; Hargittai & Walejko, 2010; Sessions, 2010) allowing for participation by anyone with both inclination and access.<sup>ii</sup> Though participation is not at all universal<sup>iii</sup> (International Telecommunications Union, 2009), and there is a pronounced digital divide (Howard, Busch & Sheets, 2010)—a gap between those who have access and those who do not (Hanson, 2010)—there are nonetheless vast opportunities for user participation among those users who do have access and inclination, and individuals appear to be utilizing social media in ever-growing numbers. A June 2011 study released by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found “nearly half of adults (47%), or 59% of internet users, say they use at least one of SNS [social networking site]” (Hampton et. al, 2011, brackets mine for clarity). *Facebook*, the world’s most popular social networking site, currently exceeds 750,000 members (Facebook, 2011). Despite the rise of social media use, its role in journalism and mass communication remains understudied.

For example, Olsson (2009), in the aforementioned study about 9/11 and traditional journalistic structure, worries about whether the emerging media environment—with its user-structured architecture—will be able to appropriately cover major events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks (p. 459), citing the role of “institutional memory” being such that traditional journalists simply know (and remember) how to cover any event, even a crisis. Olsson does not provide full and necessary consideration to the social media environment, though. Social media must be judged closely and on its

own merits. Journalism scholars Hagar Lahav and Zvi Reich (2011) do well to emphasize the need for traditional journalism, especially in the changing media environment, to go beyond “the news report” and include: “the added value of genuine curiosity; or the broadening potential of perceiving journalism as production of “well written stories about present reality”” (p. 636). I assert that the user-structured social media environment not only helps traditional journalism break out of its established structure, but that there are roles for journalists and roles for users in the journalism-social media relationship.

### **Roles for journalists and roles for users**

The rise of social media in mass communication brings roles for journalists and roles for users. At the broadest level for journalists, this means delivering both the content and context of the media message; in this case, of the unfolding news event (Hansen & Paul, 2011). More specifically, the role of the journalist has often been to provide a brief overview of the significance of the unfolding news event to the audience (Meyer, 1989). This role, which I assert endures today at the broadest level, has clearly become complicated in the age of social media. Most, if not all, major news organizations have now taken to utilizing social media tools themselves, in an attempt to attract a broader audience. But, as social media scholars Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011a) have recently asserted through the example of the micro-blogging website *Twitter* ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)), this is an imperfect approach: “Given the various ways people can consume and spread tweets, it is virtually impossible for Twitter users to account for their potential audience, let alone actual readers” (p. 118).

Marwick and boyd’s notion of “accounting for the audience” is useful for journalism practitioners to have a sense of what the context is for the unfolding event (who is being reached) and what additional context should be provided (how are those

reached being affected). This notion is similarly useful to journalism scholars, as they seek to further understand the scope and impact of unfolding news events in the age of social media. The problem, of course, is that once a story gets discussed on social media, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to fully track its trajectory. “Accounting for the audience” is a meaningful and necessary ideal, but it is to be approximated rather than ultimately reached. It is as important today for journalists to succeed in their role of providing news content and context to audiences, but it is also as challenging as it has ever been. This challenge makes the pursuit crucial for scholars and practitioners alike.

The role for users, broadly construed, is to utilize the user-structured social media environment (boyd & Ellison, 2007) to extend the conversation that began via traditional journalistic (usually print or broadcast) channels. I define extending the conversation in a Kovach & Rosensteilian sense, using journalism as a catalyst for discussion about the overarching significance of the unfolding news event. As is characteristic of expression in the social media environment, the nature of that expression is often personal or contains personal elements that connect in some way to unfolding events (Marwick & boyd, 2011a). With this assertion of roles for journalists and roles for users, I next assert the need for additional research about the journalism-social media relationship, especially with regard to these roles.

### **The Need to Further Investigate the Journalism-Social Media Relationship**

Journalism and mass communication scholars have persuasively asserted the enduring need for journalism in the age of social media (Hardin & Ash, 2011; Beam, Weaver & Brownlee, 2009) especially to help contextualize online postings (O’Shea, 2011). Some prominent media advocacy organizations have echoed this need. Amy Gahran (2011) writing for the Knight Digital Media Center, recently issued an especially

direct call for journalism to engage with social media audiences: **“We’re really all on the same side.** The internet and social media are not enemies of journalism and the news business. This means that it’s probably more important than ever for journalists and news organizations to embrace engagement through social media” (emphasis in original). Not all perspectives have been so optimistic, however.

Journalism and mass communication scholars have recently begun to investigate the journalism-social media relationship. Thomas J. Johnson and David D. Perlmutter (2010, p. 554) call the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, “the Facebook election” and explain the differences within the context of that political campaign: “the traditional campaign, with its centralized power and planning, although not dead, now coexists—sometimes uneasily—with an unstructured digital democracy” (p. 555-6). Johnson and Perlmutter do well to underscore that a mistake by a tired candidate can take on a life of its own in the social media environment.<sup>iv</sup> They rightly assert that old and new journalism now share the stage and their emphasis is effectively placed on the journalism-structured versus user-structured nature of old and new journalism, respectively.<sup>v</sup> But I am asserting the need to study social media in journalism and mass communication during an even earlier moment: the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings.<sup>vi</sup> Study of these shootings is different from the political arena and the “horserace” nature of electoral coverage. Journalism and mass communication scholars have studied coverage of breaking news events concerned with murder (see, for example, Kay et. al, 2011; Chesebro & McMahan, 2006; Entman, 2002; Gerbner, et. al, 1980) and there is a need to continue this research in the age of social media.

I assert that this event, two shootings on a college campus in Virginia at a relatively early moment in the development of social media, is of particular interest to



scholars and practitioners of journalism and mass communication. The case of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group, which amasses 185 postings in approximately 36 hours, captures the expressions that might well have otherwise been limited to dorm rooms and campus dining halls. Although social media did exist, in 2007 it was not as ubiquitous and certainly not the first place individuals went following a news event. The group functions as a kind of “virtual quad,” users employ new communication technologies, in this case, Facebook, to express themselves in the aftermath of the event. The conversation within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” is driven by users’ need for expression in the aftermath of the shootings. The shootings clearly struck a nerve with many young people, who were in 2007 the primary audience on Facebook (Yadav, 2008). As recent scholarship has made clear, many students logged onto Facebook following the shootings (Vicary & Fraley, 2010), which further suggests this news event as promising to examine the potential of social media as a mass communication platform.

### **The Potential for Social Media as a Mass Communication Platform**

This dissertation asserts social media has the potential to provide an immediate, interactive and public platform for expression about a news event across a great distance during a time of crisis. The particulars of this assertion will be unpacked below.

Social media is immediate: users’ content is posted as soon as the user clicks on the appropriate button. In this way, social media represent the “speed and reach” of online communication (Gurak, 2001).

Social media is interactive: users have the opportunity to both read and respond to the immediate content that is posted. In this way, social media represent the potential for

interactivity that mass communication scholars have recognized for more than a decade (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001).

Social media is public: anyone with an Internet connection and the inclination can join a social networking site and participate in the conversation. Some social networking sites have attracted an especially large subscriber base. The popular social networking site *Facebook*, for example, currently boasts 750,000 users (Facebook, 2011).

Social media is a platform for expression: the user-structured nature of social media environment (boyd & Ellison, 2007) promotes user expression to a considerable extent.

Social media is across a great distance: the increasingly diffused nature of Internet communication around the world (ITU, 2009) suggests social media span several countries, especially across the Western world and in advanced industrial democracies around the world.

Social media is live during a time of crisis: the user-structured architecture of the Internet makes it so this communication platform is not as susceptible to geographically-based outages owing to weather conditions or following natural disasters (DeNardis, 2009). Social media has vast potential for research, given its emerging relationship with journalism and especially in view of these characteristics stated above. From a journalism and mass communication perspective, this case needs to be mined down to its particulars, to better understand how and why individuals “switch” between traditional and social media during unfolding news events. To that end, the uses and gratifications theoretical framework is helpful to explain the broader implications of this case.

**Introducing the Uses and Gratifications Theoretical Framework:  
Users Assert Their “Needs and Wants” in the Age of Social Media**

Uses and gratifications is among the most commonly utilized theory in mass communication research (Bryant & Miron, 2004) and this theory has been applied to study individuals' use of almost every new mass communication technology or platform since the 1940s, from radio to the television and most recently, the Internet (for an overview, see Ruggiero, 2000). In uses and gratifications theory, as noted communication theorist Denis McQuail has written, "the central question posed is: *why* do people use media, and what do they use them for?" (1983, p. 423).

Although uses and gratifications theory has had a prominent place in mass communication research since the 1970s (Katz & Blumler, 1974) the questions it poses are especially pressing in today's multi-platform journalism environment, and they are compelling for the study of journalism in the age of social media, where the news often begins with traditional journalism and then users take that information and start a conversation in the social media environment. Uses and gratifications theory conceptualizes individuals' media use as decidedly active, rather than passive, and asserts their media use as "goal-directed" (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). Mass communication researchers have rightly recognized the suitability of uses and gratifications for study of the social media environment. Writing in *Mass Communication & Society*, Gary Hanson and colleagues (2010) provide the following definition: the theory "assumes that people use media purposively, selectively and actively to satisfy their needs and wants" (p. 589). Social media researchers have also noted that this theory "sheds light on what motivates individuals to switch from traditional media to new media and what kinds of gratifications these [new media] are providing" (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010, p. 351, brackets mine, added for clarity).

This case suggests “switching” between traditional media and social media may be the emerging rule, rather than the exception. Users are clearly finding, as mass communication researchers have recognized for some time, a sense of “added value” (Eighmey & McCord, 1998) in the online environment. Uses and gratifications is the most explanatory theory for this case study, because the theory recognizes the users of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” as they are: individuals who specifically employ the user-structured nature of the social media environment to satisfy their specific needs in the aftermath of the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings. For “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users, the group appears to represent participation with a purpose, and the case calls for further study to more fully understand the nature and trajectory of users’ participation and its implications for journalism and mass communication.

Broadly speaking, journalism in the age of social media presents three possibilities for users. The first possibility is that users could simply repost traditional journalism on social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. This possibility seems unlikely for users because of the potential of the social media environment to give voice to users’ concerns within a mass communication context. The second possibility is that users could entirely disregard traditional journalism in their online communication. This possibility also seems unlikely because then users’ communication would seem to circumvent, rather than participate in, the conversation started by traditional journalism. The third possibility is that users could draw on some elements of traditional journalism, ostensibly weaving them into their specific conversation, which represents users’ particular needs or wants. Recognizing the user-structured nature of journalism in the age of social media, this third possibility seems especially likely because it recognizes users as engaged in participation with a purpose. This possibility recognizes that journalism in

the age of social media no longer means *either* traditional journalism *or* social media, but rather, the emergence of a hybrid model that asserts the necessary and useful coexistence of one with the other.

### **Participation with a Purpose: Users Central to Social Media**

The five years since “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” have seen an exponential increase in social media tools and overall social media usage. Today, users regularly use *Twitter* to express themselves following major news events. The October 2011 death of computer pioneer Steve Jobs does well to exemplify this trend. As Leslie Katz wrote in an article published on the technology website CNet: “The second news outlets started reporting on the death of Steve Jobs today, Twitter erupted with a fast-moving stream of emotional reactions--and "RIP Steve Jobs," #ThankYouSteve, and #iSad became trending topics within hours.” But users are not always so well-intentioned. Andrew Keen (2009) famously warns of the cult of the amateur in his book of that title and it is, admittedly, not difficult to imagine social media conversations that devolve into non-sequitor attacks, running far afield from the unfolding news event that gave rise to the conversation in the first place. I assert this as further evidence of the need to investigate, via empirical procedures, those conversations such as “In Memorial: Virginia Tech,” which are potentially instructive about the changing shape of the news environment for journalism scholars and practitioners alike.

While the past year alone has seen any number of news events worthy of further investigation in journalism and mass communication, from the capture and killing of Osama bin Laden in May (Pew, 2011) to the aforementioned October death of Steve Jobs (Katz, 2011), never before the April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech shootings had a news event

unfolded in the social media environment. With this in mind, I examine the first instance of this phenomenon.

My examination contains the embedded assumption that journalists can—and should—learn from users’ conversations in the social media environment. One notable recent study, published in *Journalism & Communication Monographs* sheds light on what journalists are already learning and especially demonstrates the financial realities of the changing media environment for a newspaper in the Midwestern United States. I call for continued investigation of users’ social media conversations about unfolding news events, especially in those cases that are particularly instructive for journalism and mass communication.

### **Journalists Can—and Should—Learn from Users’ Conversations about Events**

Mass communication scholar Sue Robinson (2011) conducted ethnographic interviews and observation of *The Capital Times* newspaper in Madison, Wis., and especially investigated that organization’s digital transition. Robinson noted that there is a growing expectation for journalists to learn, become proficient in and actively utilize a variety of social media tools (p. 195). Accordingly, among Robinson’s conclusions, she asserted: “news organizations must compensate employees for non-traditional work not necessarily produced during the 9-5 workday or in sanctioned visible spaces” (p. 204). I support the assertion that journalists should be compensated, and I further assert that journalists can and, in fact, need to learn from how users employ social media to discuss unfolding events.

I view this as a kind of experiential learning; journalists can examine the social media conversation to more fully understand the spectrum of users’ needs and wants regarding a particular unfolding news event. Journalists have the opportunity, perhaps in

consultation with their editorial staff, to then incorporate some of those needs and wants into their ongoing coverage about the story. It may not be feasible to compensate this kind of experiential learning, but the act of doing so may help journalists serve and satisfy the needs of some individuals who regularly read their publication. Users today have specific needs and wants and they are increasingly using particular social media tools, such as *Facebook* in the case of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech,” to satisfy those needs. Research is especially needed because, despite the user-structured social media environment, users are still largely being left out. A November 2011 Pew study found that news organizations are not necessarily utilizing social media to connect to their audiences, but rather, are employing the tools to redistribute their content. Jesse Holcomb, Kim Gross & Amy Mitchell recently studied the *Twitter* feeds of 13 major news organizations and found that 93 percent of “news outlet tweets linked to their own site” (p. 1). These authors concluded: “these news organizations use Twitter in limited ways—primarily as an added means to disseminate their own material. Both the sharing of outside content and engagement with followers are rare” (p. 1).

Just as journalists need to recognize the potential role for social media in journalism and mass communication, there is a need for additional study in this regard to better serve the emerging needs of journalism students and journalism professors as well. A recent article published in *Journalism Practice* finds that journalism students—though they may be active social media users—have yet to achieve mastery about the ways that certain social media tools can be used to enhance journalistic practices (Hirst & Treadwell, 2011). At the same time, Dane Claussen (2010), editor of *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, did well to call for more specific examples about how social media can be utilized by journalism and mass communication professors. In his aptly

titled editorial note, “JMC Professors Can Seize the Moment, or at Least Not Embarrass Ourselves,” Claussen concludes: “JMC professors and researchers have an opportunity at this historical juncture to provide well-researched answers and realistic solutions” (p. 120). For journalists, students and journalism scholars, the implications of the case of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group remain as important to understand today as they have ever been.

This case will focus on the deaths of 32 people on campus at Virginia Tech. Journalism frequently covers death (Kitch & Hume, 2008), and stories about death can be broadly classified into two categories: (1) Stories about death told through obituaries (Hume, 2000) and (2) Stories about death told by the living (Kitch & Hume, 2008). The first category reflects, and reinforces, the structured environment of traditional journalism. The second category is especially compelling for study in the user-structured social media environment, because it ostensibly includes anyone with an Internet connection and a desire to express him or herself. This case sheds light on that second category, while recognizing that the coexistence of traditional journalism and social media is the new standard for journalism and mass communication.

In the pre-social media age, journalists drew individuals in to unfolding events. Journalism scholars Carolyn Kitch & Janice Hume (2008, p. 151) do well to articulate this process in *Journalism in a Culture of Grief*: “Although a crisis event initially happens in one place to particular people, when those people are explained as being ‘just like us,’ a narrative transformation takes place through which the event itself becomes a shared American experience—and larger, lasting lessons emerge in journalism.”

Journalism in the age of social media finds individuals taking to social media and social networking sites to express themselves in the aftermath of crises. Users no longer



rely in the same way on the journalistic explanation that victims are “just like us,” because users also express those connections themselves and employ the social media environment as a platform for expression across a great distance during a time of crisis. This process, too, brings “lasting lessons” for the future of journalism and mass communication.

### **Looking Ahead to the Case of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech”**

In this chapter, I stated my interest in this research and set out the nature of journalism in the age of social media. I briefly introduced my chosen case study and stated my research question: What are the implications of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group for journalism and mass communication? I asserted this research question as ripe for study because journalism is quickly becoming a “conversation” between traditional and social media (Kovach & Rosensteel, 2010). I then demonstrated traditional journalism as journalism-structured and social media as user-structured. Recognizing the rise of social media in journalism and mass communication, I explored the realities of these two environments and discussed roles for journalists and roles for users. With these roles in mind, I called for additional research to examine the journalism-social media relationship and elevated the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings as the first major news event to unfold in the social media environment. I outlined the potential for social media as a mass communication platform and asserted the uses and gratifications as the most explanatory theory for this case. Finally, I asserted participation as central to the user experience in the social media environment. I called for a case study that has the potential to be especially instructive in its implications for journalism and mass communication. The particulars of this case, “In Memorial: Virginia Tech,” will be presented in the case narrative, which follows this chapter.

This dissertation is comprised of seven chapters. As I have noted above, chapter one has set out journalism in the age of social media and introduced uses and gratifications as the most explanatory theory for understanding the broader implications of this case. Chapter two will present the case of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group. Chapter three will present the chosen method and method of analysis (a case study that utilizes content analysis), articulate the three lines of inquiry that emerged in this case, and further examine uses and gratifications as the most explanatory theory for “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.” Chapter four presents the first analysis chapter, which is focused on examining the social media cycle in the group. Chapter five presents the second analysis chapter, which examines expressions of public memory in the group. Chapter six presents the third analysis chapter, which examines the expression of emotion in the group. Chapter seven presents the conclusion, which answers the research question and also outlines areas for future research. Following from this plan for the dissertation, I next present chapter two: the case of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group.

II.

The Case of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* Group

On the morning of April 16, 2007, a Virginia Tech undergraduate student carried out two shootings on campus (Reichmann, 2007; Hauser & O'Connor, 2007). Around 7:15 a.m., Seung Hui Cho entered a dormitory and killed a female student in her room, as well as the resident assistant who had ostensibly gone into the room to check on the noise. Later that morning, around 9:40 a.m., Cho entered Norris Hall, a science and engineering building, and killed 30 students and himself, wounding 17 others. Between the two shootings, around nine o'clock, Cho mailed a package to NBC News in New York, which included material regarding his preparation for the shootings.<sup>vii</sup> (Governor's Report, 2007). Five years later, the shootings still stand as the deadliest in American campus history.<sup>viii</sup> In all, thirty-three people—32 victims and the gunman—lost their lives (New York Times, 2009).

*The Associated Press* (AP), the world's oldest and largest news organization, appears to have been the first to report the news. Before 1:17 p.m., AP issued at least ten reports, gradually firming up the details of the unfolding events. In this way, they were clearly seeking to provide both content and some early context of the shootings and their aftermath. The news spread quickly: White House spokesperson Dana Perino commented on the shootings and university president Charles Steger issued a statement to the media. Students around the country began utilizing social media to respond as well.

Sometime before 1:17 p.m., Sara Berry<sup>ix</sup>, a college student at another school in Virginia, started the "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" group on the *Facebook* social network. Berry was participating in an emerging trend in the social media environment, creating a memorial group to honor the dead (Conger, 2011; Hillis, 2009). Berry appears to have started the group because a friend of hers was among those injured in the second shooting. Personal connections are not uncommon in memorial group settings (Wang &

Gloviczki, 2008) and are quite common on *Facebook* (Ellison, Lampe & Steinfeld, 2007), but the group that ostensibly began because of Berry's personal connection quickly attracted a growing audience of college students around the country, which affirms the "speed and reach" (Gurak, 2001, p. 30) of communication in the group.

"In Memorial: Virginia Tech" opens squarely focused on the victims, and this focus is retained throughout the 185 wall postings and 33 posted photoshopped images. In fact, 184 of the group's 185 wall postings are focused on the event (See Figure 2) and all 33 photoshopped images are also focused on the event. This suggests, from the outset, users are selective in their use of this group (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008).

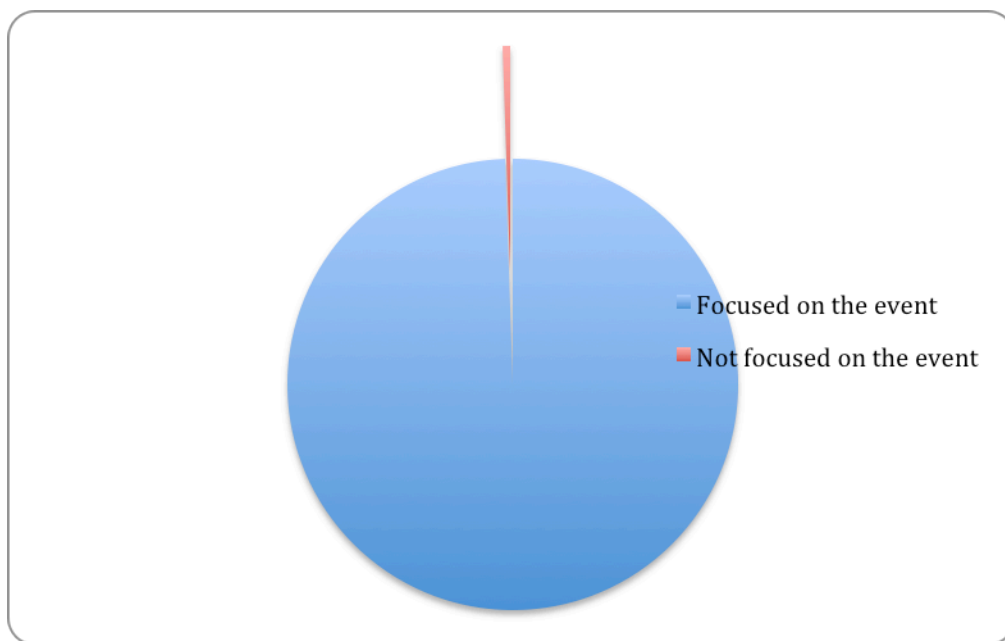


Figure 1: "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" Wall Postings are Focused on the Event

This particular focus suggests users are seeking a platform for expression about the shootings and their aftermath. The expressions are, furthermore, squarely focused on the victims and appear to be written for the sake of the victims. Employing the user-structured social media environment for memorial purposes continues to occur in the present-day (Smith & McDonald, 2011) but this case in 2007 deserves special attention

because it marked the first time users' took to the social media environment following a major news event. Users' early wall postings set the tone for the group.

### **Users Wall Postings Especially Focused on Making Sense of Victims in this Case**

The first hour postings especially express disbelief about the enormity of unfolding events, and posting the death toll (first "32 shot" then "32 dead, god rest their souls") functions as a mechanism to more fully quantify, and thus begin to come to terms with, the enormity of these unfolding events. This sense of shock is not uncommon following a sudden death (Kitch & Hume, 2008, p. 1), but the immediate, interactive and public nature of users' expression—focused on the victims—is noteworthy, because it affirms the rise of participatory culture in the social media environment (Annany & Kreiss, 2011). These users are employing the potential of the social media environment, as articulated in chapter one, and participating in "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" to make sense of what has happened to the victims.

Figure 2:  
First Five Postings Quickly Establish Group's Focus on Victims

It is unreal. Campuses around the nation need to realize what just happened. The two shootings occurred 2 HOURS apart!!! That is way to long for police to respond!!  
April 16, 2007 at 1:17pm

wow  
:  
V  
April 16, 2007 at 1:18pm

32 shot  
April 16, 2007 at 1:33pm

Why weren't classes cancelled after the first shooting?  
April 16, 2007 at 1:42pm

32 dead, god rest their souls  
April 16, 2007 at 1:47pm

In these first five postings, users articulate what has happened: thirty-two people have died in the shootings. Reaching this point of articulation is the first milestone in the group, because the terms of the group have been established: this is a memorial group in name *and* in content and users' attention is squarely focused on those victims. The nature of these articulations—short blessings, declarative statements, questions and textual emoticons<sup>x</sup>—immediately reveals the user-structured nature of this group. This sequence of expressions would not be given space in a traditional journalism environment, especially owing to their brevity (Kollock & Smith, 1999) and the fact that these expressions do not follow the fact-driven, pyramid style “language of journalism” (Cotter, 2010). In this way, the early postings distinguish these users as participating in an user-structured environment that is clearly separate from traditional journalism. These users employ news items when it serves their interests, but primarily users are focused on expressing themselves for the sake of the victims.

**“Thoughts and Prayers”:  
Religious Blessings, Campus Affiliation, Help Users to Come to Terms with Event**

Throughout the early afternoon on the day of the shootings, individuals begin emphasizing their campus affiliation as a mechanism to more fully come to terms with these student deaths. Within this context, the use of religious blessings expands—primarily if not exclusively referring to a Judeo-Christian God. I wish to emphasize that this does not appear to be an expressly religious group—postings appear to reference “thoughts and prayers” more out of American cultural convention following the death of, especially innocent, persons (Kitch & Hume, 2008; Walter, 1991). As shown in Figure 4 below, users' begin presenting their campus affiliations in a way that especially suggests

the reach of this event and this group: evoking expressions from college students around the country.

Figure 3: Users' Begin Employing Campus Affiliation with Religious Blessing.

Thoughts and Prayers from Penn State for the VT family. God Bless  
April 16, 2007 at 2:54pm

my thoughts and prayers go out to Virginia Tech and all the families affected by this tragedy. God Bless!

April 16, 2007 at 3:05pm

bless u guys

April 16, 2007 at 3:06pm

our paryers our with you all...

April 16, 2007 at 3:12pm

what a tragedy....my prayers go out to all of the victims as well as their families, may God be with them

April 16, 2007 at 3:12pm

You are all in my thoughts and prayers. May God be with all the families and loved ones in mourning of those lost today.

April 16, 2007 at 3:12pm

What a tragedy, my prayers are with all of you and your loved ones

April 16, 2007 at 3:14pm

### **Collegiate Nature of Tragedy Encourages Users' Expression towards the Victims**

Some students begin writing on behalf of their colleges and universities, including an expression of prayers.<sup>xi</sup> Individuals' collegiate status is the initial avenue through which these users begin discussing their relationship to the event in earnest. As shown in Figure 5, users appear compelled to express themselves in this group because they are college students who have been especially affected by the news of a campus tragedy that unfolded on another campus. In this way, these users are beginning to more fully demonstrate "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" as an immediate, interactive and public platform for expression across a great distance during a time of crisis. Virginia Tech



students write on behalf of their school in letters to the editor published in *The Collegiate Times*, the school's campus newspaper, in the days following the shootings (*The Collegiate Times*, 2007), but this group reveals that the reach of the event clearly goes beyond the physical boundaries of the campus and specifically inspires expressions from college students around the country and the world.

Less than three hours after the group's formation, the group's status as a primarily collegiate group—that is, a group populated mostly by students around the country—becomes evident.

Figure 4: Users Begin Invoking Their Campus Affiliations More Directly.

From UW-La Crosse, my prayers and prayers of fellow students are with all of those affected and their families.  
April 16, 2007 at 3:52pm

Prayers go out from Florida to all those who lost their lives or friends and family  
April 16, 2007 at 3:58pm

i got some friends form high school that goes to VT i hope they are ok cause they are not picking up their phones  
April 16, 2007 at 3:59pm

this shit sucks!!! you guys have our mprayers from the US Army!!! we know what you guys are going through but you can make it !!!! Good Luck and God Bless!!!  
April 16, 2007 at 4:01pm

Not only is *Facebook* a primarily collegiate social network in 2007, but “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” appears to especially reflect the user-base during that time-period. At least one user also asserts a geographic connection to the Columbine shootings—he asserts proximity to Colorado, the state in which those shootings occurred—which works to historicize the story of these recent campus shootings within the frame of the Columbine shootings, which occurred when at least some of these users were ostensibly in elementary school.

Those of us located near Columbine have a sense of what you are all going through. We are 3 days short of 8 years and it feels just like it happened yesterday. We are there to pray for everyone involved and try to help carry you through all of the emotions and difficult times ahead. Just keep talking and getting it out and it will eventually get better. Time heals all wounds!

May God Bless everyone involved in this horrible tragedy!  
April 16, 2007 at 4:13pm

While this process of relating to victims through some personal connection is not uncommon in traditional, offline memorial settings (Goodhead, 2010), “In Memorial: Virginia Tech, and its immediate, interactive and public nature, demonstrates a user from a great geographic distance articulating that expression via the user-structured social media environment only hours after the events themselves. Social media clearly makes that process more visible and ubiquitous.

The afternoon of the shootings finds these users expressing themselves as college and university students. Despite users’ lack of stated geographic or direct connection to these events, users’ student status encourages their expression for the sake of the victims.

#### Figure 5: Users Continue Asserting Their Campus Affiliations

Hey to everyone at VT, its your ACC brothers to the south, just wanted to say that all us Seminoles are honorary Hokies today, we are all sad on our campus as well. . .  
April 16, 2007 at 4:32pm

my thoughts and prayers go out to all the victims and their families at VT...God Bless  
April 16, 2007 at 4:36pm

what a tragedy :(  
God Bless all the families and friends that were affected by this tragedy!  
My prayers are with all of you in Virginia!  
April 16, 2007 at 4:42pm

I can't believe something like this happened, in Blacksburg no less. Everyone at UNC is praying  
April 16, 2007 at 4:49pm

#### **Users Begin Examining National Implications of this Collegiate Event**

Users, having asserted their student status, utilize the evening hours to start grappling with the national and cultural implications of these shootings. The linear nature of the group's discussion, mirroring radio, print or television (Zelizer, 2011; Andrejevic, 2007) is especially on display here. Having addressed the first order of concern regarding the event, as it were, the group considers national and cultural implications as "next in line" for consideration. This leads first to a brief discussion about gun violence as a cultural problem in America, and then to a more heated exchange about gun control and the issue of guns on college campuses. This is the only moment when the group veers, ever slightly, from their focus on the victims.

Figure 6: The Group Debates Gun Control

**MORE RESTRICTIONS ON GUNS!!! PERIOD!**

April 16, 2007 at 8:37pm

i agree with derek, its time the US does something about all the guns that are floating around that country. maybe something like taking away that stupid right to bear arms bullshit. stupidest law ever.

April 16, 2007 at 8:51pm

i dont know derek, but i agree with him too.

April 16, 2007 at 8:54pm

stricter gun laws would not have prevented the shootings at Virginia Tech. someone who is mentally unstable enough to murder 32 innocent students would have found ways to get around a few extra gun restrictions. i doubt that the weapons he did use were properly bought/registered following current regulations anyway. that being said, i live only a few hours from the VT campus and i can't begin to describe the sadness we are all dealing with here... almost everyone here has friends/family that go to tech. we're praying for all of you. God Bless Virginia Tech

April 16, 2007 at 9:00pm

Speaking of guns did you know that the security guards at virginia tech are not allowed to carry guns? they are there for protection and they should have the means necessary to protect meaning access to guns. Just because it is a gun free campus does not mean that a person intent on violence is going to abide by it. I also believe that the campus should have been shut down. it doesn't matter that the police had reason to believe that it was an isolated incident, the killer was still at large! there is no excuse for it. the campus should have been shut down and the students informed of the shooting in a better way. Not

everyone checks their email hourly or even daily. there needs to be a better system set up to inform students of important happenings on campus. this may have been prevented if better steps had been taken and we need to implement them before it happens again.

April 16, 2007 at 9:01pm

Sara Berry, the group's creator steps in to remind users' of the group's focus on the victims, and this provides a course correction in short order. Within minutes, the group returns to expressions of support directed towards the victims, families and their loved ones. Berry appears to have a level of at least implicit, rather than explicit, influence on the trajectory of the conversation. She intends the group to focus on the victims and, after the gun control debate, the group's focus returns to the victims. This suggests that Berry may be respected as someone who can maintain order within the group and it reinforces Galegher, Sproull and Kiesler's (1998) notion that electronic support groups may have a particular, perhaps implicit, structure about them. It is worth noting here that while traditional journalism has editors, and social media does not in the same sense, an editor of sorts can still play a similar role here, as the group's creator does when she asserts the need for the "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" conversation to return to its focus on the victims.

Figure 7: Group's Creator Asserts Need to Return Focus on Victims; Users Listen.

Although we are all entitled to our opinion, i have removed pictures that could be found offensive to some. This group is in memorial for all those who have lost loved ones, and not for political opinions. Please respect the nature of this group.

April 16, 2007 at 9:31pm

If this group is not to further political idealism then maybe everybody who is complaining about gun control should respect your wishes... But of course we all need to blame inanimate objects so why not. I have a better idea...TRY STUPID PEOPLE CONTROL

April 16, 2007 at 9:36pm

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. -Romans 12:21

April 16, 2007 at 9:38pm

In what is a telling example of *Facebook*'s American user base, especially in 2007, the group appears to quite literally “go to sleep” during the overnight hours, with only a handful of similarly victim-themed expressions between midnight and 7 a.m. This reinforces the American, rather than international, nature of this case (Hanson, 2010).

Figure 8: Group “Goes to Sleep” between midnight and 7 a.m.; only four postings (presented in reverse chronological order).

a prayer goes out to the families and loved ones of the victims at Virginia Tech  
April 17, 2007 at 5:11am

in response to someone's question: yes just four days before the 8th anniv. of columbine. what really gets me is that it took them 2 HOURS to send out a warning to their students AFTER the shooting started. To those who lost their lives...you will forever be in my prayers.

April 17, 2007 at 12:46am

My prayers are with you.  
April 17, 2007 at 12:35am

Why it should happened why can anyone tell us,sometimes we sit and think why it happened.  
April 17, 2007 at 12:01am

### **Day Two Brings Reflection and Remembrance**

The group wakes up on the day after the shootings and begins reflecting on the previous day's events. Reflections are not at all uncommon following tragic events (Kitch & Hume, 2008) but the immediate, interactive and public nature of these users' reflections, and the varied nature of users' reflections, suggests that “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” members are especially employing the potential of the social media environment to make their voices heard. Moreover, individuals have an enduring desire to participate in the group on the second day, which suggests a particular commitment to expressing their remembrance. During the mid-morning hours, a few users share personal acts of remembrance—including one man who asserts the creation of racecar decals to

remember the victims during an upcoming auto race. In this way, “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” are taking their personal, seemingly private expressions and making them decidedly public, as they articulate remembrance for the sake of the victims, which is not uncommon in online memorial settings (Foot, Warnick & Schneider, 2005; Hess, 2007; Wang & Gloviczki, 2008; Smith & McDonald, 2011).

Figure 9: On Day Two, Users Express Remembrance for Victims

May god bless each and every family that's suffering from this tragedy!  
April 17, 2007 at 10:45am

My prayers go out to all the loved ones and victims who are suffering from this terrible tragedy.  
April 17, 2007 at 10:55am

Hey guys, just wanted to offer my sympathies, keep your chin up...  
April 17, 2007 at 11:10am

We will be getting some VA Tech decals on our race cars this weekend to honor and remember those who lost their lives yesterday. VA TECH...i think its safe to say that the country and the world has your back!  
April 17, 2007 at 11:12am

As the group approaches the noon hour of the second day, there is a slight decrease in the frequency of the postings, but the group retains its steadfast focus on expressions—especially expressions of remembrance—directed towards the victims.

Figure 10: Group Pauses Near 24-Hour Mark, Retains Day Two Focus on Remembrance.

Five Postings Between 11:45 p.m. and 1:45 p.m. (Reverse Chronological Order).

Im praying for ya guys.. God will heal all the hurt..  
April 17, 2007 at 1:41pm

My heart goes out to everyone at VT. May peace come to you with time.  
April 17, 2007 at 1:27pm

All of VT is in my prayers  
April 17, 2007 at 1:03pm

My most sincere sympathies to everyone. Nothing I think to say seems adequate. My prayers go out to the lives lost, the families and friends hurt.  
April 17, 2007 at 1:03pm

The victims, victim's families, students, faculty, and staff, you all are in my prayers and may you be comforted in this time of tragedy. You're in the nation's prayers especially those of college students everywhere. Once again you're in my prayers.  
April 17, 2007 at 11:45am

The 11:45 a.m. posting, above, summarizes the sentiment of remembrance that has emerged by midday on April 17<sup>th</sup>: many individuals, inside the group, but also beyond the confines of social media, are remembering those killed in the shootings. The fact that there is a 78-minute pause until the next posting (at 1:03 p.m.) may be simple coincidence, but there is at least one other possible explanation: the group has affirmed who they are (primarily college and university students) and what they are doing (remembering those killed in the shootings). It would not be surprising, in fact, if the group had ended at this point. With a clearly articulated purpose, the group could have run its course at this point. But it kept developing, and that continued development suggests the particular focus of this group as comprised of college students expressing themselves in the aftermath of a collegiate tragedy. This observation suggests that the group likely fulfills a particular, expressive need, owing to social media's user-structured nature, that is, users can drive the communication in the needed direction with relative ease (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010).

### **Users' Employ "We are Hokies" to Assert Victims' Legacy in Aftermath of Shootings**

Shortly after the 24-hour mark of the group, at 2:41 p.m., a user begins a wall posting with the phrase: "We are all Hokies today." This is among the group's most direct expressions of solidarity (Rice & Love, 1987), and it especially establishes the

group's second day trajectory: to remember the victims by standing together with the members of the campus community.

We are all Hokies today. So senseless that one person can have such a devastating effect on everyone else. Thoughts and prayers are with everyone.  
April 17, 2007 at 2:41pm

Just as the group members utilize their campus affiliation to help come to terms with the enormity of the event on day one, the invocation of the mascot—the Hokie—is central to their reflections about the enduring legacy of the victims on day two. Users have thus drawn themselves into that legacy as college students, which is exemplified by a posting at 3:47 p.m:

yes ma'am...yesterDAY was a devastating day for the United states and all post secondary students around the world.  
April 17, 2007 at 3:47pm

Robin Vandenko, who made the group's initial posting, sheds light on how solidarity may have emerged as the group's core second-day theme.

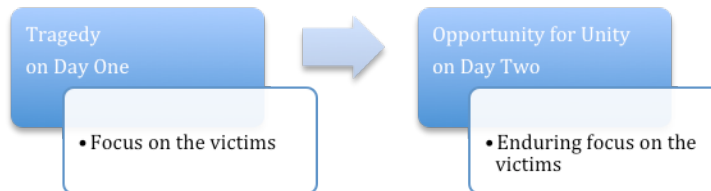
The amazing thing that happens here though is that all of a sudden, there are no rivalries, there is no violence or hate between universities, and there is unity. Everyone steps back and realizes that we are all the same. A Buckeye is the same as a Wolverine, a Gator is the same as a Seminole, a Sooner is same as a Longhorn, and a CAVALIER is the same as a HOKIE. We are all HOKIES this week just like that quote says. America unites with the students and faculty at VA Tech. WE ARE VIRGINIA TECH! WE ARE VIRGINIA TECH! Great speech by the lady at that ceremony. God Bless  
April 17, 2007 at 5:34pm

Within his third and final posting, at 5:34 p.m., the concluding words are especially thought-provoking: “WE ARE VIRGINIA TECH! WE ARE VIRGINIA TECH! Great speech by the lady at that ceremony. God Bless” Vandenko is ostensibly referring to Virginia Tech English professor Nikki Giovanni, an award-winning poet, who included those words in a convocation speech—as well as the phrase “we are Hokies”—delivered to the campus community on the day after the shootings. The invocation of this phrase,



and of the sentiment of solidarity at its core, suggests that this tragedy has now also become an opportunity for unity among college students around the country and the world. Users have recast the event from a tragedy to an opportunity for unity to more fully make sense of the lives and deaths of those individuals killed in the shootings, and to assert their enduring legacy in the aftermath of the shootings. This finding suggests social media has brought participatory culture (Bennett, 2003; Benkler, 2006) to a new level of user participation (Annany & Kreiss, 2011). Users are more fully participants in the age of social media: their expressions are immediate, interactive and public and they span a great distance during a time of crisis. The user-structured social media environment facilitates expressions that cover an especially broad and varied range, all the while maintaining a steadfast focus on the victims in these shootings. The group's users have used those expressions to recast the event from a tragedy to an opportunity for unity among college students around the country and the world.

Figure 11: From tragedy to opportunity for unity, users maintain focus on victims



Having made this assertion of the victims' legacy, the last batch of postings turns, however slightly, inward to include a few more individuals who may have a direct or geographic connection to the event:

“RIP Leslie Sherman & Mary Read. xoxo- ♥ Megan”

April 17, 2007 at 9:38pm”

The personalization of the above posting, to include two specific individuals and signed by someone who writes her first name, may indicate that this user had some personal connection to the deceased. If this is the case, the posting may suggest that individuals with a direct connection to the event largely spent the first few days dealing with those personal connections, rather than participating in group’s such as “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.” The personalization in the above posting stands out because of its relative absence during earlier moments in the group. The 185<sup>th</sup> posting, in fact, the last one considered in this dissertation, made in the late evening on day two, states simply:

Bluefield College is praying for you!  
April 17, 2007 at 11:16pm

Bluefield College is less than 65 miles from Virginia Tech. This geographic proximity, again, is only truly notable because of its relative absence throughout so much of the group’s earlier trajectory. The group, in its final postings, asserts itself as *inclusive* rather than *exclusive*. “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” provides a platform for expression across a great distance during a time of crisis, but the platform also makes space for those individuals who are at a limited distance during the unfolding events. None of the users assert themselves as Virginia Tech students, though, and only one user clearly asserts that her siblings attend Virginia Tech; this assertion comes in the nine o’clock hour on the evening of the second day. The lack of other personal invocations among users in the group, expressions of direct personal or geographic connection to the event, profoundly suggests that the group reaches *out* across the country and the world. And “In Memorial: Virginia Tech,” for the most part, only comes closer inward towards the very end of the postings examined in this dissertation.

### **“In Memorial: Virginia Tech” Platform for Expression for Users Without a Direct, Geographic Connection to Event**

This group facilitates expression among those users who do not otherwise have a direct, geographic connection to the event. In recasting the event from only a tragedy to also an opportunity for unity, users draw upon the news—especially the death toll and Nikki Giovanni’s convocation speech—offer expressions to reflect this group’s status as a memorial and present the trajectory of their emotions for the victims in the aftermath of the shootings. These college students from around the country and the world utilize the group to give voice to their expressions following the shootings and their aftermath. As a visual representation of the distance that is covered in this group, consider the distance between Blacksburg, Va, and Australia:



Figure 12: The distance between Blacksburg, Va. (A) and Australia. (B)

The trajectory of this group truly spans the globe, and does so in a remarkably focused set of 185 wall postings made in approximately 36 hours. The posted, photoshopped images in the group carry forward the trajectory that is established in the group’s first 185 wall postings.

### **Posted, Photoshopped Images Carry Forward the Group’s Trajectory**

The content of the images frequently features a black ribbon, the Virginia Tech university logo, and the logo of another college or university. Taken together, I read these three elements as an assertion that the image's creator wishes to assert solidarity with the Virginia Tech community in the aftermath of these shootings. The phrase "Today, we are all Hokies" is often employed to reinforce in textual terms that visual expression of solidarity, as in this image below, posted on April 19, 2007.



Figure 13: Users' images visually represent solidarity with members of campus community.

Users' ability to make this assertion further suggests the immediate, interactive and public nature of the group as a platform for expression across a great distance during a time of crisis. Users are expressing themselves about the event in a profound and seemingly novel manner, which both reinforces and strengthens the trajectory of the aforementioned wall postings. For visitors to the group, its purpose can be viewed and reasonably understood in imagistic, and not simply textual, terms. This may help explain

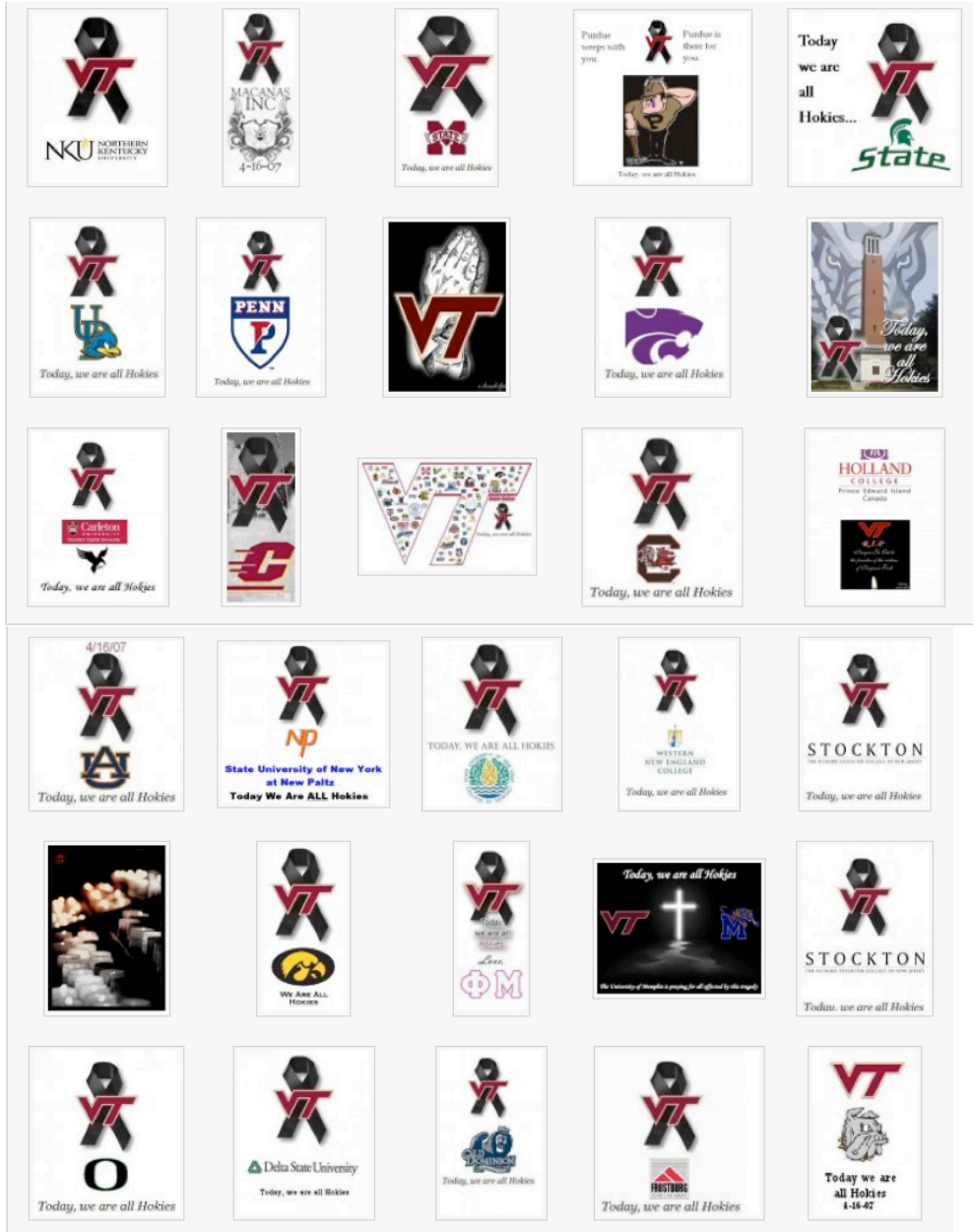
the international reach of the group, which spans as near as Bluefield College and as far as Australia.

Accordingly, these images especially affirm the expressions of solidarity that are central to users' second day wall postings. Most of the images are posted after the first 185 wall postings but, critically, they visually represent the sentiments of solidarity that users first introduce into the group on the afternoon and evening of its second day.

Users posting images may have been especially compelled to participate in the group in a somewhat novel way, because text has long been the dominant form of expression in computer-mediated communication (Smith & Kollock, 1999). The presence of these posted images suggests that these group members were fairly apt users of the social media environment, who both recognized and exercised the potential for the social media environment as a platform for both text and images

Figure 14: Screenshots of Thirty-Three Publically Posted Photographs in Group (Presented on this page and on the following page)





### Images Suggest Users as Particularly Selective in their Media Use

Just as the group's wall postings follow a fairly tight trajectory, emphasizing the tragedy in view of its impact on the victims through the death toll on day one and then emphasizing the unfolding events as an opportunity for unity through the "We are Hokies" phrase on day two, the group's posted images specifically emphasize the

aftermath of the shootings as an opportunity for unity for the sake of the victims and their enduring legacy.

“In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users are extraordinarily selective (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) in their media use. Their posted content, and especially these images, affirm that the victims in these shootings did not die in vain: they are remembered through the images posted within the group. Victims’ legacy, expressed through the images, is to have brought a call for unity among college students around the country and the world.

The frequent repetition of this sentiment across the group’s 33 posted images suggests that users clearly sought to utilize these images as a way to shift emphasis away from victims’ deaths and towards an expression of solidarity in the aftermath of the deaths. Recognizing that the deaths can no longer be prevented, users employ images within the social media environment to craft an especially directed response of solidarity with the members of the Virginia Tech campus community. In this way, users took control of the story, shaping it the way they wished, which is a stark contrast to what was previously possible in “one-way” journalism (newspapers, radio, television).

### **Summarizing the Case Narrative and Looking Ahead to Methods & Theory**

For “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users, the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings are a three-pronged event: (1) The shootings are a *news event*, and this group provides users with an immediate, interactive and public platform for expression across a great distance during a time of crisis. In the first instance, users are responding to the news of the event. (2) Users also assert these shootings as a *memorial event*, which is especially evidenced by their day two expressions of not only personal remembrance but especially the assertions solidarity with members of the campus community and their invocation of the

phrase: “We are hokies.” (3) Users, in recasting the event from a tragedy to an opportunity for unity among college students around the country and the world, further assert the shootings as an *emotional event*. Their emotional expressions extend from hurting for the victims on day one to beginning to heal with the members of the campus community on day two. The forthcoming methods chapter presents the most effective way to fully investigate the complexity of this three-pronged event.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, methods and theory, the case of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” especially lends itself to further study because of its implications for journalism and mass communication. The way that users recast the event from a tragedy on day one to an opportunity for unity on day two suggests this group as an exemplar for the changing state of journalism and mass communication in the age of social media. This case narrative has presented that these users clearly employ the potential of social media and they are certainly engaged, through both text and images, in participation with a purpose: to make sense of and bring meaning to the lives and deaths of those killed in the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings.



III.

Methods and Theory

In chapter one, I discussed the nature of journalism in the age of social media. I also laid out, in detail, the case narrative and provided a chronology. I did this to place the case within the context of emerging mass communication technologies and, specifically, journalism in the age of social media. I especially asserted the rise of the user as central to the notion of participation with a purpose. In chapter two, I presented the case narrative of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group. In this chapter, I present the research method, method of analysis, and the most explanatory theory for the method in this case. This dissertation answers the following research question: What are the implications of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group for journalism and mass communication? To answer this research question, I employed a case study research method.

### **Case Study Research Method**

The seminal definition of the case study research method comes from Robert K. Yin, who asserts: “case study methods involve an in-depth, longitudinal examination of a single instance or event: *a case*” (Yin, 2003). Case study methods have often been criticized in mass communication research, a largely social scientific field, because of their lack of generalizability. One potential reason for this criticism may be that, as a prominent Mass Communication textbook suggests, much of the research in the field “ha[s] been based on a model of inquiry adopted from classical physical science,” (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995, p. 2). Case studies researchers, though, are not necessarily concerned with generalizability in the same way as social scientists. Case studies focus on achieving what educational researcher Robert Stake has called “particularization.” According to Stake, “the real business of case study is particularization, not

generalization. We take a particular case and come to know it well, not primarily as to how it is different from others but what it is, what it does,” (1995, p. 8).

Endorsing Yin’s definition of case study research and Stake’s call for particularization, I aim to more fully understand the case of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group. Heeding Kathleen M. Eisenhardt’s advice, I am, furthermore, allowing the case to be my guide in the research process. As she writes, “case study theory building is a bottom-up approach such that the specifics of data produce the generalizations of theory,” (1989, p. 547). Building this group from the ground up, I focus on the most active areas for communication within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech”—the group’s first 185 wall postings and more than 30 posted, photo-shopped photographs. This focus supports existing research about the wall as the central hub for communication on *Facebook* (boyd, 2008).

My focus on “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” also recognizes the dialogic nature of qualitative case-based research. Qualitative case-based research is a dialog between established theories and ideas and keeping an open mind to allow the case itself to guide the research. The dialogic nature of such research recognizes that the researcher does not come to the research *tabula rasa* (with a blank slate). The researcher brings her or his previous knowledge and preconceptions to the work, but does so in a way that sets out to let the case speak for itself.

My research question is informed not only by the existing research, but also by my life experiences and past work in graduate school. As researcher Norman Denzin (1989, p. 48) has written: “the research question is framed by two sources: the researcher and the subject.” Accordingly, it seems worthwhile to expand upon how I, as a researcher, came upon the subject of online memorial groups.

As I detailed in the introduction, I first became interested in online memorial groups after my friend Nic Harter passed away following a scuba diving accident. In the online environment, I saw a virtual space within which the usually finite event of a memorial service could become infinite. Moreover, the dynamic capabilities of the online environment—the possibilities to share text and pictures at the user’s convenience in an “always-on” online community—struck me as a way to keep the conversation going about the lives of people who had passed away. My interest in communication within online memorial groups continued to develop in the fall of 2007, when my college acquaintance Katherine Olson was killed after answering a *Craigslist* posting.

In addition to these personal experiences, I come to this dissertation research having written two course papers about online memorial groups. In the first course paper, which I began in Spring 2007, I drew from five respondents, who responded to a short online survey and online follow-up questions on the *Facebook* social network. This very small sample of individuals who joined non-celebrity memorial groups suggested that such individuals may be using the groups (1) as an outlet for personal expression, especially grief, about the loss of the person for whom the group is named; (2) to stay connected with those who knew the person being memorialized; and (3) because of its convenience—the online environment allows anyone with an Internet connection to connect to the group. In the second course paper (2010) about online memorial groups formed after the Haiti and Chile earthquakes, respectively, I found that 18 of 29 survey respondents said they used the groups to search for people who were missing, which suggests that at least some people sought to use the connective power of the Internet to find missing persons after these international disasters. I am mindful that these past experiences, and my past studies might have provided a hint of emergent themes in the

“In Memorial: Virginia Tech” group, but the emergence of those themes was not predetermined. I maintained my focus on the task at-hand: building the case of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” group from the bottom-up.

Finally, I chose the case study research method because it was most effective for the purposes of answering my research question. The process of understanding the case of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” from a mass communication requires detailed examination the group’s wall postings and posted photographs. The group has tight spatial and temporal boundaries, which especially suggests the usefulness of the case study research strategy for this dissertation (Yin, 2003). Other approaches would seem to have difficulty analyzing the vast, interdisciplinary nature of this group. Given that the research question is focused on the “particularities” (Stake, 1995) of the group and its implications for journalism and mass communication, the case study research strategy appears to be the best approach for this dissertation.

### **Data Collection and Approach**

For the purposes of data collection, I used my free *Facebook* account to join “In Memorial: Virginia Tech,” which as an open group could be joined by accessing a link, <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2329457342>, without needing prior approval. As an open group, the group was ostensibly public, any user could view or participate in “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.”<sup>xii</sup>

I downloaded the group’s wall postings and posted photographs, saved them as both Word documents and PDF files, and stored them in a password-protected account on my computer’s hard drive. I printed out the group’s first 185 wall postings and began reading them. In all, I made five full reads of the group’s wall postings. In my first read, I was simply seeking to become acquainted with the group. In subsequent reads, I used a

ten-color pen to denote some emergent themes within the text. Relatively early in this process, the emotive quality of the group started to become apparent.

Following my five reads, I utilized the “track changes” function in a popular word processing program to begin a digital record for each posting. When utilizing “track changes,” I took care to emphasize the particularities of the text in each posting, bringing together what I found in my five hard copy reads with one additional read within the word processing program. I chose to utilize multiple reads, first in print and then in the word processing program, to obtain a fuller understanding of the group and its members. Working inductively, I was committed to letting the case be my guide.

My approach was content analysis, as defined by Babbie (2010) “the study of recorded human communications, such as books, websites, paintings and laws,” (p. 333) for my dissertation research. Content analysis is frequently used in quantitative mass communication research (Neuendorf, 2001; Krippendorff, 2004), but I see it as a valuable way to create qualitative content categories (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). Such categories helped me recognize emergent themes and three lines of inquiry emerged within the group: (1) the social media cycle (2) expressions of public memory and (3) the expression of emotion.

To study the social media cycle, I first define it: the social media cycle is the interplay between (1) the novel structural arrangement of an unfolding news event in the age of social media and (2) users’ particular needs during the same event, as expressed by themselves in the social media environment. In this case, the novel structural arrangement is that traditional journalism is journalism-structured and social media is user-structured and users’ particular needs are to make sense of, and bring meaning to, the lives and deaths of the victims in the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings.

Drawing upon Internet studies scholar Laura Gurak's (1997) conception of rhetorical dynamics, I assert that the social media cycle has two mass communication dynamics: (1) the message and (2) its chronological position. The first, the message, refers to the content and context of users' posted text or images within "In Memorial: Virginia Tech." The second, chronological position, refers to the moment when users posted the message in the group. These are the two mass communication dynamics within "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" because, just as the shootings are an unfolding news event, users' "goal-directed" narrative is a time-sensitive event. Later in this chapter, I present my understanding of the social media cycle and its mass communication dynamics in greater detail.

Mass communication often investigates media messages from a quantitative perspective (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005), but I assert the need to closely examine the changing media environment, its messages and their chronological position, from a qualitative case-based perspective. The case of the "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" Facebook group provides a compelling opportunity to do that.

To study expressions of public memory, I endorse John Bodnar's (1992) definition of public memory as "body of beliefs about the past that help a public or society understand both its past and its present, and, by implication, its future." To define expressions of public memory, I utilize what Bodnar terms "expressions of comradeship with and sorrow for the dead." For example, the fifth wall posting: "32 dead, god rest their souls" is an expression of public memory. The posting uses the phrase "God rest their souls" to assert the user's hope that the victims will find "rest" in life after death. In this way, God is the vehicle through which the user expresses both "comradeship with and sorrow for the dead."

To study the expression of emotion within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech,” I examine users’ emotion communication and, especially, their socioemotional expressions. Emotion communication suggests the tone of the expressed emotion while socioemotional expressions suggest the precise nature of the expressed emotion. Emotion communication provides contextual information to help the reader understand the emotional direction of the socioemotional expression. For the purposes of understanding the trajectory of postings in this group, emotion communication is coded as either negative or positive; this information is intended to help the reader more fully contextualize the socioemotional expressions within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.” For example, the first sentence in the group’s first posting: “it is unreal” is negative emotion communication and a socioemotional expression of tension. This sentence is coded as such because the user seems to be expressing a sense of feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the unfolding events.

In this case, day one is mostly characterized by negative emotion communication while positive emotion communication becomes more prominent on day two, especially once the phrase “We are Hokies” enters the group’s conversation. Emotion communication is a relatively recent term in computer-mediated communication, which seeks to further understand how emotion is communicated in a computer-mediated setting. Writing in *Computers in Human Behavior*, Derks et. al, (2008) “define emotion communication as the recognition, expression and sharing of emotions or moods between two or more individuals.” (p. 767). “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” is ripe for investigation of emotion communication because these shootings, with their resulting in student deaths, were arguably experienced by users as an emotional event.



While emotion communication provides important contextual information, my analysis of emotional expression primarily relies on understanding “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users’ socioemotional expressions. Emotion has a long history in computer-mediated communication (Hiltz & Turoff, 1978) and the study of socioemotional expression (Rice & Love, 1987) is an especially useful way to understand users’ expression of emotion within a computer-mediated setting. Communication researchers Rice & Love (1987) provide an especially instructive definition: “Socioemotional content is defined as interactions that show solidarity, tension relief, agreement, antagonism, tension and disagreement” (p. 93). Rice & Love (1987) also do well to define task-dimensional content “as interactions that ask for or give information or opinion,” (p. 93) and they rightly recognize that task-dimensional content can also contain socioemotional elements, especially if it draws on personal information. The six categories that Rice and Love specify each have some role within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech,” but the most prominent are expressions of tension on day one and expressions of solidarity towards the end of day two, respectively. The phrase “it is unreal,” as noted above, is coded as an expression of tension while the phrase “We are Hokies” is coded as an expression of solidarity. Taken together, the socioemotional expressions across the 36 hours reveal the trajectory of the expression of emotion within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.” My use of *both* emotion communication and, especially, socioemotional expressions in this study is intended to present a more holistic understanding of users’ expressions of emotion within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.”

These three lines of inquiry provide a full understanding of the case of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” and its implications for journalism and mass communication. These lines of inquiry recognize that users’ conceptualize the 2007 Virginia Tech

shootings as a news event, a memorial event and an emotional event, respectively. These three prongs of the event represent the complexity of users' expressions within "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" as I see them from a research perspective. I recognize that a case study is, ultimately, my interpretation of the meaning and significance of content that is tightly bound in space and time (Yin, 2003; Gurak, 1997; Stake, 1995). It is subjective and others may see it differently, but I employ a systematic research approach and draw heavily on content from the group itself to present the case in a richly detailed and hopefully compelling manner.

Users are drawn to the group because it provides an immediate, interactive and public platform for expression across a great distance during a time of crisis. Moreover, users are seeking to make sense of, and bring meaning to, the lives and deaths of those killed in the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings. Study of (1) the social media cycle (2) expressions of public memory and (3) users' expression of emotion have considerable potential to reveal precisely how users make sense of, and bring meaning to, the lives and deaths of these victims.

### **Journalism in the age of social media and these three lines of inquiry**

Journalism in the age of social media, in particular the user-structured social media environment, brings journalism and mass communication into collaboration with other, seemingly disparate, academic disciplines. These three lines of inquiry reflect that trend. To my knowledge, I am the first to utilize the phrase *social media cycle* when discussing the reaction to the traditional news cycle as it unfolds in the social media environment. Public memory, on the other hand, does have a small place in the mass communication literature, which I will touch on below. To my knowledge, I am among the first to consider emotion communication and socioemotional expressions within a

journalism and mass communication context. Journalism is certainly changing with the rise of digital media (King, 2010) especially for the way traditional and social media come into “conversation” (Kovach & Rosensteil, 2010). The particulars of this case necessitate close consideration of these three lines of inquiry.

### 1. The Social Media Cycle

Earlier in this chapter, I presented my definition of the social media cycle and its mass communication dynamics. I will first consider the social media cycle and then its mass communication dynamics. Based on my analysis of the data in this case, the social media cycle had six stages.

In this case, these six stages, which I will present in the first analysis chapter, represent how individuals employ both traditional journalism and their own experiences to more fully make sense of, and bring meaning to, the lives and deaths of the victims in the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings. The social media cycle reveals journalism in the age of social media as a hybrid model and this case especially allows close consideration of “journalism as conversation” (Kovach & Rosensteil, 2010) and its implications for journalism and mass communication.

As introduced earlier in this chapter, I assert that the social media cycle has two mass communication dynamics: (1) the message and its (2) chronological position. My understanding of mass communication dynamics is rooted in Internet studies scholar Laura Gurak’s conception of rhetorical dynamics. In *Persuasion and Privacy in Cyberspace: The Online Protests over Lotus Marketplace and the Clipper Chip*, Gurak (1997) employs rhetorical dynamics to examine early forms of online social action; specifically, the online protests over Lotus Marketplace and the Clipper Chip: “a close look at both online actions shows that they functioned through two rhetorical elements:

the appeal of ethos and the canon of delivery which, [Gurak] argue[s], constituted the *dynamics* of the community protest in cyberspace” (p. 12). Gurak defines ethos from within the tradition of classical rhetoric, noting: “ethos is associated with the credibility and character of the speaker” (p. 13). Within the context of these two online social actions, Gurak asserts “community ethos is the basis for what information other online participants will accept and believe” (p. 15). Gurak ties ethos to the canon of delivery in the following manner: “one’s perceived credibility and persona are inherently linked to how one delivers a speech” (p. 15). Gurak, furthermore, notes that online communication places considerable emphasis on the “medium of delivery” (p. 15):

“Where ethos was once conveyed to a room or town square full of people via a speaker’s physical gestures, it is now sent across the world, conveyed through ASCII characters, unique signature files, and strong language, to thousands of people who can immediately respond. When people of similar interests become attracted to a certain message, such communities as the Marketplace or Clipper protest groups come into existence.” (p. 16).

Just as Gurak (1997) saw an opportunity to study rhetorical community in a novel way through the cases of Marketplace and the Clipper Chip, I consider the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings, and specifically, the case of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group to be a promising opportunity to study the changing state of journalism and mass communication. My articulation of the social media cycle and its mass communication dynamics reflect a desire to mine the particulars of this case, especially in view of its implications for journalism and mass communication.

### *The Message*

I have chosen the first dynamic, the message, because mass communication is principally concerned with the production, consumption and dissemination of messages (Hansen & Paul, 2010). Broadly speaking, there are two forms of messages to consider in

this case: those that originate from journalistic sources (traditional journalism) and those that originate from informal sources (users' expressions). "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" users have the novel opportunity to select from a host of messages, or to generate their own, in the user-structured social media environment. As in the rhetorical tradition, a well-crafted mass communication message is inherently persuasive, but mass communicators are primarily interested, and to perhaps too great an extent, in the outcome of the message: the journalist in particular seeks to inform his or her audience about the changing world (Meyer, 1989; Kovach & Rosensteel, 2007; King, 2010). That process is clearly changing in the age of social media (Robinson, 2011) Examining the way users within "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" express the process of making sense of, and bringing meaning to, the lives and deaths of these victims provides a rare vantage point to journalism and mass communication scholars and practitioners. Studying when and how these individuals utilize information from traditional journalism, as well as when they draw upon their own experiences and viewpoints, has strong potential to provide needed understanding about the audience in the changing media environment.

#### *Chronological Position*

I have chosen the second dynamic, chronological position, because the time-based placement of the message in a social media conversation is just as significant as the message itself. The message "32 dead, god rest their souls" as the fifth posting in the group's conversation helps users make sense of—for the first time in the group—the deaths of these victims. The same message posted later in the group's conversation would not have the same impact, because that sensemaking has already been established. The subsequent posting would be seen as dovetailing the fifth posting, and so it would not be likely to contribute to users' sensemaking in the same way.

As Gurak did when discussing rhetorical dynamics (1997, p. 15), I assert that these two mass communication dynamics are “inherently linked”—the message must not be separated from its chronological position, one needs the other in order for the social media cycle to be fully understood.

*The Pace of the Group Further Suggests Need to Investigate The Social Media Cycle*

The rapid pace with which conversation begins, reaches a peak, and then subsides also supports Gurak’s notion of the “speed and reach” of online communication (2001, p. 30) and further suggests the need to investigate the social media cycle within the context of this group and its implications for journalism and mass communication. The pace of the news environment today is quicker than perhaps ever before. Political communication scholar Andrew Chadwick (2011) rightly notes this issue has engaged journalism scholars for some time. Chadwick writes that journalism scholars (including Gans, 1979, and Tuchman, 1980) have long been concerned with “cyclical routines and the importance of time in press and broadcasting environments” (p. 6). Each mass communication platform—from newspaper to radio and television to the Internet—has arguably been concerned with the pace of news. Journalism educator Willard G. Bleyer (1932) wrote about the production of four editions of the next day’s daily newspaper: the first produced around 9:30 p.m., the second produced around 11:30 p.m., and the third produced around 1:30 a.m. and the regular city edition at 3:30 a.m. (p. 439). Bleyer suggested distance as the primary reason for the production of multiple editions, as the first edition was “intended for places at a considerable distance” (p. 439). Broadcasting, first on the radio (Douglas, 1989; Douglas, 2004) and later on television (Edgerton, 2009; Baym, 2009) changed the way that news traveled across distances, and changed the pace of news as well. A radio broadcast could be heard by tuning to a particular frequency at a

particular time, and a television broadcast could be heard and seen by tuning into a particular channel. The pace of the news was especially accelerated with the advent of 24-hour cable news. As veteran journalists Howard Rosenberg and Charles S. Feldman write: “news on TV is driven largely by technology, the human contribution limited increasingly to flipping on the switch and letting everything rip” (2008, p. 15). The pace of news has also become accelerated, finally, in the online news environment.

Social media especially places the user at the center of the unfolding news environment, a sharp contrast to their position just 15 years ago, in the age of cable television as described by Rosenberg and Feldman. As Chadwick (2011) rightly notes: “New technological tools are said to have led to the compression of news time” (p. 6). Users can now employ the tools of the social media environment, at a moment’s notice, as an emerging platform for mass communication. The pace of news in the social media environment only adds to the need to investigate the social media cycle and its mass communication dynamics. The first analysis chapter takes up this call.

## 2. Expressions of Public Memory

Mass communication scholars have recognized the relationship between the construction of public memory and the media. Writing in *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Russell, Hume and Sickler (2007) state: “One of the powerful institutions credited with influencing American public memory is the press, which uses commemorations, historical analogies, and historical contexts in its reportage.” The rise of the social media environment, and especially the case of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” should encourage mass communication scholars to think beyond the press when examining expressions of public memory. Through an examination of the way “In

Memorial: Virginia Tech” users post expressions of public memory on the group’s *Facebook* wall, the second line of inquiry—examination of expressions of public memory—contributes to the process of broadening that perspective.

Public memory is an emerging area of mass communication research (Hume & Rossner, 2009; Russell, Hume & Sichler, 2007). When considered within a mass communication context, public memory has been investigated via newspaper coverage related to major military figures, such as William T. Sherman (Hume & Rossner, 2009) and George A. Custer (Russell, Hume & Sickler, 2007). Journalism historians have also begun to examine public memory of major sports figures (see Rossner, 2010, on press coverage about baseball great Ty Cobb in *The Sporting News* and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*). This focus on press coverage has suggested, in broad terms, that newspaper accounts help shape public memory of these individuals, especially as it becomes diffused throughout culture and society. In communication studies, rhetoric and related fields, public memory has been a more actively investigated area of research, spanning historical figures such as U.S. president Abraham Lincoln (Wilson, 2010) and, especially, memorials such as the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial (Blair, Jeppeson & Pucci, 1991; Haines, 1986) and the AIDS quilt (Rand, 2007; Blair & Michel, 2007; Brouwer, 2007; Jones, 2007; Knaus, et. al. 2000). Studies of offline memorials have also considered the Oklahoma City Bombing (Jorgenson-Earp & Lanzilotti, 1998) and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (Sturken, 2007). Studies of online memorials are beginning to emerge in the research literature, with particular consideration given to September 11 memorials in online settings (Hartelius, 2010; Hess, 2007; Foot, Warnick & Schneider, 2005). This dissertation takes the study of public memory and memorials into a still under-researched direction, with a focus on online memorial groups and, specifically, the



“In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group, from a mass communication perspective. Recognizing that offline and online memorials continue to be studied across communication and related fields, this dissertation brings together pertinent literature especially from computer-mediated communication and mass communication for the purposes of studying expressions of public memory (Bodnar, 1992) within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.”

I assert that the expansion of mass communication into the digital and social media environment encourages broader consideration of expressions of public memory. This dissertation asserts social media as potentially providing a platform for immediate, interactive and public expression across a great distance during a time of crisis. Given that “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” asserts itself as a memorial group by name, studying expressions of public memory seems especially well-suited to this case. For the purposes of considering the case of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech,” the 1999 Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado are an especially instructive historical example. The 1999 shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, brought renewed attention to memorial practices (Spencer & Muschert, 2009). In their study of 15 wooden crosses placed on a hill overlooking the school—13 for those killed and one for each of the two shooters, Spencer and Muschert asserted that the crosses are “a collective expression of grief and memorialization that develops immediately after an untimely or tragic death” (p. 1372). The 2007 Virginia Tech school shootings, as the deadliest school shootings in modern American history, are often compared to the Columbine shootings, which previously held the distinction as the nation’s “deadliest” shootings. Study of the Virginia Tech shootings, and specifically the case of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” builds

understanding about memorials and, specifically, the growing realm of memorial groups in the online, social media environment.

In the case of the aforementioned Columbine memorial, Spencer and Muschert found the two crosses intended for the shooters to be a particular source of tension, both within the community and in the local, national and international media coverage. The two crosses intended for the shooters were the source of both local, public controversy contentious media coverage, until those two were eventually removed from the site (p. 1384). According to Spencer & Muschert: “the removal of the two crosses symbolizes the victory of the traditional concept of moral culpability over the modern concept” (p. 1384). This example suggests that these two crosses were central to that memorial: which is to say, they were at the heart of the discussion about the role of those crosses as a memorial to that particular event. The 2007 Virginia Tech shootings, and this *Facebook* group, provides a needed opportunity to further develop knowledge of public memorials in the social media environment. The second analysis chapter will take up this call.

### 3. The Expression of Emotion

Emotion has recently been studied in mass communication research, but the studies have mostly been employing an experimental survey design (Angelcev & Sar, 2011; Major, 2011). There is a need to more fully place emotion in mass communication settings, which is to say, to examine emotional responses in real-world settings. My use of emotion communication (Derks et. al, 2007) and socioemotional expression (Rice & Love, 1987) draws on the research tradition in computer-mediated communication.

Emotion has a long history of study in computer-mediated communication research (for an overview, see Derks, et. al, 2008). Some scholars debate about the nature of emotional expression in CMC environments, and this relationship has been an active

area of research since at least the late 1970s, when Starr Roxanne Hiltz and Murray Turoff published their seminal book The Network Nation (1978). Hiltz and Turoff especially noted “the narrowing of communication channels” (p. 76) in view of the absence of the visual cues associated with face-to-face communication (p. 80). Visual information, facial expression, eye contact, body movement and psychophysiological responses (p. 78-80) were missing from text-based CMC. Within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech,” thirty years after Hiltz and Turoff’s book, these five cues are still “missing” from the group’s communication.

In part on the basis of missing visual cues, there emerged a scholarly debate about the extent to which emotions could be expressed in a computer-mediated communication environment, and some scholars were more skeptical (Rice & Love, 1987); (Sproull, Galagher & Kiesler, 1986) than others (Walther & Burgoon, 1992). Recent work tells a rather different story, asserting: “emotions are abundant in CMC, and there is no indication that CMC is an impersonal medium, nor that it is more difficult to communicate emotions online” (Derks, et. al, 2008, p. 779). Accordingly, there is a need to examine whether, and to what extent, there is emotion communication and socioemotional expressions within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.”

The possibility for both emotion communication and socioemotional expression is especially profound because *Facebook* in 2007 was primarily populated by college students and these users are expressing themselves following a news event that most directly affected the campus community at Virginia Tech. The case narrative also revealed a trajectory from tragedy on day one to opportunity for unity on day two, which suggested that users conceived of the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings as an emotional event. The nature of this shift, from hurting for the victims to healing with the members

of the campus community, requires further investigation. Accordingly, the third analysis chapter examines the expression of emotion within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.”

I have chosen to undertake these three lines of inquiry because they are needed to fully understand the case of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group and its implications for journalism and mass communication. These three lines of inquiry emerge from the data and they are my interpretation of the inner workings of this case (Yin, 2003; Gurak, 1997; Stake, 1995). I am asserting that these three lines of inquiry will provide the evidence needed to fully answer my research question.

The three analysis chapters that follow this chapter will be primarily descriptive, set in the context of similar research and analysis. In the chapter seven, the conclusion, I will utilize uses and gratifications theory as a way to theorize my findings and tie them together at a higher level, in more explanatory terms.

### **Uses and Gratifications as the most explanatory theory for this case**

Social media are especially well-suited for the uses and gratifications approach, as Anabel Quan-Haase and Alyson L. Young persuasively assert, because “the concurrent use of various tools suggests that each fulfills a distinct need making an analysis of U&G essential” (2010, p. 352). This has made it a popular, explanatory theory for the study of social media, including *Facebook*. For example, Foregger (2008, p. 85) conducted one of the first uses and gratifications studies about *Facebook* and found that users especially sought to “pass time.” This is not necessarily surprising, as previous research about *Facebook* suggests that the social network is often utilized to maintain existing relationships, rather than to seek out or establish new relationships. In a survey of first-year students at Michigan State University, Lampe, Ellison & Steinfeld (2006, p. 169) found that *Facebook* was primarily used to “keep in touch with an old friend or someone

I knew from high school.” In 2007, the same research team (Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe) surveyed 286 Michigan State University undergraduate students about their *Facebook* use and found strikingly similar results: “Our participants overwhelmingly used Facebook to keep in touch with old friends and to maintain or intensify relationships characterized by some form of offline connection” (2007, p. 1162). Taking a uses and gratifications approach, Quan-Haase & Young (2010) compared use of *Facebook* and instant messaging (IM) via a questionnaire and interviews, and found results that seem to support those of the Michigan State team: “Facebook is used to find out about social events, friends’ activities, and social information about peers” (p. 358). “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” was created and became active, it may very well be that the group’s members do not have any existing relationships, a notion that is at odds with one previous study (Ellison, et. al, 2007). However, the findings of Quan-Haase and Young (2010) resonate because users learn about events and peers in this emerging media environment. Notably, users are learning about a news event—not simply a social outing—and they employ the group to gratify their need for expression about the victims in these shootings. “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” provides a platform for users to participate within a mass communication context. These users are adding their voice, for the sake of the victims, into the conversation. This case therefore points out the need for journalists, journalism scholars and educators to more fully integrate these previously under-represented voices into their ongoing examination of unfolding events. In this case, the audience is revealed as more visible and ubiquitous in the age of social media than during earlier journalistic eras. Traditional journalism in all its forms should adapt to this vital shift and work towards integration of these voices.<sup>xiii</sup>

The focus on wall postings in this dissertation, though, means that the presence or absence of any existing connections between users cannot be asserted with certainty.

Nonetheless, it seems possible that, if users had some existing connection with others in the group, that connection might be referenced in their wall posting. Even more importantly, the case of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” brings the opportunity for expanded understanding about the audience and mass communication in the social media environment. The unique parameters of this case suggest it expands understanding about how individuals utilize a particular mass communication platform across a great distance during a time of crisis:

(1) This group’s members are “active, goal-directed” users. Their “active” status is affirmed because of the decision to post on the *Facebook* wall. Their “goal” is assumed to be communication through text and/or images in a wall posting.

(2) This group’s members are the ones using *Facebook*, the social networking site is not “using them.” Users control their own usage; they are able to click when and where they would like, and to post information (or not) of their own volition; they are not being forced or coerced into *Facebook* usage.

(3) Group members’ media use, in this case their *Facebook* use, “compete[s] with other sources of need satisfaction.” Media use in general, and *Facebook* use specifically, is only one option among a host of sources for “need satisfaction.”

(4) In large part, *Facebook* users’ “goals of media use can be derived from data supplied by individual audience members themselves.” Users wall postings, which constitute the data in this case, explain why users sought to participate, at least in part, within the group. In relation, users are “sufficiently self-aware to be able to report their interests and

motives in particular cases.” *Facebook* users wall postings are assumed to accurately reflect “their interests and motives” for participation within the group.

(5) There is a need to consider “audience orientations on their own terms,” in this case, to consider each wall posting for its own sake and as its own discrete entity.

Those phrases that are in quotations above are from Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch (1974), who authored the seminal text on uses and gratifications in mass communication research. As shown above, I endorse and apply their understanding of this theory, and I assert it as the most explanatory theory in this case. That said, I also recognize some key limitations of applying this theory to “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.”

### **Recognizing Key Limitations of this Theoretical Perspective**

Every theoretical framework has limitations, and in this case, it concerns the active audience and the underlying assumptions embedded in the theory of uses and gratifications. In this case, I present “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users as “goal-directed” and “purpose-driven” in their media use. Some critics (White, 1994) have asserted neither the individual user nor the media audience actually have such “active” capacity, because they are simply consuming what is provided in media. To this criticism, I would assert that the rise of the social media environment brings vast potential for user-generated content (Jenkins, 2010) and that, even though users probably cannot entirely control their experiences in media use from production to consumption, the social media environment seems to place the end-user in a more active position than even the WWW did. For example, more than 30 user-generated, photoshopped images were uploaded to “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.” As I discuss in the third analysis chapter, these images play a role in users’ emotion communication and their socioemotional expressions of solidarity in the aftermath of the “We are Hokies” convocation speech. These users are

clearly active because they have taken it upon themselves to generate content and share it with the audience.

I do recognize, though, that the group has more than 3,000 users overall. Of these, only a small percentage are among the most active: the 173 users who made the group's 185 wall postings, and those who posted more than 30 photoshopped images. Because the users are only a small percentage of the group's overall population, I ultimately return to Rubin's (2002, p. 534) notion of audience activity as being active on a "continuum between active and passive users."

The second criticism of uses and gratifications theory that seems to endure is the lack of rigorous "theoretical underpinnings" (Ruggerio, 2000). The process of answering this criticism is somewhat more challenging. But, as I have shown, uses and gratifications is a living theory, that is, one that grows and changes with its application to new and novel media. The study of a new medium, which is frequently when uses and gratifications has been employed, is a necessarily difficult undertaking. Uses and gratifications theorists, since the 1970s, have been working to refine the theory and its underlying principles, especially in view of the active audience (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). Namely, media sometimes have "unintended effects" (p. 24), and any process that attempts to investigate the impact of individual selection and choice on media use is, clearly, at least somewhat indebted to considerations of individuals' social and psychological background (Katz, Gurevitch & Haas, 1973). More recent studies of the social media environment proceed in recognition of the fact that individuals' media use is only discernible to a given extent (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010), based on readily identifiable data and methods of investigation. While no single study can reveal everything about individuals' media use, uses and gratifications theory is especially well-



suited for “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.” The theory is particularly explanatory in this case because it allows for the study of posted content: wall postings and images.

**Studying Content:**

**Uses and Gratifications Theory as Most Explanatory for this Case**

The Internet has long been recognized for its vast amount of archived data (December, 1996). In this dissertation, I work towards an understanding of users on their posted content. Specifically, wall postings and photographs posted onto the group. In this way, I am asserting that what individuals posted within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” provides a meaningful, fairly robust vantage point from which to consider how and why individuals utilized the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group. Many previous uses and gratifications studies have, on the other hand, relied on surveys and interviews (for example, on *Facebook* studies, see Foregger, 2008; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Those are fine and valid measures, but I am asserting that users’ posted content reveals insights about what was occurring “in the moment.” These insights might be lost in surveys and interviews, which almost always occur after the event has concluded (Riffe & Stovall, 1989). The study of content, like the use of surveys and interviews, certainly does not answer every aspect about how and why individuals utilize media. But the study of content is uniquely suited to this dissertation. An understanding of the first major news event to unfold in the social media environment requires close consideration of that “unfolding,” which seems most fully obtained through study of the group’s wall postings and posted, photo-shopped images, as undertaken here. My study of these specific elements recognizes them as intertwined into the larger culture of *Facebook*.

On this point, communication scholars Carey & Kreiling (1974), writing about the study of popular culture via uses and gratifications, call for an examination of “culturally

constructed ‘tastes’ for specific cultural styles and forms” (p. 245-6). I recognize that “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users likely feel comfortable in the culture of *Facebook*—having sought out, and participated, on the social network during a time of crisis—writing wall postings and, for some, photoshopping and uploading images. With emphasis on the group’s content, I examine how the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings unfolded within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.” Uses and gratifications theory is especially well suited for the case of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group and its implications for journalism and mass communication, because it is most explanatory in terms of what I found in this case. Working inductively, I start by presenting the case narrative and content analysis, then use uses and gratifications theory to explain what I found.

### **Summarizing the Method and Theory and Looking Ahead to the Analysis**

This chapter has presented the research method, method of analysis and most explanatory theory for this case. This dissertation employs a case study research strategy (Yin, 2003; Stake, 1995) and utilizes content analysis (Babbie, 2010) to examine the case of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group and its implications for journalism and mass communication. Working inductively (Eisenhardt, 1989), three lines of inquiry emerged (1) the social media cycle (2) expressions of public memory and (3) expressions of emotion. The user-structured social media environment made it possible for users to employ these three, seemingly disparate, forms of expression as news of the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings unfolded. The uses and gratifications theoretical framework provides the most explanatory theory for this case. The theory not only has a long, established history in mass communication research (Katz, Gurevitch & Haas, 1974; Ruggiero, 2000) but it has also increasingly being applied to the user-driven social media

environment (Foregger, 2008; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). This clearly made it the most explanatory theory to help answer the research question: What are the implications of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group for journalism and mass communication?

Taken together, the three analysis chapters that follow—social media cycle, expressions of public memory and expressions of emotion—will provide the evidence needed to answer the research question.

IV.

The Social Media Cycle

As I introduced in chapter three, the social media cycle is the interplay between (1) the novel structural arrangement of an unfolding news event in the age of social media and (2) users' particular needs during the same event, as expressed by themselves in the social media environment. In this case, the novel structural arrangement is that traditional journalism is journalism-structured and social media is user-structured and users' particular needs are to make sense of, and bring meaning to, the lives and deaths of the victims in the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings.

The social media cycle has two mass communication dynamics: (1) the message and (2) its chronological position. The first, the message, refers to the content and context of users' posted text or images within "In Memorial: Virginia Tech." The second, chronological position, refers to the moment when users posted the message in the group. These are the two mass communication dynamics within "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" because, just as the shootings are an unfolding news event, users' "goal-directed" narrative is a time-sensitive event. This case reveals the audience in dialog with the gatekeeper, as users participate in the group to gratify their needs relating to this unfolding news event. The audience is constantly being productive and living out the theory of uses and gratifications, they also are acting as producers or gatekeepers; these users shape a narrative for the event that is squarely focused on the victims in these shootings and, in doing so, they are implicitly encouraging traditional journalism to take a more holistic view of unfolding news events as well.

Though the social media environment is user-structured, this analysis of the social media cycle and its mass communication dynamics will reveal that, even and especially in this user-structured environment, the structure provided by traditional journalism is needed to address gaps and correct divergences on the path towards satisfying users'

specific needs. This analysis will further reveal that users tend to rely on two techniques to structure the conversation. First, users employ specific news items from traditional journalism. Second, users employ their personal experiences—especially from their lives as college students. This analysis of the social media cycle sheds needed light on the possibilities and pitfalls of these techniques to structure users’ conversation as they work towards satisfying their particular needs: to make sense of, and bring meaning to, the lives and deaths of the victims in the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings.

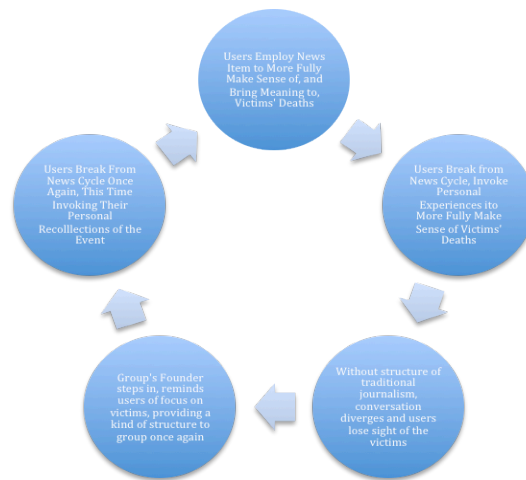


Figure 15: The Six Stages of the Social Media Cycle in This Case

As pictured above, the social media cycle within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” has six stages. This analysis chapter will present the social media cycle in chronological order, thus proceeding clockwise. The group is slightly weighted towards the first day, 102 postings, to 83 on the second day and the social media cycle follows this weighting: the first four stages of the social media cycle occur on day one and the last two stages occur on day two. For these users, the first day is primarily focused on making sense of the shootings and early, largely failed attempts to make sense of and bring meaning to the lives and deaths of the victims, while the second day transitions towards more successful

attempts at bringing meaning to the lives and deaths of the victims. Moreover, the active posting within the group, especially on the first day, strongly suggests users' compulsion to post about news events as they unfold; there is a pursuit of immediate gratification at work, the user in the age of social media has the tools to see the event and, immediately, to make a posting in a group such as "In Memorial: Virginia Tech." The desire to gratify a need for expression, even and especially at a distance, can be more fully realized in the age of social media.

The two mass communication dynamics, *the message* and its *chronological position* in the group's conversation, reveal the particularities of journalism in the age of social media.

#### DAY ONE: APRIL 16, 2007

##### Figure 16: First Eight Postings Occur Before President Bush Remarks

Robin Vanderboch It is unreal. Campuses around the nation need to realize what just happened. The two shootings occurred 2 HOURS apart!!! That is way to long for police to respond!!

April 16, 2007 at 1:17pm

Adonis Mishra wow : V

April 16, 2007 at 1:18pm

Stan Douglas 32 shot

April 16, 2007 at 1:33pm

Karen Young Why weren't classes cancelled after the first shooting?

April 16, 2007 at 1:42pm

Jenna Baxter 32 dead, god rest their souls

April 16, 2007 at 1:47pm

Linda Reyner This is almost surreal. My best wishes to everyone.

April 16, 2007 at 1:54pm

Joe Hall Not to take away from this tragedy, but DiMeo, you're a pretentious fuck. Get out of this group.

April 16, 2007 at 1:57pm

Nick King Took a shower and shave. Had to phone fight with a credit card company. Turned on the TV and freaked out. All my prayers for everyone involved.

April 16, 2007 at 2:01pm

“President Bush was described Monday as shocked and saddened by the mass shooting at Virginia Tech, the deadliest incident of campus violence ever in this country. ‘He was horrified and his immediate reaction was one of deep concern for the families of the victims, the victims themselves, the students, the professors and all the people of Virginia who have dealt with this shocking incident,’ White House deputy press secretary Dana Perino said. ‘His thoughts and prayers are with them.’ (*Associated Press*, 2:03 p.m.).



**The First Stage of The Social Media Cycle—  
Social Media Scoops Traditional Journalism:  
Users’ Expressions Directed Towards Victims Outpace President Bush**

The social media cycle outpaces the traditional news cycle in expressions directed towards the victims. Eight wall postings have already been made in “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” by the time then-U.S. President Bush offers his “thoughts and prayers” to the victims in the Virginia Tech shootings. In fact, Robin Vandenko asserts the national scope of the event in the first posting: “It is unreal. Campuses around the nation need to realize what just happened.” It will be a full 45 minutes until President Bush’s words. Social media expressions clearly scoop traditional journalism in this case—and by a long while. Journalism in the age of social media is a “conversation” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010) between traditional journalism and social media, and this finding especially suggests that, when it comes to expressions directed towards the victims, social media appears to be leading the way. Furthermore, this finding affirms that social media



is expression-driven (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd & Ellison, 2007). From the outset, these users appear to employ the potential of the user-structured social media environment to facilitate participation with a purpose.

The breakneck pace of these initial postings (Chadwick, 2011; Robinson, 2011; Zelizer, 2011) may well be explained because individuals without a direct, geographic connection to the event do not appear to have a comparable mass communication platform for expression in the aftermath of the news event. Accordingly, “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users “switch” (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010) between traditional media and the group in an attempt to satisfy their initial expressive needs. This case demonstrates *Facebook* as an immediate, interactive and public platform for expression following a news event across a great distance during a time of crisis.

Already in these first eight postings, users’ particular needs begin to come into sharper focus: they are specifically seeking to make sense of, and bring meaning to, the lives and deaths of the victims in these shootings. Users’ expressions of initial shock, their utilization of the death toll from traditional journalism in an attempt to quell their initial shock and then the invocation of religious blessings and prayers for the dead represent the initial stages of users’ sensemaking process.

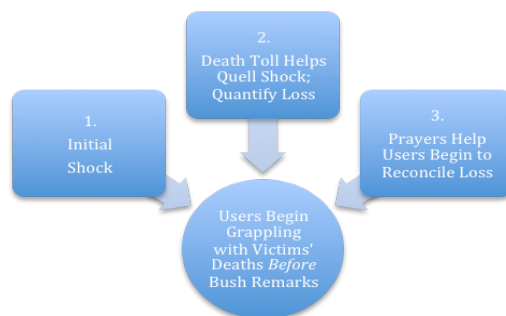


Figure 17: Users Begin Grappling With Victims’ Deaths Before Bush Remarks

The bookends of this process—shock and prayers—are common after death or tragedy throughout American culture (Kitch & Hume, 2008) but the utilization of the death toll is relatively novel to this case; it suggests users initially employ traditional journalism to more easily come to terms with the enormity of these unfolding events. For these users, traditional journalism is most useful when specific news items, such as the death toll, drive forward the group’s “goal-directed” (Hanson et. al, 2010; Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974) narrative about the lives and deaths of the victims in these shootings. Namely, the death toll is employed here precisely *because* it allows users to begin to more fully make sense of the lives and deaths of these victims. This finding strongly suggests that this news item, the death toll, provides needed structure to help address gaps in sensemaking in the group’s user-structured social media conversation. In this way, traditional journalism helps guide users’ selectively focused narrative about the unfolding events.

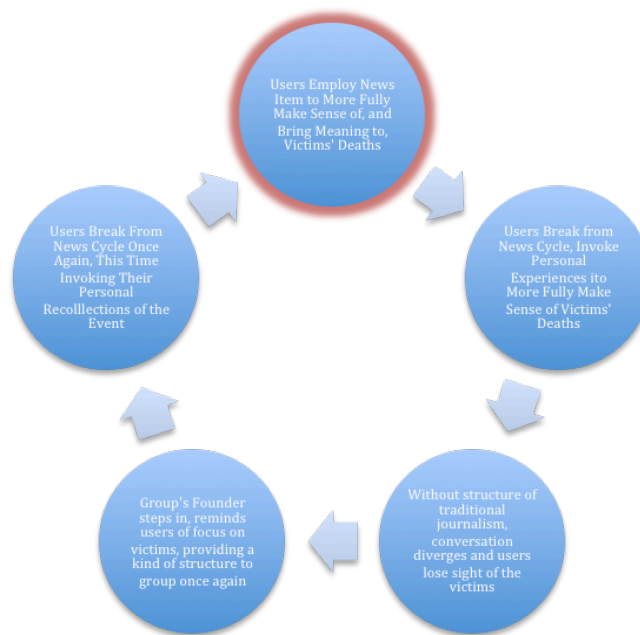


Figure 18: The First Stage of the Social Media Cycle in This Case

This first stage in the social media cycle reflects the brevity of communication in the online world (Turkle, 2011; Smith & Kollock, 2001) and brief postings may be especially appealing to these users at this point because the initial shock of these unfolding events might render it a challenge to write at length about them (Vicary & Fraley, 2010; Goodhead, 2010; Mayer-Schonberger, 2010). Students interviewed in the traditional news cycle throughout the afternoon were still experiencing profound shock and uncertainty about unfolding events. This feeling is likely due, for the most part, to those students proximity to the events--all students interviewed by *The Associated Press* in the afternoon were Virginia Tech students, providing a student-on-the-scene perspective. Three students were interviewed by the AP *before* the first posting in "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" and one student was interviewed one minute after the group's first posting. These four student perspectives uniformly represent an acute sense of initial shock and uncertainty.

Figure 19: *The Associated Press* Only Includes Student Perspectives from Virginia Tech Students

### **Before the Group's First Posting**

"There's just a lot of commotion. It's hard to tell exactly what's going on," said student Jason Anthony Smith, 19, who lives in the dorm where shooting took place."

"Aimee Kanode, a freshman from Martinsville, said the shooting happened on the 4th floor of West Ambler Johnston dormitory, one floor above her room. Kanode's resident assistant knocked on her door about 8 a.m. to notify students to stay put.

"They had us under lockdown," Kanode said. "They temporarily lifted the lockdown, the gunman shot again." "We're all locked in our dorms surfing the Internet trying to figure out what's going on," Kanode said.

Madison Van Duyne, a student who was interviewed by telephone on CNN, said, "We are all in lockdown. Most of the students are sitting on the floors away from the windows just trying to be as safe as possible."

### **After the Group's First Posting**

“Maurice Hiller, 21, a mechanical engineering student from Richmond, saw police and SWAT team members with guns drawn going toward Norris Hall. “This is something just totally beyond anybody’s expectations, he said.”

These eyewitness accounts certainly suggest proximity to the event, but Hiller may or may not have been aware of the overall gravity of unfolding events—32 deaths—during the time of his comment. He, like his fellow students on campus, may or may not have had the benefit of knowledge of the death toll to help them make sense of the enormity of the unfolding events.

“In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users, participating from afar, have the benefit of news coverage, and specifically of the death toll, as they begin to come to terms with the enormity of these events. “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” appears to have “scooped” traditional media when it comes to expressions directed towards the victims. Journalism in the age of social media is therefore revealed as a hybrid model: those individuals who have access to both traditional journalism and social media –and who are especially motivated to do so, as these users appear to have been—are able to shift, relatively quickly after the shootings, towards the process of making sense of these unfolding events.

The first stage of the social media cycle represents users’ initial process of making sense of these victims’ deaths. Sensemaking continues throughout the afternoon on day one, with users dovetailing President Bush’s “thoughts and prayers” (2:08 p.m.), the group’s social media cycle diverging from the traditional news cycle as it reaches a global audience (3:39 p.m.) and users’ continuing this divergence as they affirm their campus affiliations (4:32 p.m.). As “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users make sense of the event, they utilize a combination of traditional journalism and personal experiences to give the social media cycle its early structure on the afternoon of day one.



Figure 20: The upcoming chronology on the afternoon of day one

**The Second Stage of the Social Media Cycle—  
The Social Media Cycle Dovetails, then Diverges from Traditional News Cycle:  
Second Hour Dovetails President Bush, then Diverges as Group Goes Global,  
Users Employ Campus Affiliations to Assert Shootings as Campus Event**

As an expression-based narrative, and having scooped the traditional news cycle, users are content in the second hour of the social media cycle to dovetail with President Bush’s expression of “thoughts and prayers.” All sixteen second-hour postings contain some religious expression, which speaks to the prominence of Judeo-Christian values in American society (Long, 2007) and lends support to the notion that these values tend to emerge following national crises (Vicary & Fraley, 2010; Sanderson & Leoung, 2010), especially those crises involving unexpected deaths (Hume, 2000).

Users’ conceptions of who constitutes *the victims* extends during the second hour to include family, friends and the Virginia Tech campus community, which lends support to the notion that the expansive nature of a news event tends to become more evident throughout its initial hours (Deuze, 2011; Allan, 2009). Users likely see no need to employ an additional news item here because the expression of prayers, which began at 2:01 p.m., is the predominant feature of second hour postings.

But, by the third hour, the event has gone global, with one posting in which the user claims to be writing from “across the atlantic.” Once the group establishes its

national character, dovetailing on traditional journalism, it is not at all surprising that the third hour brings the group's first transatlantic posting:

“our prayers are with you from across the atlantic. xx”  
April 16, 2007 at 3:39pm

This geographic expansion reflects the international diffusion of Internet usage (International Telecommunications Union, 2009) especially across Western Europe, and it also supports the longstanding notion that online communication has made geographic borders more easily traversable, especially in politically democratic nations (Hanson, 2010). This finding also affirms the role of uses and gratifications theory in this case. The need to express one's self in the aftermath of these shootings, and the opportunity to seek this gratification, is present afar, as well as in the United States. This finding may suggest international users reach out in a public forum, and seek connections with other users, in a similar manner as their domestic counterparts. Future research should further investigate the particularities of transnational response to unfolding news events, but this finding may suggest core similarities among expressive needs, such as the needs of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users to express themselves about the victims in the aftermath of these shootings.

On the afternoon of the shootings, international traditional journalistic coverage about the shootings is still relatively limited. But a news story in *The Guardian Unlimited* relates only one student perspective, that of an individual on-campus at Virginia Tech:

"There are police driving throughout the neighbourhoods with a loudspeaker saying, 'this is an emergency, everyone stay inside, we're looking for suspicious activity'," Brittany Sammon, a Virginia Tech student staying at an apartment off campus, told Fox News. "There's no one outside at all, there's no traffic, there's nothing ... everyone's doing what they said."

The sense of “commotion” is apparently repeated here, but that student perspective is, again, a very limited expression of the emotional range of the event. Sammon’s words may indicate that international journalism repeats the narrow conception of covering the event, similarly failing to provide a voice for those individuals without a direct, geographic connection to the Virginia Tech shootings. Accordingly, it may very well be that international students benefit, and they certainly could benefit, from the group satisfying their expressive needs in a similar way as American students who are geographically at a distance from the Blacksburg campus, but a more international audience of users would be needed to actually test this phenomenon. Having spanned the Atlantic, it becomes clear that this American event has an international reach as well.

The event is now approximately nine hours in the making; six hours between the first shooting and the group’s first posting and three hours from the group’s first posting to the first international posting. Journalism in the age of social media has spanned the globe in this timeframe. Traditional journalism has provided the content and context surrounding the unfolding events, while users—each of whom at this point seems to have *no* empirically identifiable, direct or geographic connection to the event have made evident that the reach of the event is far broader than has been reflected in traditional journalism. The 46 postings in the first three hours reveal that the impact of the shootings spans far beyond the Virginia Tech campus.

As the social media cycle has expanded from national to global, “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users diverge from the traditional news cycle and assert their campus affiliations: these affiliations help make clear that these users view the shootings and their aftermath as a campus event. For “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users, many of whom

came of age during the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School, these shootings evoke that memory. Towards the end of the third hour, users begin placing this event into historical context, especially alongside the Columbine shootings, that occurred almost a decade earlier, when many of these users (and ostensibly the victims) were in primary and middle school:

“Those of us located near Columbine have a sense of what you are all going through. We are 3 days short of 8 years and it feels just like it happened yesterday. **We are there to pray for everyone involved and try to help carry you through all of the emotions and difficult times ahead. Just keep talking and getting it out and it will eventually get better.** Time heals all wounds! May God Bless everyone involved in this horrible tragedy!”

April 16, 2007 at 4:13pm (emphasis in bold mine)

The *Associated Press* publishes a list of notable American campus shootings on the morning of April 16<sup>th</sup>. Though the Associated Press published the list much sooner than this historicization within the group (11:21 a.m. EST), the list is decidedly removed from users’ apparent life experiences, because the Columbine shootings *are not included on it*; they were a high school, rather than a college, school shooting.

This comparison especially reveals the fact-based nature of the traditional news cycle versus the expression-based nature of the social media environment. When a user with a geographic connection to Littleton, Colorado, posts within the group, he relates his own experience with those shootings. These users employ the group to connect with, and perhaps publically express grief, with at least one individual who seems to have been previously affected by the Columbine shooting. In this way, social media facilitates the expression of ostensibly similar experiences—a school shooting one decade earlier and the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting—across space and time at a moment’s notice and in a mass communication context. Viewing the experiences of those who have previously lived through similar events may help these users recognize, and gratify, their own needs



in the aftermath of this event. When a user discusses coping with the Columbine shootings, it may serve as a guide for some “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users.

This expressive narrative is missing from *Associated Press* coverage. With this historicization, “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” makes user expressions more visible and ubiquitous than they are in the traditional journalism context. While this process of relating to victims through some personal connection is not uncommon in traditional, offline memorial settings (Goodhead, 2010), “In Memorial: Virginia Tech, and its immediate, interactive and public nature, demonstrates a user from a great geographic distance articulating that expression via the user-structured social media environment only hours after the events themselves. The afternoon of the shootings finds these users continuing to express themselves as college and university students. Despite users’ lack of stated geographic or direct connection to these events, users’ student status encourages their expression for the sake of the victims.

Figure 21: Users Express Campus Affiliations to Assert Shootings as Campus Event

Hey to everyone at VT, its your ACC brothers to the south, just wanted to say that all us Seminoles are honorary Hokies today, we are all sad on our campus as well. . .  
April 16, 2007 at 4:32pm

my thoughts and prayers go out to all the victims and their families at VT...God Bless  
April 16, 2007 at 4:36pm

what a tragedy :(  
God Bless all the families and friends that were affected by this tragedy!  
My prayers are with all of you in Virginia!  
April 16, 2007 at 4:42pm

I can't believe something like this happened, in Blacksburg no less. Everyone at UNC is praying  
April 16, 2007 at 4:49pm

The ability to make this distinction—to assert a national, unfolding news event as also and especially a campus event—is a novel characteristic of journalism in the age of

social media. The user-structured social media environment has made it possible for this cluster of students to invoke their campus affiliations in a first attempt to make meaning from the seemingly senseless lives and deaths of the victims in these shootings. This process begins for users through the prism of their own lives.

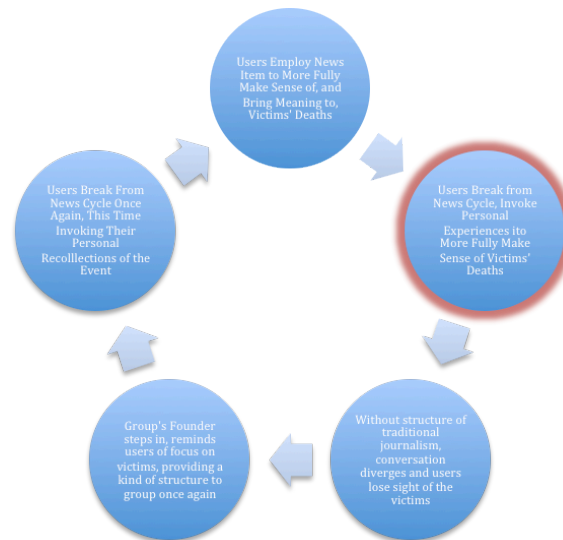


Figure 22: The Second Stage of the Social Media Cycle in This Case

This finding reveals a key distinction between traditional journalism and social media. Whereas traditional journalism has long rendered the experience of tragedy a “shared American event” (Kitch & Hume, 2008, p. 151) that viewers and listeners experienced in their basements and living rooms, social media allows clusters of individuals, such as these “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users, to further assert the specific meaning of this event in their own lives. These postings reflect that meaning being made more visible and ubiquitous than perhaps ever before in a mass communication context, which speaks to the “added value” (Eighmey & McCord, 1998; see also, Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Hanson et. al, 2010) of social media as a mass communication platform. The user-structured social media environment more fully

reveals the “particularities” (Stake, 1995) of the mass communication audience (Zelizer, 2011; Robinson, 2011; Kovach & Rosensteel, 2010; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Chaffee & Metzger, 2001).

The traditional news cycle, on the other hand, is not well equipped to aide users in this “hyperpersonal” (Walther, 1996) and largely collegiate-driven exploration of the initial meaning of the event, because roles for journalists emphasize providing content and context to the public (Hardin & Ash, 2011). The traditional news cycle, perhaps not surprisingly, does not reveal a similar turn towards students’ campus affiliations during this time-period. Within the *Associated Press* coverage from the same time period, for example, interviewees, when they are students, are exclusively Virginia Tech students. This finding suggests that traditional journalism continues to present a “fact-based” account (Zelizer, 2011; Kovach & Rosensteel, 2010; Schudson, 1979; Tuchman, 1979) of events, while the social media cycle continues to be expression-driven. Users’ expression-driven narrative faces its first major struggle when the group embarks on a discussion of the cultural implications of the shootings without the benefit of a fact-based foundation from traditional journalism.

**The Third Stage of the Social Media Cycle—  
The Social Media Cycle Loses Focus Without the Traditional News Cycle:  
Users Struggle to Discuss Cultural Implications, Briefly Lose Sight of Victims  
in Gun Control Debate**

Figure 23: Social Media Cycle Continues Divergence from Traditional News Cycle:  
Users Struggle to Discuss Cultural Implications Without Fact-Based Foundation

It is a sad event and believe me when I say that MAJOR changes are about to be made at large universities around the nation. I go to Ohio State and there are some lecture halls with 500+ people wiht only 2 exits. Imagine that. This is very sad and this has been a problem for some time. Security needs to be changes at colleges and schools. Regardless, we cannot live in fear. Thoughts and prayers for everyone involved from everyone at The Ohio State University. God Bless.

April 16, 2007 at 5:33pm · Flag

To the entire VT community, I'm saddened to hear the news about the loss of your own. I don't understand, how in the world would a civilized human being randomly ruthlessly gun down college students! This barbarism makes me sick--this show how low lifes', with their barbarous motivation would stop at nothing to make themselves known--they know nothing of civilization-- I can't comprehend what motivate such characters. One of my grade school bestfriend was gunned down about 6 yrs---I relate to the horrifying episodes VT community is going thru right now. VT you are in my thoughts and prayers--some senseless creature took your friends, boyfriends---girlfriends and classmates--.... Remember that who live in the hearts of others never die.... We are all one as we mourn this loss, you have my thoughts during this difficult time. Patrick Kluivert Ddiba  
April 16, 2007 at 5:59pm · Flag

This stuff gets worse every year Its one big efn American Problem, I just cannot believe it happened at a College We mourn with you VT  
April 16, 2007 at 7:34pm · Flag

I believe the people of our generation grow from this, in a strange way. Going throgh grade school, and even up to the 9/11 attacks, people have been taught to pick someone out, and say "your fault." In this incident, no one is left to point a finger at, and society in a sense, must finally take a glance at how it is. In both how we treat each other, and ourselves. From what im told, this all started because of a relationship problem. Cheating. There was a time when cheating on your lover was taboo. nowadays, its comon day. The guy that did those shootings, obiously lost it after he got back at that girl for breaking him down. And thats another thing, is how fragile people have become. You kill one or two people, and it all of a sudden becomes less of a terrible thing in your mind. I guess its like the old saying says "We may be human, but we're still animals." And as animal's, we need to learn to move as a pack. ~T.W.T.  
April 16, 2007 at 7:36pm · Flag

Continuing, I mourn for the students of VT, and I only hope that shold I ever have a family of my own, my children will not have ot grow up in a world with thing's like this happening.  
April 16, 2007 at 7:38pm · Flag

“In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users appear to have a fair amount of difficulty when they initially seek to move beyond the prism of their personal experiences. Without a fact-based foundation to draw upon from the traditional news cycle, and with an enduring desire to move forward in understanding the meaning of victims’ deaths, the tone of the group’s conversation becomes more heated as users strive to understand the

cultural implications of these shootings. The lack of structure, the need for it, begins to be revealed at this juncture in the group's conversation.



Figure 24: The group's chronology on the evening of day one

It is a credit to users, in fact, that the group at all retains its focus on the victims, because one criticism of online communication has been that, without a meaningful structure, it can lose focus and become excessively fragmented (Giroux, 2011; Keen, 2007). Admittedly, some users may employ the group to seek a gun control debate as their desired gratification—perhaps especially those users who *only* post during the debate. The social media environment is a vast landscape; social media users have myriad, sometimes contradictory, goals in their “goal-directed” (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010) media use, but the users seeking a gun control debate gratification appear to represent the minority of overall group members. “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users are, for the most part, squarely focused on making sense of, and bringing meaning to, the lives and deaths of the victims in these shootings. The unique and grave nature of this event, as well as the collegiate focus of both the event and *Facebook* during 2007, would seem to help users maintain their focus on the victims. Moreover, users may be especially motivated to drive their “goal-oriented” narrative forward precisely because social media affords them a seemingly unique opportunity for participation within a mass

communication context. These factors may each help explain why the group presses onwards into the cultural discussion without an obvious structural foundation beyond their personal experiences and fears.

Traditional journalism tends to place grief *well before* examination of cultural implications in a profound way. Writing in *The New Yorker* on April 30, 2007, a full two weeks after the shootings, Adam Gopnik emphasizes this practice:

“The cell phones in the pockets of the dead students were still ringing when we were told that it was wrong to ask why. As the police cleared the bodies from the Virginia Tech engineering building, the cell phones rang, in the eccentric varieties of ring tones, as parents kept trying to see if their children were O.K. To imagine the feelings of the police as they carried the bodies and heard the ringing is heartrending; to imagine the feelings of the parents who were calling—dread, desperate hope for a sudden answer and the bliss of reassurance, dawning grief—is unbearable. But the parents, and the rest of us, were told that it was not the right moment to ask how the shooting had happened—specifically, why an obviously disturbed student, with a history of mental illness, was able to buy guns whose essential purpose is to kill people—and why it happens over and over again in America.”

The overarching message here is clear: there is a time for grief and a time for discussion of cultural implications. This *New Yorker* article suggests that, in the traditional news cycle, the period between these two stages is *at least* two weeks. In the social media cycle, this discussion begins in about the fourth hour of the group. Users, understandably, have a desire to mine the cultural implications of this event, but traditional journalism lacks the pace to satisfy that desire. In this way, the fact that traditional journalism maintains its structure, even during unfolding crises (Olsson, 2009), has a profound impact on the social media cycle: the lack of an accessible structure complicates users’ sensemaking process.

The cultural implications discussion helps reveal that, even and especially in this user-structured environment, the structure provided by traditional journalism helps correct divergences on the path towards satisfying users’ specific needs. While there are

never easy solutions to complex cultural problems, the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users engage in a cultural debate at such an early moment in the unfolding events that traditional journalism has simply not yet begun to investigate those considerations in a sustained manner. It is likely that this lack of readily available traditional journalism contributes to the more heated tone at this stage in the discussion: users *need* to draw on their personal experiences because they cannot easily employ a fact from the traditional news cycle—as they did with “32 dead,” the death toll—to more fully make meaning of the cultural implications of these victims’ deaths. Users’ desire to make meaning of the cultural implications of the event becomes especially pressing by the early evening hours because the event has already “gone global” within the group for *at least* two hours. Users seem to recognize that the world is taking notice of these unfolding events and so they, prematurely, take up a debate about the cultural implications of these shootings.

It should be underscored that grappling with the cultural implications of any event is a challenging process, especially so for members of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group in the user-structured social media environment. When traditional journalism takes up this task, seasoned professionals spend weeks and months, perhaps longer, engaged in research and conducting interviews. The results usually appear as magazine length stories in major publications such as *The New Yorker*, *The Economist (UK)* or *Time*. “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users engage in this discussion without the expertise or the passage of time, which helps explain the heated tone. The first shooting occurred less than twelve hours prior to the discussion. The rapid pace of users’ expression, which helped them scoop traditional journalism in terms of expressions directed towards the victims, leads the conversation astray from its sensemaking purpose,

when users seek answers to questions that have hardly yet been posed, much less discussed, in the traditional news cycle.

Without the structure provided by traditional journalism, the conversation further devolves into a gun control debate and users, however briefly, lose sight of their goal: making sense of, and bringing meaning to, the lives and deaths of the victims. The gun control debate begins at 8:37 p.m., when Robin Vandendoorn returns to the group and states:

**MORE RESTRICTIONS ON GUNS!!! PERIOD!**  
April 16, 2007 at 8:37pm

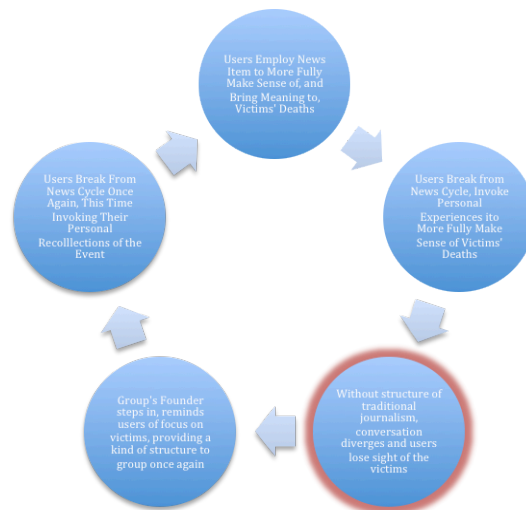


Figure 25: The Third Stage of the Social Media Cycle in This Case

Figure 26: The Gun Control Debate

i agree with robin, its time the US does something about all the guns that are floating around that country. maybe something like taking away that stupid right to bear arms bullshit. stupidest law ever.

April 16, 2007 at 8:51pm · Flag

i dont know robin, but i agree with him too.

April 16, 2007 at 8:54pm · Flag

stricter gun laws would not have prevented the shootings at Virginia Tech. someone who is mentally unstable enough to murder 32 innocent students would have found ways to



get around a few extra gun restrictions. i doubt that the weapons he did use were properly bought/registered following current regulations anyway. that being said, i live only a few hours from the VT campus and i can't begin to describe the sadness we are all dealing with here... almost everyone here has friends/family that go to tech. we're praying for all of you. God Bless Virginia Tech  
 April 16, 2007 at 9:00pm · Flag

Speaking of guns did you know that the security guards at virginia tech are not allowed to carry guns? they are there for protection and they should have the means necessary to protect meaning access to guns. Just because it is a gun free campus does not mean that a person intent on violence is going to abide by it. I also believe that the campus should have been shut down. it doesn't matter that the police had reason to believe that it was an isolated incident, the killer was still at large! there is no excuse for it. the campus should have been shut down and the students informed of the shooting in a better way. Not everyone checks their email hourly or even daily. there needs to be a better system set up to inform students of important happenings on campus. this may have been prevented if better steps had been taken and we need to implement them before it happens again.

April 16, 2007 at 9:01pm · Flag

Though the debate is brief, and I assert that only four postings are “gun control postings” this episode within the group occurs, at least in part, because the user-structured social media environment is considerably more susceptible to heated personal debate than the traditional journalism environment. While there is nothing necessarily wrong with heated personal debate on its face, the gun control debate is detrimental in this case because it detracts from users’ process of making meaning from the lives and deaths of the victims in these shootings. The gun control debate in the social media cycle features four postings that tend to be longer than the norm for the group. This aberration in length reinforces these postings as out of place in an otherwise civil discussion (Ono & Jackson II, 2011; Giroux, 2011), and helps explain the gun control debate as detracting from users’ “goal-directed” narrative, within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.”

Scholars who are critical of technological innovation as a source of cultural decline (Postman, 1985; Keen, 2007) would likely point to the gun control debate as evidence of the “mindless chatter” (Keen, 2007) that is all too pervasive in the online world, but I assert this episode as well-intentioned discussion that fails because it lacks a

structure, a usable past to build on. I assert this debate as evidence of a structural failing, rather than as any kind of failure on the part of the users. This episode largely reveals the limits of personal expression during an unfolding news event; users' apparently similar stage in life (as students) suggests that most of them likely has a personal point of reference through which to access the earlier afternoon trajectory of these shootings as a campus event. This shared point of contact erodes during the gun control debate. The structure for the group's conversation draws upon readily identifiable signposts—first the news item “32 dead” and second users' relatively similar personal experiences as students, but the gun control debate, as vast, decisive, and intensely personal—functions without a mutually understood foundation. Journalism in the age of social media is clearly a “conversation” (Kovach & Rosensteil, 2010), but users certainly progress more quickly than journalists in this case. Accordingly, the consequences of the lack of a traditional journalism structure here (Olsson, 2009) are that “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” requires a substitute form of structure. That structure arrives for the group, in the form of a posting from its founder.

Although we are all entitled to our opinion, i have removed pictures that could be found offensive to some. This group is in memorial for all those who have lost loved ones, and not for political opinions. Please respect the nature of this group.  
April 16, 2007 at 9:31pm

**The Fourth Stage of the Social Media Cycle—  
The Social Media Cycle Regains Focus:  
Group's Creator Returns Conversation to Victims**

Sara Berry ostensibly recognizes this debate as detrimental, and makes a posting that urges users to remember the focus of this group, that is, on the victims of the Virginia Tech shootings. By stepping in, Berry seeks to impose a kind of loose structure back onto the group's conversation. Within seven minutes, the group returns to

expressions of thoughts and prayers directed towards the victims. In fact, ten of the fourteen postings between Berry's request are focused on the victims, which suggests that Berry has been successful in imposing a loose structure onto the group and refocusing the conversation towards making sense of, and bringing meaning to, the lives and deaths of the victims in these shootings. This finding strongly suggests that structure is very helpful, and perhaps even necessary, for a group of likeminded users to satisfy their specific needs; this instance reveals that structure can take the form of a respected member of the group who speaks out and reminds other users of their "goal-directed" needs. In this case, uses and gratifications theory may be functioning through a moderator or leader, who is changing or reiterating the structure. These users needed Berry to redirect the conversation so that others might continue to be gratified within the structure. This finding also suggests that leadership may be at work in maintaining order, cohesiveness, and the ultimate goals of the group. As the group's founder, Berry asserts her desired gratifications, strongly directing "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" to follow her path. While Berry is neither a gatekeeper (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) nor an agenda-setter (Baran & Davis, 2011; McCombs, 2004) in the traditional mass communication sense, the fact that she steps in and users respond to her request suggests that, in this instance, Berry functions not unlike an editor, as she strongly encourages a course correction in the trajectory of the group's conversation.

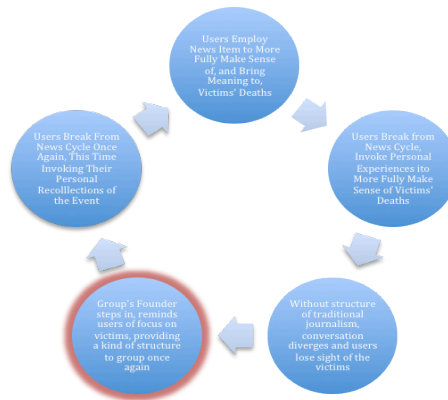


Figure 27: The Fourth Stage of the Social Media Cycle in This Case

By late evening on day one of the group, the social media cycle has returned to invoking “thoughts and prayers,” as they did in the early afternoon (Kitch & Hume, 2008), but this time with a more active attempt to bring meaning to the previous day’s events and, especially, to the lives and deaths of the victims in these shootings. Having established *what happened*, and after the largely failed attempt to use the cultural implications debate to more fully understand *what it all means*, the group still seems intent, especially so, on bringing meaning to the lives and deaths of the victims in these shootings. In this way, social media expression appears to be decidedly cyclical, whereas journalism tends to be more linear (Zelizer, 2011). The fact that the fourth stage of the social media cycle continues the influx of individual expression suggests that informal sources—in this case, primarily college and university students—(Hansen & Paul, 2011) are prominent in the social media cycle, even after nine hours of group development. There appears to be, accordingly, a particularly strong level of commitment among these users to participate in “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.” This strong level of commitment is likely due to many users’ student status: they are seeking to more fully make meaning of this campus event and, especially, of victims’ deaths *because* these victims were members of a campus community.

Users may have been especially struck by the event because of the seemingly idyllic nature of college life, asserting the shootings as a violation of that ideal (DeFoster, 2010; Farrell, 2010). This finding, though not explicit within the postings, seems implicit in users' sustained attention to the group. The second day will be focused on bringing meaning to victims' deaths, which are especially seen as senseless in an otherwise idyllic campus environment. This transition effectively begins in the late evening hours of day one. Within twelve hours, the group's conversation, facilitated by the user-structured social media environment (Robinson, 2011; Kovach & Rosensteil, 2010; Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010), has turned its attention from making sense of victims' deaths to bringing meaning to victims' deaths.

Figure 28: Late Evening Day One Posting

all our prayers from Memphis Tennessee go out to the Family's of the victims in this horrific misfortune

April 16, 2007 at 10:18pm · Flag

Mine and my family's prayers and condolences go out to the family and friends of the victims of this horrific experience that took place today.

April 16, 2007 at 10:27pm · Flag

All of our prayers and condolences from the ATL go out to the families and friends of those killed in this unfortunate event...God bless...

April 16, 2007 at 10:39pm · Flag

All of Eureka College's prayers and condolences go to the families and friends of those killed today...may peace be with them.

April 16, 2007 at 10:48pm · Flag

Dear Hokies and your families, Be strong, be diligent, 'persevere in prayer'. The thoughts, hearts, and prayers of myriads are with you during this time of tragedy and mourning. Hold your heads high! Despite the media, the actions of one, of a few, do not define Virginia Tech and it's Hokies. It is your Pride, your Spirit, your Unity, that will forever be embedded within us all. "Let us resolve to be masters, not the victims, of our

history, controlling our own destiny without giving way to blind suspicions and emotions." --JFK

April 16, 2007 at 10:58pm · Flag

other sites are saying to wear orange & maroon tomorrow in remembrance and support. we should all do it.

April 16, 2007 at 11:06pm · Flag

The victims and their families are in my thoughts tonight. Beautiful lives lost to senseless acts. Many prayers coming from Prince Edward Island, Canada.

April 16, 2007 at 11:15pm · Flag

Everyone at Virginia Tech will be in my prayers....puts life into perspective

April 16, 2007 at 11:22pm · Flag

This is the TIME when WE need GOD more THAN ever! Everyone should take this time LOVE and HONOR your family n friends dearly. R.I.P VT students...KNOW that u are LOVE n NEVER forgotten!

April 16, 2007 at 11:27pm · Flag

anyone have names of any of the victims?

April 16, 2007 at 11:56pm · Flag

A posting near midnight encapsulates this pointed intention quite nicely: “anyone have the names of the victims?” The implication embedded within this posting is clear, the group wishes to learn more about the particulars of these deaths. In this way, the late evening postings foreshadow that day two within the group may well be a day of remembrance. For these users, the second day will have an even more specific goal: to more fully bring meaning to the lives and deaths of the victims in the Virginia Tech shootings.

DAY TWO: APRIL 17, 2007

**The Fifth Stage of the Social Media Cycle—  
The Social Media Cycle Diverges from, then Dovetails Traditional News Cycle:  
Users Employ Personal Recollections, then “We are Hokies,” to Bring Meaning to  
Event**

*In Recollections, Social Media Expression-Based, Traditional Journalism Fact-Based*

On the morning of the second day, the urgency of the event, that was so palpable on the first day, seems to have diminished to a certain extent. This finding lends support to the notion that, when news events especially shock individuals, the shock reaction tends to happen fairly early during the event (Kitch & Hume, 2008). The tone of users' postings is distinctly one that prioritizes reflection about the previous day's events. This finding reinforces mediated memories as a kind of "creative reconstruction" of the past (van Dijck, 2008, p. 173).

For example, a young woman tells a harrowing account of learning about the event from a friend and then turning on the Cable News Network (CNN) to watch the coverage unfolding on television. Within the reflection, the emphasis is on expressions of encouragement for those affected by the event. This is a stark contrast to expressions on the afternoon of the first day, when many users expressed shock and disbelief.

Figure 29: Early Morning Day Two Postings Offer Encouragement to Those Affected

To Family, Freinds, Staff and students of V Tech thoughts and prayers are with you all , God Bless and be with you in this time of need.

April 17, 2007 at 9:18am · Flag

My thoughts and prayers are with those victims families and the students who had to live in this numb feeling shock of a tragic event. GODSPEED TO YOU ALL. Thanks to the quick action of the police. to those who criticize the university, hindisght is 20/20 if they knew what was gonna happen as they do now i am sure they do things differently. But what done is done. MAY EVERYONE have a speedy road to recovery. PEI CANADA VT friend

April 17, 2007 at 9:09am · Flag

My thoughts and prayers go out to the families and friends of the victims of this tragic day. I hope for the best for the students who have to return to school. I thank all law enforcement agencies who responded to this event for their bravery and everyday dedication. Hang in there Virginia Tech...our prayers are with you. Montreal Police Department

April 17, 2007 at 8:43am · Flag

The passage of time and the development of the event within the group have clearly brought users a fresh mindset on the new day: the group expresses confidence that those affected by the event can and will recover, to become more unified in the wake of the tragedy. This finding, too, may be shaped by users' student status; these young people may be especially resilient in the face of tragedy (Goodhead, 2010; Kitch & Hume, 2008). Users assert, on the second day, that those affected have the power to define the lasting legacy of the event, rather than be defined by the event as a tragedy. Similarly, when users on the morning of the second day offer condolences, they stress that the dead are "in a better place" and "that they are with you wherever you go," which suggests users are emphasizing victims' place in heaven, rather than dwelling on the shootings that led to their deaths. This emphasis again suggests the rather more optimistic viewpoint that is characteristic of the morning of the second day. The finding of this optimism may shed light on these users' status as college students who, as a group, may tend to be more idealistic than other populations (Farrell, 2010). In addition to a more optimistic viewpoint, a few users relate personal acts of remembrance directed towards the victims. Most striking among these is the creation of race-car noted in a posting at 11:12 a.m:

Figure 30: Personal Remembrance Directed Towards Victims

May god bless each and every family that's suffering from this tragedy!

April 17, 2007 at 10:45am

My prayers go out to all the loved ones and victims who are suffering from this terrible tragedy.

April 17, 2007 at 10:55am

Hey guys, just wanted to offer my sympathies, keep your chin up...

April 17, 2007 at 11:10am

We will be getting some VA Tech decals on our race cars this weekend to honor and remember those who lost their lives yesterday. VA TECH...i think its safe to say that the country and the world has your back!

April 17, 2007 at 11:12am



The expression of personal acts of remembrance is a critical development in the group's social media cycle because it suggests that users have begun to make meaning, albeit in a small way, in their own lives about the nature of the previous day's events (van Dijck, 2007). The shootings are no longer as enormous and difficult to comprehend as they once were; users' personal reflections help bring their experiences with the event into fuller focus. While users drew on their campus affiliations to understand and more fully come to terms with the event on the previous afternoon, the benefit of time now finds users drawing on their memory of the previous day's events to more fully make meaning from it. This finding again reveals the cyclical nature of the user-structured social media environment: personal experience provides a loose structure to the group, just as it did on the afternoon of day one. The campus affiliations asserting the shootings as a campus event have become remembrances of the shootings as a campus event. Though the personal remembrances are relatively limited within the group, it is their quality—rather than their quantity—that propels the conversation forward. Personal remembrance by its users, not only speaks to “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” as a memorial group (Goodhead, 2010), but it reinforces the notion that social media makes individual expression more visible and ubiquitous than perhaps ever before within a mass communication context.

While "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" users are offering their personal reflections on the event, traditional journalism is reflecting on what is now known about the shootings, specifically, the identity of the shooter and the scope of the killings. At 7:31 a.m. EST, *The Associated Press* issued a 92-word report, squarely focused on the shooter:

“A Virginia Tech senior from South Korea was behind the massacre of at least 30 people locked inside a campus building in the deadliest shooting rampage in modern U.S. history, the university said Tuesday.

The Virginia Tech Police Department identified him as Cho Seung-Hui, 23, a senior in the English department.

The bloodbath ended with the gunman's suicide, bringing the death toll from two separate shootings first at a dorm, then in a classroom building to 33 and stamping the campus in the picturesque Blue Ridge Mountains with unspeakable tragedy.”

This contrast in emphases again represents the expression-based emphasis of social media (Marwick & boyd, 2010; boyd, 2008) and the fact-based emphasis of traditional journalism (Kovach & Rosensteil, 2010), respectively. More pointedly, though, the shooter (or his name) is mentioned in less than ten total postings within the group. The group's expressions, again on day two, are squarely focused on the victims, and the selective emphasis of these users' postings allows them to offer remembrances of the event, rarely mentioning the shooter's name. Selective emphasis (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) has made it possible for users to recast the event without having to recast those details that would ostensibly take away attention from the victims. In this way, users' “creative reconstruction” (van Dijck, 2007) of the event takes on new significance: users remember the victims without remembering the shooter—the user-structured social media environment facilitates these users' meaning making in a “goal-directed” (Hanson et. al, 2010; Katz & Blumler, 1974) manner, on the lives and deaths of the victims.

This opportunity likely contributes to the lasting conversation within "In Memorial: Virginia Tech"; the trajectory is sustained over 36 hours because users are driving it, rather than being driven by traditional journalism. Journalism in the age of social media allows users to isolate one aspect of an event, as these users have done with expressions directed towards the victims, and provides an opportunity for the postings to remain squarely focused within that isolated arena. The role for journalists, to provide content and context of unfolding events (Zelizer, 2011; Hardin & Ash, 2011), does not afford them the same opportunity within the traditional news cycle, especially because

traditional journalism organizations tend to maintain their structured orientation during crises (Olsson, 2009). This distinction helps explain why users continue to utilize the group on the second day. Users continue to “switch” (Quan-Hasse & Young, 2010) because “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” continues to satisfy their selectively focused needs for expression directed towards the victims.

*Social Media Cycle Affirms Shootings as a Collegiate Event: Campus Media, Like Traditional Journalism, Does Not Appear to Afford Users A Voice*

The analysis in this chapter is largely focused on the social media cycle versus the traditional news cycle, but it seems worthwhile to note, at this point on the morning of the second day, that campus media—despite its focus on students—appears more closely aligned with traditional journalism than social media.

Recollections from college students came, though later in the week, in the traditional campus media as well. For example, *The Collegiate Times*, Virginia Tech’s weekly college newspaper, published seven letters to the editor on April 18<sup>th</sup> (3) and April 19<sup>th</sup> (4), two and three days, respectively, after the shootings. Of these, each was authored by an individual with a current or past affiliation to the campus community. As expressed in Table 2 in chronological order, the seven letters to the editor analyzed here (3 from April 18 and 4 from April 19, 2007), suggest letter writers’ close connection to the campus, and also a tighter geographic focus on Blacksburg, Virginia.

**Table 2: Letterwriters of *The Collegiate Times* Letters to the Editor on 4/18 & 4/19**

Name	Location	Biographical Information
Erin Anderson	Not Expressed or Implied	Class of 2005
Justin R. Bachtell	Not Expressed or Implied	Class of 2004 / Industrial & Systems Engineering
Leslie Corbus	Blacksburg (Implied by her student status)	Senior, Communications

Bill Ziegler	Pittsburgh, PA (expressed in signature to LoE)	Brother of Michael Ziegler, VT student who died in March 2001 and was posthumously awarded degree for that class year.
Michael Newman	Blacksburg (Implied by his student status)	Junior, English
Alex Chapple	Blacksburg (Implied by his student status)	Sophomore, English
Martha Bailey Shields	Germantown, MD (Expressed in signature to LOE)	Alumna (year not specified in letter, or in LoE signature)

This finding suggests that letters to the editor (Conway, 2010) may not function in the same way as online comments (Santana, 2011) in terms of providing a broad spectrum of users' experiences. Letters to the editor may gratify those who write them and, eventually, those who read them, but social media provide online users with an opportunity for immediate gratification on an interactive and public platform for expression. Letters to the editor, especially these seven, seem to reinforce the hierarchical structure of traditional journalism (Zelizer, 2011) rather than providing an expanded reach to the discussion, as within the user-structured social media environment and, specifically, "In Memorial: Virginia Tech." This finding may suggest that collegiate-based spaces for expression in traditional journalism are similarly structured as day one news coverage; users, though they are college students, would seem unlikely to be granted a voice in Virginia Tech's campus newspaper. Traditional campus media seems to prioritize the voices of those individuals who have a direct connection (in one way or another) to the specific campus, which seems to underscore the enduring importance of user-structured spaces, such as "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" for expression among students from across the country and the world. User-structured spaces for expression are arguably most important on the second day and in subsequent days, once the initial shock of event has begun to subside and individuals press forward with the extended process of

making meaning out of the event (Kitch & Hume, 2008). With the frenetic event coming into better focus, the meaning making can truly begin (Vicary & Fraley, 2010; Goodhead, 2010). “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users find themselves in this position around noon on the second day. The pace of the postings slows considerably, and it is even somewhat surprising that the group continues onward. In approximately 24 hours, users have begun to make sense of the previous day’s deaths and have, on the morning of the second day, even started reflecting on their personal experiences as a very early form of making meaning from these lives and deaths. By any standard, this is a considerable accomplishment, arguably all the more so because of the trials and tribulations of this group’s conversation. But these users have not yet satisfied their need (Hanson et. al, 2010) to make meaning from the lives and deaths of the victims in these shootings.

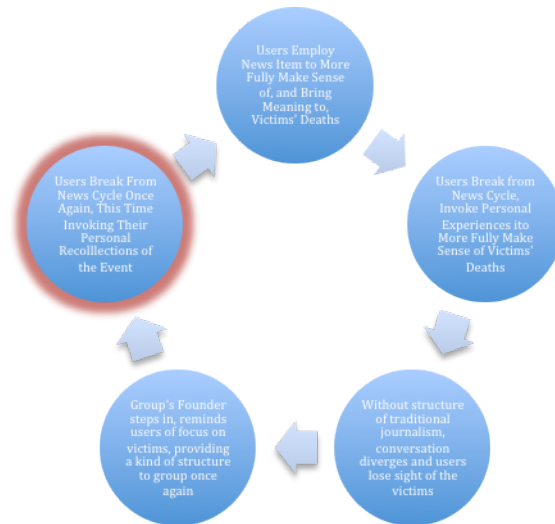


Figure 31: The Fifth Stage of the Social Media Cycle in This Case

Users have recognized the boundaries of personal experience (Smith & McDonald, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2010; boyd, 2008) in the user-structured social media environment. It is useful for reflection and for the initial stages of beginning to make meaning for victims’ lives and deaths, but it is challenging to use personal

reflection to arrive at a coherent meaning for a complex issue such as these victims' lives and deaths (Jenkins, 2010; Kitch & Hume, 2008). Structure is thus needed on day two to build meaning from the events, as it was on day one to make sense of the events. The return of this need for structure regarding users' understanding of the event, now in an advanced form, further reflects the cyclical nature of social media expression. Drawing upon the 2:00 p.m. convocation at Cassell Coliseum on campus, in fact, the group's process of making meaning through personal reflection begins to cohere into a specific message, which further affirms that users will seek out media to meet their specific needs (Hanson et. al, 2010; Katz & Blumler, 1974).



Figure 32: The Group's Chronology on the Afternoon of Day Two

Poet and professor Nikki Giovanni's convocation speech, which ends with the following words below, provides the needed structure so that users can begin the process of making meaning from victims' lives and deaths around a specific, coherent message. The phrase "We are Hokies" serves the twin purposes of beginning to make sense of victims' lives and deaths and also affirming users' participation in the group. The tragedy of these shootings now also has the potential to be reconceptualized as an opportunity for unity among college students around the country and the world.

"We are the Hokies.  
We will prevail.  
We will prevail.

We will prevail.  
We are Virginia Tech.”

*Users Employ “We are Hokies” Convocation Speech to Bring Meaning to Event*

Users, as they did on day one, employ a news item (this time, the convocation speech) to engage in participation with a purpose: this time, to more fully bring meaning to the lives and deaths of the victims in these shootings. At 2:41 p.m., 41 minutes after the convocation speech began, a signal posting is made that speaks to this process in action:

We are all Hokies today. So senseless that one person can have such a devastating effect on everyone else. Thoughts and prayers are with everyone.  
April 17, 2007 at 2:41pm

This posting drives the social media cycle towards the meaning that users have been seeking: while journalism gave rise to personal reflection on day one, personal reflection precedes the traditional news cycle, in the form of this speech, on day two.

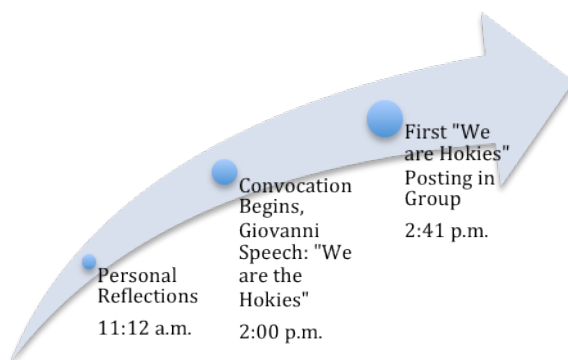


Figure 33: Giovanni Speech Propels Group Forward in Making Meaning of Deaths

By invoking the phrase from the convocation speech, the potential for participation with a purpose in the user-structured social media environment has, once again, been realized. Users have employed the phrase “We are Hokies” to begin, in earnest, the process of making meaning from victims’ lives and deaths. In doing so, the meaning of the shootings has also begun to be recast in the group, from a tragedy to an

opportunity for unity among college students around the country and the world. This process affirms the user-structured social media environment as fairly customizable towards users' particular needs (Annany & Kreiss, 2011). Operating within the loose structure that these users sought out through traditional journalism and its particular news items, this case suggests the user-structured social media environment (Robinson, 2011; Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010; Kovach & Rosensteel, 2010) can encourage a reimagining (van Dijck, 2007) of a given news event to emphasize one aspect, in this case, the legacy of the victims. This finding lends support to the notion that participatory culture (Marwick & boyd, 2010; Benkler, 2006; Bennett, 2003) can bring about a recasting that helps users' more fully bring meaning to the lives and deaths of the victims in these shootings.

This recasting becomes especially evident in the early evening, when Robin Vandenko returns to the group and makes his final posting. The lengthy posting, shown below, concludes with the following statement: "WE ARE VIRGINIA TECH! Great speech by the lady at that ceremony. God Bless."

The amazing thing that happens here though is that all of a sudden, there are no rivalries, there is no violence or hate between universities, and there is unity. Everyone steps back and realizes that we are all the same. A Buckeye is the same as a Wolverine, a Gator is the same as a Seminole, a Sooner is same as a Longhorn, and a CAVALIER is the same as a HOKIE. We are all HOKIES this week just like that quote says. America unites with the students and faculty at VA Tech. WE ARE VIRGINIA TECH! WE ARE VIRGINIA TECH! Great speech by the lady at that ceremony. God Bless  
April 17, 2007 at 5:34pm

Vandenko's posting has a clear message: These victims have not died in vain, the unfolding events of the previous day have inspired students around the country and the world to carry forward the message of the Virginia Tech campus community. The process of fully making sense of, or bringing meaning to the lives and deaths of these



victims is a long, surely arduous process, but “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users employ this news item from the traditional news cycle and seemingly make at least one significant stride in that direction. The social media cycle has almost come full circle.

**The Sixth Stage of the Social Media Cycle—The Social Media Cycle Scoops Traditional News Cycle Once Again: “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” Provides Platform for Expression to Users Without (and A Few With) Connection to the Event**

In the late evening hours on the second day, a few users post within the group who apparently have a personal connection to the unfolding events.

Figure 34: On the evening of day two, a small cluster of users assert a more direct connection to the event

I would also like to send my prayers out to the victims at Tech..My friend tabby who goes to VCU her friend Elita who attends tech was also shot. She was shot in the jaw and her wrist..Please keep her in your prayers as well...

April 17, 2007 at 7:23pm

(This 9:22 p.m. posting by Sara Berry, Group’s Founder): tayyaba habar: my friend elita habtu is injured, she got shot in her jaw and her wrist. please keep her in your prayers!

April 17, 2007 at 9:22pm

RIP Leslie Sherman & Mary Read. xoxo- ♥ Megan

April 17, 2007 at 9:38pm

Both of my brothers go to Tech, but luckily, they were not harmed yesterday. I feel sorrow for those families whose sons and daughters...brothers and sisters....and loved ones were taken away from them and us....as we are all family....we all unite as Americans....I thank GOD my brothers are okay. Keep on praying....

April 17, 2007 at 9:43pm

The posting in which a user mentions that her “brothers attend tech” and expresses her thankfulness that they were not harmed is especially noteworthy. This is a telling example about the user-structured nature of the social media environment. “In Memorial: Virginia Tech,” which on its first day gave voice to those individuals without a direct, geographic connection to the event, now also includes those who ostensibly *do*

have a direct connection to the unfolding events. This finding strongly suggests that the user-structured social media environment is more malleable rather than fixed (Marwick & boyd, 2010); its boundaries can be pressed, to a certain extent, according to users' particular needs (Hanson et. al, 2010). Journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosensteil (2010) rightly affirm the pressing need for an editor in this environment: "they must curate the expanding dialogue with audiences as well as the material available throughout the Web" (p. 189). "In Memorial: Virginia Tech," in fact, reveals the need for an editor during the gun control debate on day one, and the very specific use of these news items (the death toll on day one and the convocation speech on day two) suggests that these users are driving their narrative—they are not simply "curating" it.

Journalism in the age of social media is revealed in this case as a hybrid model in which users actively employ traditional journalism *and* their individual expressions to meet their particular "goal-directed" needs. Users with a direct connection to the event ostensibly found "added value" (Eighmey & McCord, 1998) in "switching" (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010) between traditional journalism and this "goal-driven" (Hanson et. al, 2010) narrative, crafted by these affected outsiders, that is, the users of "In Memorial: Virginia Tech."

As this case strongly suggests, individual expressions are needed for active social media users to achieve their desired uses and gratifications; users wish to add *their* voices to a growing tapestry; posting text and images facilitates participation in a more visible and ubiquitous manner. Each posting represents a user's addition to the structure that becomes "In Memorial: Virginia Tech." This case helps shed light on how today's social media user has more specific needs and gratifications, owing to the customizable quality of the social media experience, than perhaps ever before within a mass communication

context. This case suggests users employ social media to articulate and gratify those needs. A sustained presence within the group, as the event evolves over time, would appear to help users fully seek out and gratify their changing needs with the changing event. Robin Vandenko provides perhaps the most striking example of active participation within the group; active participation has the potential to lead to active, changing gratification throughout the life of the group. Users that enter and exit the group at various points in time will, almost certainly, achieve slightly different uses and gratifications. With their individual expressions, users can employ social media in a rapidly changing media environment in an effort to seek out and gratify their specific needs.

This “added value” likely stems from the fact that the structure of the traditional journalism environment does not appear to facilitate the inclusion of this combination of voices during the same time period, approximately 36 hours after the group’s formation. In featuring the combination of voices at the end of the period studied here, the users assert the group’s wall as, finally, a space that is ultimately user-driven rather than journalism-driven. Individuals, including those with a direct, geographic connection to the events, have a need for expression and they seek out “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” because it provides an immediate, interactive and public platform for expression across a great distance during a time of crisis.

While traditional journalism will include perspectives from students both on and off campus in the days following April 17, 2007, especially in the style of long-form news journalism and magazine feature articles, the case of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” demonstrates that the process of including a multiplicity of voices has already begun in the social media environment. Accordingly, “In Memorial: Virginia Tech”’s

185 wall postings end seemingly as they began: by scooping traditional journalism. The social media cycle has come full circle.

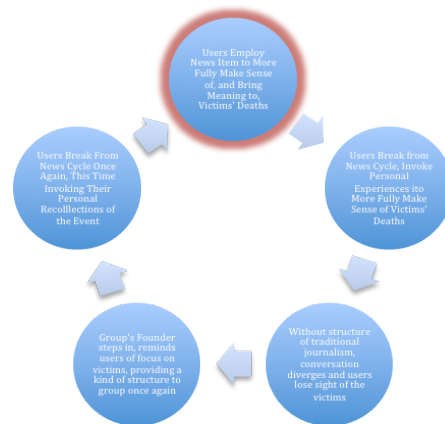


Figure 35: The Sixth Stage of the Social Media Cycle in This Case

### **The Social Media Cycle and Uses and Gratifications Theory**

The six stages of the social media cycle strongly suggest that these users utilize “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” because they desire the gratification of building a legacy for the victims in the aftermath of the shootings. With active participation in the group’s first 36 hours, the group’s members recognize each of the six stages as the linear building blocks in the construction of that gratification. This case suggests online memorial group uses and gratification as more complex than simply seeking “support” (Anderson, 2011)—and these users, in fact, do not seem to directly look to one another for a support gratification. Their desired gratification very much appears to be to utilize the new information environment, drawing from traditional journalism and personal experience, to recast the aftermath of the event from a tragedy to an opportunity for unity among college students around the country and the world. Uses and gratifications scholars (Hanson et. al, 2010; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Ruggiero, 2000) sometimes suggest new gratification categories in light of their findings, and the trajectory of the social

media cycle strongly suggests that these users are seeking a legacy gratification through their active participation within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.”

The six stages of the social media cycle shed needed light on the specifics of a legacy gratification, which, it is strongly suggested, requires both an acknowledgement of the past and a vision for the future. These specifics help explain the linear trajectory of the group as integral to the process of firming up a legacy for these victims, one makes sense of, and brings meaning to, their lives and deaths. In the pursuit of this desired legacy gratification, Robin Vandenko and Sara Berry appear to be desiring “informal camaraderie, or connection” (Chen, 2011) with members of the group, because of their continued postings throughout the group’s 36-hour life span. Their repeated participation suggests they are, at the very least, seeking some form of connection to the group as a desired gratification. For the most part, though, this case suggests users are focused on building a legacy for the victims, rather than building connections or being social with one another. The fact that acknowledgment of one another’s postings is rare, in fact, suggests “sociability,”—at least in its leisure-time emphasis—(Smock, Ellison, Lampe & Wohn, 2011; Ellison et. al, 2007), which remains a common gratification among social networking users, is not sought as a desired gratification by users in this case. This finding is likely explained because the gravity of unfolding events almost certainly shifts the mood of the group from leisure-time to crisis-time, which remains understudied in the online world. In the conclusion, I expand upon the implications of this case for the concept of being social during a time of crisis, especially for the way it might reconceptualize memorial groups and individuals’ connection with strangers in the aftermath of crises.

As active media users faced with what mass communication scholar Iris Chuyi has perceptively termed “information surplus” (2005), other media likely are competing for their attention once their desired legacy gratification has been made visible and ubiquitous within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.” This visibility within an emerging mass communication context might well reinforce users’ belief that their desired legacy gratification has been obtained—the trajectory from tragedy to unity is, in fact, laid bare for members, researchers and onlookers alike to examine—but followup research would be required to more fully confirm whether, and to what extent, users’ firmly obtained this desired gratification. Following Palmgreen and Rayburn (1985) I acknowledge this shortcoming as one limitation of uses and gratifications theory and I assert that users’ desired legacy gratification, which emerges from this analysis of the social media cycle, extends understanding about the uses and gratifications of social media, especially during times of crisis.

### **Summarizing the Social Media Cycle and Looking Ahead to Public Memory**

This analysis chapter has presented the social media cycle and, as appropriate, has drawn upon traditional journalism to contextualize the social media conversation. Journalism in the age of social media provides, as this analysis of the social media cycle reveals, the catalyst for users to engage in their own “goal-oriented” (Hanson et. al, 2010; Katz & Blumler, 1974) narrative. From the fact-based foundation of traditional journalism (Zelizer, 2011; Kovach & Rosensteel, 2007; Meyer, 1989; Schudson, 1979; Tuchman, 1979), these users are as apt to pick and choose certain elements as they are to ignore the traditional news cycle within their conversation. In some cases, such as the cultural implications debate and the gun control debate, the user-structured social media environment (Robinson, 2011; Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2010) is

laid bare for its propensity towards heated exchange, but these users maintain enough structure to proceed, and rather admirably so, towards their goal of making sense and bringing meaning to the lives and deaths of the victims in the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings.

These users rarely acknowledge one another in their postings and, with the exception of the gun control debate on day one and the “We are Hokies” news item on day two, they rarely respond to one another by name. This finding may suggest that “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” is not an online community-driven space (Smith & Kollock, 1999). Journalism, too, is a means to an end for these users: they employ those news items that affirm and drive forward their “goal-oriented” narrative. What is clear, though, is that these users consider “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” as a platform for expression about a news event across a great distance during a time of crisis.

In working to make sense of, and bring meaning to, the lives and deaths of the victims in these shootings, the next analysis chapter will examine how the user-structured social media environment especially facilitates these users’ expressions of public memory. Drawing on John Bodnar’s notion of public memory, chapter five will analyze how the group’s users remember the victims and thus honor the phrase in the group’s description: “Long Live the Hokies.”

V.

Expressions of Public Memory



The social media cycle revealed “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users responded to the traditional news cycle, employing particular news items—the death toll and the convocation speech—to more fully make sense of, and bring meaning to, the lives and deaths of those killed in the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings. But users’ reactions suggest that the purpose of their participation goes beyond reacting to traditional journalism. Users wish to remember the lives of those killed. As the public memory chapter will reveal, “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users are making more visible and ubiquitous those expressions of public memory that have often followed a major news event.

The expressions once largely confined to basements and living rooms, where individuals listened to the radio and watched television, have now migrated into the social media environment. As a result, expressions of public memory unfold in the group’s immediate, interactive and public setting. These expressions demonstrate the complexity of journalism in the age of social media: users are not only responding to the event, they are compelled to post content that reflects the memorial tone of the unfolding events.

Put another way, users are not only “talking back” to traditional media, they are “talking forward,” expanding upon the traditional media conversation to reflect their own wants and needs (expressions directed towards making sense of what has happened to the victims) in the aftermath of the shootings. Users have their own narrative to pursue in the group, which is informed by traditional news but clearly goes beyond it as well, and expressions of public memory are central to the way users’ make sense of, and bring meaning to, the lives and deaths of the victims. This finding again demonstrates how users employed social media, and specifically, “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” to achieve their uses and gratifications in the aftermath of the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings.

## Understanding “Expressions of Comradeship”

### *The Religious Blessing as Central to Early Postings*

Early expressions of comradeship emphasize simple statements in which users ask God, ostensibly the Judeo-Christian God, to bless those affected by this event. Posting 12, made by Sarah Wilkes at 2:12 p.m. EST on the day of the shootings, is emblematic of this kind of posting. She writes in a terse and direct manner: “god bless those students and their families.” These statements indirectly reflect users’ distance from the event; “those students and their families,” a common construction for early expressions of this kind, suggests users’ distance from the event itself.

This distance continues through the second hour, when the religious blessing becomes somewhat vague. Consider posting 14, which reads: “Our prayers are with you all.” Here, those affected are characterized as “you all,” which yields almost no information about who is being addressed. The group addressed may be apparent to the poster, but there is no emphasis on students, the campus community, Virginians, Americans, and so on, which makes it difficult to discern the intended audience for the expression.

This sort of vague expression continues through the second hour, until a seemingly international poster states: “our prayers are with you across the atlantic.” This posting, in the middle of the third hour, seems to encourage individuals to include their location along with their “expressions of comradeship” through religious expressions of support for those affected.

Near the end of the group’s third hour, the first expression of comradeship through religious that includes reference to a college or university is made: “From UW-La Crosse, my prayers and the prayers of fellow students.” With this statement, the

event's resonance with college students starts to become apparent in the group. While the shootings marked a notable American moment for many in this country, the event was likely especially meaningful for college students. In the previous statement, that sense of meaning is suggested through an "expression of comradeship," as a college student, in a religious manner (prayers). This form of "expression of comradeship," as I will demonstrate later in this section, becomes quite common throughout the second-day stages of the group.

The most direct "expression of comradeship" in the group's first three hours, though, comes from a poster who claims affiliation with the armed forces and states: "we know what you guys are going through." This posting is likely the closest among early postings to Bodnar's notion of comradeship; the simple, direct connection, ostensibly: we are like you.

In this way, users are employing the tools of the social media environment, specifically the immediate, interactive and public nature of this group, to give voice to those expressions that might have otherwise remained confined to interpersonal communication with close friends and family as the events unfolded on the radio or on television. Users employ expressions of comradeship to position themselves alongside the victims and thereby more easily make sense of their deaths. The social media environment allows them to express a more nuanced reaction to unfolding events, highlighting the memorial tone of the event in general, but specifically making possible the visible and ubiquitous presentation of users' expressions of public memory.

### **Early Expressions of Public Memory Wish Comfort for the Dead**

The expressions of public memory in “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” begin with a user’s request that God bring “rest” to the “souls” of the dead. This user appeals to a higher-being as a means to make sense of what seems beyond human comprehension.

32 dead, god rest their souls  
April 16, 2007 at 1:47pm

God is utilized as a sensemaking mechanism through which this user begins to come to grips with the initial news of student deaths. God functions, at this early moment in the group, as the vehicle through which users deliver their initial expressions of public memory. Recognizing the tension between history and commemoration that is inherent in expressions of public memory, God stands in for users’ knowledge of the history of the event, which arguably cannot yet be known, at least not fully, at this moment within the group. What humans do not yet know, these postings seem to suggest, God must know, as an omnipresent being. The group is not overtly religious, though, with only a few postings of Biblical scripture, and one reference to the Kaddish, a Jewish prayer for the dead. The references to God, therefore, suggest users’ hopes that the dead will be cared for, that they will find “rest” after their deaths, but that “rest” is not explicitly characterized in terms of one specific religion.

Recognizing the American origins of the event, and of the group, there may be a Judeo-Christian influence in this reference to God. This user hopes the dead find comfort in the afterlife (ostensibly through God’s will), a comfort that seems especially pressing because of the fact they were murdered. The gruesome nature of the killings seems to hasten insistence that the dead find “rest.” The emphasis on God as bringer of rest in this initial expression suggests a particular assertion; God, and not the shooter, is the final arbiter for those killed in the shootings. God will care for them, finally, and offer rest

from what the shooter has made them endure. Free of the shooter, the dead are now with God. God is now the keeper of the dead and, by extension, this user's text seems to suggest, of their public memory.

Following this initial expression of public memory, the next posting contains a secular expression of support "my best wishes," which continues the theme of hoping the dead find comfort, but without a direct reference to any religious figure. Comfort for the dead, offered through whichever means, is the emphasis of this expression of public memory.

This is almost surreal. My best wishes to everyone.  
April 16, 2007 at 1:54pm

There is an implicit claim in this expression that the dead should be remembered for the way they lived, rather than the way they died. This focus, away from the negative end to their lives, is its own call for a kind of rest, expressed not through God but through the more general, very positive statement "best." This user, in a way similar to the first user, is looking beyond the event of their deaths, and beyond the shooter's actions, bracketing those events as "surreal" and looking to a brighter moment in the undetermined future. Offering comfort for the dead, especially in their public memory, seems the underlying emphasis of this second expression of public memory as well.

*"Expressions of Comradeship" Begin to Emphasize Users' Status as College Students on First Evening*

As the first day continues, in fact, users seemingly become more comfortable to specify the groups they wish to address in their "expressions of comradeship." Posting 48, by Reginald Shepard, for example, at 4:32 p.m., states: "just wanted to say all us Seminoles are honorary Hokies today. We are all sad on our campus as well." In this posting, Shepard extends the theme of the earlier poster from UW-La Crosse, and

specifies his college affiliation (Florida State). With the use of college mascots, the first such use in the group, the poster is expressing a level of comfort with the address, knowledge that he as a college or university student is addressing a group of peers.

Shauna Wallace carries this theme forward once evening settles into the group. At 6:41 p.m. EST she states: “Rivalry aside, when something like this happens Hoos and Hokies come together.” Wallace states, more directly than any student before her, this event transcends the usual sense of “rivalry” between the University of Virginia (Hoos or Cavaliers) and in-state rival Virginia Tech. Given the in-state rivalry between these two schools, this expression of comradeship suggests, for Wallace, that the shootings have a transcendent impact on the relationship between the two schools.

Though a few postings throughout the evening hours continue to mention college or university affiliation, the most striking among them is when a person at 8:31 p.m. EST, who notes his status as a Dawson College (Montreal) student states: “I know what they’re all going through.” Dawson College was the site of a 2006 school shooting, which makes this poster’s expression of solidarity all the more poignant. This specific posting not only suggests the geographic reach of the group, but it suggests that perhaps not all affected outsiders are alike; this poster has previous experience with another school shooting.

Through the overnight hours, the group features only a few postings, but Marcia Stone’s 12:35 a.m. EST posting, which simply states: “My prayers are with you,” is relatively personal for the group’s expressions of comradeship, because of its simplicity and its identification of two parties—the poster’s and that of those affected by the event. In this way, the “expression of comradeship” comes through a simple exchange, that is, from “me” to “you.” Stone’s willingness to make this direct of an exchange is

emblematic of the growing degree of comfort between users and those affected by the event.

*Affected Outsiders Express Increased Proximity on Morning of Second Day, Especially as Students*

The second day brings a level of increased proximity among affected outsiders, which seems to shift the tone of the group's expressions as well. Around 10:00 a.m. EST on the 17<sup>th</sup>, Rochelle Langford introduces her posting by mentioning that her sister is an alumna, and Langford states: "I pray for those who lost their lives and those affected." With this contextual understanding about *why* she is praying for the group, Langford extends group members' sense about her reasons for participation.

Bernardo Miguel Feliz continues this extended discussion about reasons for participation at 11:12 a.m. EST, when he states:

"We will be getting some VA Tech decals on our race cars this weekend to honor and remember those who lost their lives yesterday. VA TECH...i think its safe to say that the country and the world has your back!"

Feliz's notion "the country and the world has your back" is among the most sweeping expressions of solidarity in the group; Feliz not only explains his reasons for participation (ostensibly to note decals on race cars) characterizes a particular behavior, the use of those decals, as a form of "honor." This posting is perhaps most directed in the group in its reverence for those affected by the event.

Liz Beck directs the sweeping nature of Feliz's posting towards college students specifically, when she writes at 11:45 a.m. EST: "Your in the nation's prayers especially those of college students everywhere." Beck, in this way, is wishing to speak on behalf of other college students around the country; her expression of "comradeship" through

prayers not only continues the college student theme of “comradeship” from the night before, but fuses it with Feliz’s sense of an overarching expression as well.

*“Expressions of Comradeship” as College Students Intensify Throughout Second Day*

This expression of comradeship through ostensibly collegiate status continues on the afternoon of the second day, when DeShawn Lowry writes at 2:41 p.m. EST: “we are all hokies today.” Student status proves a transnational theme in the group on the second day, in fact, as a female student from England writes at 5:03 p.m. EST: “just remember every countries students are with you all right now!” But it is Robin Vandenko, the group’s creator, who places the capstone on this second-day theme when he invokes language from poet and English professor Nikki Giovanni at 5:42 p.m. EST.

Vandenko writes: “America unites with the students and faculty at VA Tech. WE ARE VIRGINIA TECH! WE ARE VIRGINIA TECH!” This expression of comradeship through student status (Vandenko mentions being an Ohio State University “Buckeye” earlier in this posting) brings together the second day’s sweeping continental and transcontinental expressions with the stronger expression of users’ connections to the event that runs through the day’s postings.

On the evening of the second day, the group’s “expressions of comradeship” settle into a decidedly national character. Two users identify themselves according to their states (Georgia and Texas), but the most striking posting from this theme comes at 10:14 p.m. EST, when Laura Hopwell states a sense of a sense of uncertainty about how to assist those affected. She notes that her expression of comradeship (through God) for those affected offers a tangible action in the wake of the shootings. Hopwell writes: “just like all the other American's I can still pray.” The increased proximity that college



students expressed earlier on the second day has now started to reach, at least for some users like Hopwood, beyond the collegiate and university ranks to the national level.

Ultimately, though, the “expressions of comradeship,” emphasize collegiate and university ties rather than national ones. The last posting examined here that contains an expression of comradeship fittingly states: “Bluefield College is praying for you.” The collegiate character of these expressions is the order of the day throughout the group. Where public memory is concerned, the case of this group is a case of college students expressing their Bodneresque “comradeship” with other students across the country and the world.

*A Caveat: Establishing Number Dead is Precursor to Invocation of Public Memory*

Finally in this section, I wish to offer a caveat: though the group is rife with “expressions of comradeship” it is notable that the group is not initially concerned with public memory—the first five postings do not mention it in any way—and the group settles on the number dead (32) before the first posting (posting six) suggests invocation of public memory. The establishment of the number dead appears, at least in this case, to be a necessary precursor to the invocation of public memory.

**Characterizing the Event: Expressions of Sorrow in “In Memorial: Virginia Tech”**

Bodnar (1992, p. 9) notes the role of “expressions of sorrow for the dead” as a second component following “expressions of comradeship,” and there are 30 “expressions of sorrow for the dead” in “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.” These expressions of sorrow in the group are most often used to characterize the day of the shootings. Scott Metz opens his posting at 2:35 p.m. on the day of the shootings with the following statement: “what a very sad day.” In this way, Metz is characterizing in an overarching sense of sorrow. Building from this characterization, Metz mentions “praying” for the

“kids” affected by the event. In this way, the expression of sorrow provides Metz with a springboard into his expression of support through a religious reference. Taking a uses and gratifications perspective on the expressions of sorrow, especially those on day two, these seem to function as a form of consolation to users who are still very much grappling with victims’ deaths. This finding may suggest that expressions of sorrow help users “regulate” their emotions, in a similar way as individuals sometimes listen to sad songs when they are feeling sadness (Lonsdale & North, 2011). The expression both reflects and affirms users’ ostensibly sorrowful mood.

Later that evening, Robin Vandenko opens his 5:33 p.m. posting with a similar, straightforward statement: “It is a sad event.” Vandenko’s characterization, like Metz’s, is a springboard into a discussion about the need for campus security reform in the wake of the event. Several lines into that posting, Vandenko iterates “this is very sad,” and he notes the enduring nature of the problem of campus violence. In this way, Vandenko’s characterization of the event as “sad” also serves as a springboard into a historical mention about the significance of the event.

While Vandenko is ostensibly using an expression of sorrow to take “the long view” of history, Samuel Otango uses an expression of sorrow less than thirty minutes later as a way to lead into a personal story: “One of my grade school bestfriend was gunned down about 6 yrs---” Otango ostensibly uses the characterization of sorrow: “I’m saddened to hear about the loss of your own” to tell a story about the loss of *his own*; the loss of his best friend. In this way, Otango’s expression of sorrow as public memory stems from his personal memory.

Following this personal memory, Serena Wallace uses her expression of sorrow to characterize personal emotions: “I am deeply saddened by the events of today.” Among

the final expressions of sorrow on the first day poster Jeff Klein, who describes the overarching sorrow of the event, as: “i can't begin to describe the sadness we are all dealing with here...” The similarity of this expression to Metz’s earlier expression noted in this section suggests the enduring relevance of the theme of sorrow-as-a-shroud over the event throughout the first day.

*Second Day Expressions of Sorrow: Expanding Sorrow Themes from Day One*

On the morning of the second day, the personal shroud of sorrow is expressed in a more direct manner: “This whole thing really has me downtrodden.” This statement comes after the poster identifies the shooter by name. This expression of sorrow comes, therefore, ostensibly as a reaction to learning the shooter’s name. This posting expands Wallace’s theme from day one, and deepens it in view of knowledge about the shooter.

Later that afternoon, a posting expresses being “upset at a tragedy of this magnitude,” but then expresses a sense of satisfaction at the rise of a group like this one. In this way, the expression of sorrow extends out in a new direction—finding a “silver lining” in the group’s formation amidst that sense of sorrow about the event.

As the afternoon pushes onward, this sense of a “silver living” reaches into the realm of prayers for those affected; the poster notes that the “sad and horrible thing that has happened” encourages his prayers for the event. Again, the sorrow is paired with an uplifting item.

This pairing of the negative with the positive continues at 4:33 p.m. EST, combining prayers with a sense of being “extremely sorry for those affected.” In these second-day “expressions of sorrow,” the “expressions of comradeship” (prayers) are sometimes also present alongside of them. In this way, the group contains not only

freestanding expressions of “comradeship” and “sorrow for the dead” but also the combination of the two expressions in some of the same postings.

The presence of expressions of public memory within the group in this way suggests “In Memorial: Virginia Tech”’s communication dynamics facilitate what I am terming “memorial dynamics.” I see memorial dynamics as a subset of communication dynamics, memorial dynamics being specifically focused on conceiving the event, and the group, as a memorial.

### **Reflecting on Expressions of Sorrow & Comradeship: Four Memorial Dynamics**

#### **(1) The group elevates those killed, while reducing the shooter, to drive the trajectory of public memory within the group.**

These expressions of public memory suggest the group is explicitly claiming those killed as *the victims*, while their decision to largely ignore the shooter suggests that he is not considered worthy of inclusion in this memorial setting. This pattern within the group’s postings follows Spencer & Muschert’s (2009) finding about 15 wooden crosses near Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, the site of 1999 school shootings, in which two crosses—each meant for one of the shooters—were removed after public and media controversy. Spencer and Muschert assert: “the removal of the two crosses symbolizes the victory of the traditional concept of moral culpability over the modern concept” (2009, p. 1384). While there is no “victory” within this group—the story of the victims does not triumph over the story of the shooter—there is also, for the most part, no mention of the shooter. This absence within the group suggests that users likely do not even wish to place the shooter alongside the victims in their postings. Those killed inhabit the hallowed, moral ground of those ascending to heaven, and the shooter is, in view of his actions, seen as largely extraneous to that conversation.

Silence about the shooter serves a dual function in the group: First, the group advances the notion that enduring memory about the event should be squarely on those killed (and those affected) in the event. The shooter belongs, if anywhere at all, on the periphery of that enduring memory. Second, the group endorses, however implicitly, the afterlife as the ultimate, joyous resting place for these victims. Though a few postings make explicit the dichotomy of heaven for those killed and hell for the shooter, the religious tone of the group is, on the whole, much more subtle: prayers for those killed suggest they are ascending to heaven, and the relative absence of mentions for the shooter in this way suggests that he will not be joining them. There is an implicit sense of justice in this construction within the group: those killed, though the victims here, are the ones who will enjoy eternal life in heaven. And, those killed will enjoy such eternal life because they are essentially blameless—the blame for the event falling instead on the shooter for his actions.

The expressions of public memory, in this way, help establish the victims as on a different, inherently elevated, moral ground than the shooter. Those killed are elevated as exemplars—worthy of memorialization—while the shooter only merits an occasional mention, which is usually infused with anger and an implicit or explicit sense of blame. The group values those killed, by virtue of the frequency and nature of such mentions, in a way that it does not value the shooter. This sense of value not only emphasizes who the victims are, but perhaps most importantly, the focal point of the group as well.

With this focal point, squarely on those killed as the victims, the group's users are, furthermore, celebrating themselves as moral actors; individuals who, through their constructed emphasis, are driving the group towards a more just memory. This assertion—that there is a “right” way to remember the event (a focus on those killed) and

a “wrong” way to remember the event (including the shooter)—suggests group members are actively invested in the way the group shapes memory of the event. Posting about the event in this way also finds the users’ mindful of the fact that they are posting about themselves. This is especially evident in the way the users’ emphasize their own actions, specifically prayers. Users wish to be seen as actively contributing to the ‘moral high ground’ of the victims, and thus contributing towards the broader notion of those killed as the victims of the event. This is an intriguing finding from an uses and gratifications perspective as well, because it suggests these users might be willing, even eager, to seek out relationships with complete strangers in order to more fully work towards their specific needs and gratifications. This notion would go beyond the “sociability” (Ellison et. al, 2007) of Facebook, towards a more pressing need for social connection between users, even if previously there was none, in the aftermath of tragedy.

In this way, the users seem acutely aware of the immediate, interactive and public nature of the group. Each posting connects the wall poster to the event, and users have a particular need to control, and position, the nature of that connection. The users recognize, furthermore, that they are writing themselves into the memorial. The memorial is not simply *for the victims*; it is *by the affected outsiders*. Like 173 artists completing a sculptural homage, each poster seems invested in making sure the product is rendered in a particular manner. This sense of equal investment among the users is not to suggest that each nuanced view of public memory is treated in the same way, however. The group privileges the short posting that expresses sorrow for the dead, support for those affected and, sometimes, encouragement for the campus community’s recovery. Broader cultural assertions about the reasons for the shooting or, especially, the debate about gun control seem discouraged in the group. In the case of the gun control debate, in fact, the group’s

founder explicitly asks for the end of that discussion, and her request is quickly granted. The group's postings suggest users conceive of the group's function in relatively focused terms: to memorialize those affected in the event, usually through a brief expression of support. The group's users, therefore, are not simply expressing sentiments of public memory, they are advancing a particular trajectory for public memory within the group.

**(2) Users often attempt to make evident their connective tissue to the event.**

As affected outsiders, these users likely recognize that their connection to the event is, at first glance, not evident. Users are writing, after all, within a group that, as has been stated, provides for immediate, interactive and public expression across a great distance during a time of crisis. Users often make explicit their connection to the event, when they do so, in one of four ways: (1) as students of a particular American college (2) as students somewhere around the world (3) as Americans, that is, as members of a particular American state, city or institution (4) as individuals from around the world, from a particular continent or country. These largely geographic connections appear meant to invoke the reach of the event, rather than as any kind of assertions about outright nationalism. Statements such as "we are all hokies," in fact, suggest a collectivist, rather than a nationalist or provincial, character among the expressions of public memory.

Most importantly, these four forms of connective tissue provide specific evidence to help place the *affected outsiders*. They are "of" a place, it is outside of the geographic community of Blacksburg, Virginia and, still, they are active participants within the group. These articulations of place, these strands of connective tissue, help justify their presence in the group in an especially immediate, interactive and public manner. In doing so, the users succeed in firming up, and justifying, their presence within the group. This

process of justification has the role of validating their expressions of public memory, because they are participating within the established boundaries of *Facebook* as a platform for expression. Specifically, they have posted on the group's wall—the hub of communication on this social network—and they have, often, positioned themselves within the vast geographic spectrum that is afforded to *Facebook* users. They are *Facebook* users within this group, as well as members of a particular geographic community. The geographic community, and their connective evidence, again, articulates the geographic reach—and makes evident the geographic distance—across which these *Facebook* users are drawn. This emphasis suggests users wish to make clear the event has brought them together across boundaries. In this way, users are working to redefine the event—as an opportunity for unity, and a moment in which this opportunity was realized through the transnational geographic connections within the group.

### **(3) Users emphasize the university convocation as a moment of hope and unity.**

Emphasis of the university convocation on the second day allows users to drive the narrative within the expressions of public memory towards a moment of rebirth; for the campus community and, by extension, for the affected outsiders. In this way, the expressions of public memory are pressing the group's narrative towards *triumph after tragedy*, a bringing together in the group. The moral emphasis present in the first memorial dynamic is present here, too: group members were faced with the tragedy and, instead of being overcome by it, they emphasize the convocation as a moment that brings hope and unity, rather than succumbing to despair and fragmentation in the wake of these deaths. In celebrating the strength of the campus community, as expressed at the convocation, users are asserting their own strength in the situation as well. The strength of the second day, in particular, speaks to users' need to move forward in the wake of this



seemingly horrific event. Discussion about their first day participation within the group, and especially about the convocation, provides a mechanism to encourage that forward motion. Again, as in the first memorial dynamic, users are contributing to a particular kind of “remembering” about the event and its aftermath: they are emphasizing the triumph that followed the tragedy, rather than the initial tragedy. The event, and the group, turns on this process of not only survival through adversity but, most importantly, again, rebirth in the aftermath of the event as a prominent aspect of the group’s public memory.

**(4) The affected outsiders begin to reach “inside” towards the end of these postings.**

The posting on the evening of the second day, by the woman whose “brothers attend tech,” suggests a particular sense of the group’s growing “proximity” to the event itself. Though it is important not to make too much of this single posting, the posting nonetheless suggests that *affected outsiders* within the group are able to use the platform of *Facebook* to begin “reaching” those who might more fully be considered insiders, such as the aforementioned poster. The memorial group, then, is not discrete from the larger event (i.e. not “the outside chapter” of the Virginia Tech memorial) but a chapter that begins somewhat *outside* of the event and then moves, at least in this small way, closer to the event itself. This suggests that distance, as expressed in terms of the public memorial of the group, is a fluid concept—and that expressions of support for those affected are not conceived expressly in terms of vast geographic distance.

The presence of at least one “insider” in the group’s posting, too, may suggest a new phase in the group’s developmental process: the wall as, potentially, becoming a space in which outsiders *and* insiders might share their reactions and remembrances, particularly in view of public memory, as they exist surrounding the event. In this way,

the group's users are evolving along with the event itself. This evolution may reveal something about the way that insiders versus outsiders make use of memorial groups. What may be a "first stop" for affected outsiders, may be a subsequent stop for insiders—individuals who have other, more pressing geographic concerns within the group. Insiders may be initially concerned, for example, with travelling to the scene of the event or getting in touch with their loved ones in the affected area. The process of dealing with these concerns, and the time necessary to do so, may help understand why insiders do not emerge until the tailend of these postings. Affected outsiders, seemingly without these insider-like concerns, are more fully able to participate in the group from its inception. Affected outsiders seem much more likely than insiders to go looking for a platform through which to express themselves during a time of crisis; a platform as *Facebook* does in this case. The immediate, interactive and public nature of expression on *Facebook* seems tailored to the needs of those who have geographic distance from the event but are nonetheless feeling affected by it during this time of crisis. "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" provides a platform to which these users might not otherwise have access: a platform for their expression about the event. These memorial dynamics suggest that, just as the group has particular chronological dynamics, the nature of memorialization—in this case, the nature of expressions of public memory—has specific dynamics as well.

**Reflecting on Memorial Dynamics:  
Public Memory & The Ever-Advancing Present**

"Mediation," Thomas de Zengotita reminds us, "means dealing with reality through something else" (2005, p. 8). In the case of "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" that *something else* is *Facebook*. Expressions of public memory within the group serve as a particular means of dealing with a specific aspect of that reality: the gravity of the event.

In the Bodnaresque expressions of sorrow and comradeship, users are able to make meaning out of their participation in the group, and out of the event itself. The expression of sorrow likely has the meaning of providing a sense of catharsis, while the expression of comradeship is a forward-thinking gesture, acknowledging support for the difficult future. In this way, expressions of public memory encapsulate both the tragedy of the event and the potential for rebirth in the future. Such expressions give the event a living history: emphasizing what happened in the past, and what can happen in the future.

Through these expressions, the past meets the future at a dynamic crossroads: the ever-advancing present. I characterize the present this way because of the immediate, interactive and public nature of *Facebook* as a platform in this group. As the group advances minute-to-minute, there is certainly a record at any present moment in time (the *Facebook* wall itself), but the group at its height is in a dynamic, rather than a static form. In this way, the present, ever-advancing, is decidedly elusive. I understand the process of looking backwards and forwards, but not necessarily straight-ahead, as motivated, at least in part, by the fluid manner of the group's development. The *something else* of *Facebook*—its immediate, interactive and public character, encourages expressions of public memory in this particular way.

### **Expressions of Public Memory and Uses and Gratification Theory**

This analysis of expressions of public memory within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” suggests these users strongly desire memorialization as a gratification of their use of this group. Although this gratification has been mentioned in some previous online memorial group research (Anderson, 2011; Carter, 2008), memorialization has not, to my knowledge, been adequately explained or theorized as a social media gratification. This case may help address at least a portion of that gap. Memorialization in this case is

revealed to be a largely immediate act. Unlike offline memorial research, however, which has sometimes suggested memorials as “spontaneous” (Spencer & Muschert, 2008), this case suggests that online memorialization is both an immediate and, perhaps surprisingly, a deliberate act. Memorialization elevates the legacy of the victims in these shootings. It may well be that users’ desired memorialization gratification is perceived reinforcing, and strengthening, the legacy gratification discussed in the social media analysis chapter. Users’ desired memorialization gratification also affirms their own participation within the group, further quantifying the outcome of their grappling with this difficult event and its challenging emotions. The memorialization gratification, therefore, may also have the utility of validating the user experience within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.”

Recognizing that users’ media attention is, following from uses and gratifications theory, constantly being sought (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974) the “goal-oriented” (Hanson, et. al, 2010; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010) act of posting expressions of public memory within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” is a more immediate form of gratification than, for example, having to write and mail a condolence card (Goodhead, 2010) or physically traveling to a memorial site (Anderson, 2011). It would be illuminating, in further research, to more fully understand whether these users combined their online memorial use with visits to other offline memorial sites, including memorials constructed on the Virginia Tech campus. This undertaking might bring additional understanding to public memory in the age of social media. Future interviews with “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users and other online memorial group’s users could also examine whether, and to what extent, these expressions of public memory were a portion of a broader system of memorial practices in the aftermath of the shootings (Vicary & Fraley, 2010).

Public memory is the specific nature of the group's expression and emotion, the emotional response, characterizes the nature of the group's expression at a broad level. The next analysis chapter will consider the role of emotion within the group. In the following chapter, I draw especially on scholarship across computer-mediated communication to explicate the nature of emotion expression within "In Memorial: Virginia Tech."

VI.

The Expression of Emotion

The social media cycle chapter demonstrated users' reaction to and engagement with the traditional news cycle and the public memory chapter demonstrated one particular prominent form of expression. In this way, the previous analysis chapters have demonstrated the complexity of the shootings as a news event and a memorial event for users in the "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" group. Given the group's apparent shift from hurting for the victims on day one to healing with the members of the campus community on day two, emotion communication and, especially, socioemotional expressions appear to be an underlying form of expression that suggests these users also see the shootings as an emotional event. This analysis chapter especially makes evident the emotional trajectory of users' communication within the group.

In doing so, these socioemotional expressions further suggest that users' expressions have become especially visible and ubiquitous during journalism in the age of social media. Not only in the specific nature and trajectory of users' expression, as evidenced in the social media cycle, or in the particular forms that grow out of users' expressions as in the public memory chapter, but perhaps especially in the way that users' expressed emotional state is now bared, and fully on display, in the social media environment. It is worth noting again, as discussed in the literature review, that socioemotional expression has a rich history in computer-mediated communication (Hiltz & Turoff, 1978) and, despite differences between platforms of computer-mediated communication (computerized conferencing versus email, or the early web versus social media) this feature is sustained over time, whatever the particular software involved.

Journalism in the age of social media therefore captures the complexity of the users' reactions with more depth and breadth than was arguably possible in the pre-social media age. While it is conceivable that, if a traditional media news crew would have

documented a group of individuals and their responses to an unfolding news event, they may have captured the emotional trajectory of those users' communication. But the social media environment places this emotional trajectory on display—albeit in text and images—in a way that goes beyond what even the most ambitious traditional news crew could have reasonably hoped to document.

These users, most of whom do not have a direct, geographic connection to the event, fully demonstrate the nature of this group as an immediate, interactive and public platform for expression across a great distance during a time of crisis. The emotional trajectory of users' postings especially demonstrates users' desire to utilize the group to make sense of, and bring meaning to, the lives and deaths of these victims, thus employing the tools of the social media environment to make their voices heard—and the nature and trajectory of their communication evident—in a novel way that does not appear to be available to them on any comparable mass communication platform. The emotions that drive users' reaction to the event most profoundly suggest their needs and wants in the aftermath of the shootings. The expression of emotion is the catalyst for many postings in this group.

### **Early Emotion Communication Suggests Users' Need for Expression**

The early emotion communication suggests that, following initial knowledge about the news event, users may have had a particular need for expression. This is consistent with mass communication scholarship suggesting individuals may experience emotional reactions after tragic news events (Riffe & Stovall, 1989). In structural terms, the emotional expression within the posting frequently occurs at the beginning of the posting, with subsequent information in the posting often serving to contextualize that emotional expression. There appears to be some past precedent for this structure, as it has



been previously observed, though to a lesser extent, in blog postings following Hurricane Katrina (Macias, Hilyard & Freimuth, 2009). The early emotion communication within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” is also notable because of the seeming lack of information-seeking behavior. Specifically, only two questions about the shootings are posed in the first thirteen (the first hour), which is somewhat unusual given existing knowledge about the use of new media platforms for information-seeking behavior following news events (Thelwall & Stuart, 2007).

This is a group that prioritizes emotional expression above all else, and this prioritization of emotional expression is evident from the outset of the group. For example, as shown below, explicit emotion communication, indicated in bold, is the initial expression in six of the postings during the first hour. As I will demonstrate in this first section, users’ initial emotion communication, specifically their appraisal of the event, helps negotiate initial shock.

#### Figure 36: Emotion Communication as Initial Expression in Six First Hour Postings

**It is unreal.** Campuses around the nation need to realize what just happened. The two shootings occurred 2 HOURS apart!!! That is way to long for police to respond!!  
April 16, 2007 at 1:17pm ·

**wow : V**  
April 16, 2007 at 1:18pm

32 shot  
April 16, 2007 at 1:33pm ·

Why weren't classes cancelled after the first shooting?  
April 16, 2007 at 1:42pm

32 dead, god rest their souls  
April 16, 2007 at 1:47pm ·

**This is almost surreal.** My best wishes to everyone.  
April 16, 2007 at 1:54pm

Took a shower and shave. Had to phone fight with a credit card company. Turned on the TV and freaked out. All my prayers for everyone involved.

April 16, 2007 at 2:01pm ·

**i have no idea what to say**, i cant believe it. kinda puts ur own life into perspective when u hear of things like this... you just never know anymore when your gonna wake up and tragedy strikes... peace.love.prayers to all

April 16, 2007 at 2:08pm ·

I am a Canadian student that has looked into a few shootings over the past while and the correlation with the media jumping on video games. I dunno much about this one, but, there was a 1st shooting?

April 16, 2007 at 2:08pm

according to my friends at the hospital nearly all the wounded have died, leaving a body count now of 49

April 16, 2007 at 2:09pm ·

**God bless** those students and their families.

April 16, 2007 at 2:12pm

**love for the hokies !**

April 16, 2007 at 2:14pm ·

The first posting sets the group on a decidedly emotive course, as users begin to negotiate initial shock through their appraisal of unfolding events:

“It is unreal. Campuses around the nation need to realize what just happened. The two shootings occurred 2 HOURS apart!!! That is way to long for police to respond!!”

April 16, 2007 at 1:17pm

The opening phrase: “It is unreal” is explicit emotion communication (Derks et. al, 2008) and, specifically, an explicit emotional appraisal of the event (an expression of disbelief) that contains a decidedly negative tone (p. 767); this emotional appraisal is not at all surprising given the uncertainty of unfolding events at this moment in time, and the enormity of the event, discussed in chapter four. In this case, in fact, users appear to be utilizing *Facebook* in a way that goes beyond usual, everyday use of the world’s most popular social network. New media scholars have asserted *Facebook* is most commonly

used “to learn about social events and keep in touch with friends and as a diversion from school work” (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). This finding suggests that “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users’ emotion communication may not be characteristic of their everyday usage on the social network; users may well conceive of this event as a special case, one that is particularly worthy of emotion communication and emotional appraisal. In this way, the group seems to challenge, on a micro-level, the existing notion of “sociability” as the primary reason for individuals’ *Facebook* use (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Ellison et. al, 2007; Lampe et. al, 2006). Not only does “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” demonstrate *Facebook* as a platform for immediate, interactive and public expression across a great distance during a time of crisis, but the nature of that expression, viewed in socioemotional terms, seems especially to suggest tension at the outset of the group.

From a socioemotional perspective (Rice & Love, 1987), the phrase “It is unreal” in the first posting, suggests the user might be expressing tension (p. 93), which may also be related to the enormity and uncertainty of the event. Explicit emotion communication, specifically, in terms of event appraisal, and socioemotional expression of tension shed needed light on the emotive quality of early postings in online memorial groups. Early moments in such groups have been recognized as an active period (Hess, 2007); this group suggests that early activity is spurred by emotion communication. Brief communication, which has been noted for quite some time in CMC (Hiltz & Turoff, 1978; Rice & Love, 1987; Kollock & Smith, 1999) seems to extend, in the case of this group, to emotion communication as well. Though very terse communication has become somewhat more common with the advent and rise of *Twitter* (Hargittai & Litt, (in press)),

the group's emotion communication suggests the trend towards brevity may have already been prevalent on *Facebook* in April 2007, when the shootings occurred.

The second posting, in just one word and an emoticon, carries forward this sense of explicit emotion communication in an extraordinarily terse manner. Though much has rightly been made of the brevity of online communication and the resulting difficulty of meaningful communication (Turkle, 2011), the second posting presents a micro-level challenge to that notion. This posting is effective, explicit emotion communication which conveys the enormity of the event, and associated shock, in a compelling manner and utilizing only five characters.

“wow : V ”

April 16, 2007 at 1:18pm

This posting includes emblematic form (Derks et. al, 2008) specifically, as an open-mouthed emoticon ( :V ), and thus it stands in line with an extensive history of computer-mediated communication research, because “the conventional forms of text-based internet communication, such as email and ICQ/chat, have long been enhanced by the opportunity to include emoticons and smileys” (Kappas & Kramer, 2011, p. 3). This second posting suggests that emotional appraisal of the event can (and does) occur without specific reference to the event; the emoticon provides any needed contextualization about the nature of the reference, which seems to build understanding about the nature of emotion communication (Derks et. al., 2008). In each of these first two postings, the decidedly negative emotional communication suggests users are still coming to terms with the uncertainty of the unfolding events. This is consistent with early moments in online communication following tragic events (Macias, Hilyard & Freimuth,

2009; Thelwall & Stuart, 2007). The event arguably becomes somewhat more certain with the third posting, which lists the number shot:

“32 shot ”  
April 16, 2007 at 1:33pm

Following Rice & Love (1987), the third posting is a task-based expression that provides information about the event at hand (p. 93). After this quantification, the group turns its attention onto the victims, which is where the emotion communication largely remains for the duration of the first 185 postings. Regarding the victims, the fifth posting combines task-based and socioemotional content (Rice & Love, 1987), respectively. This combination of task-based and socioemotional content has past precedent in CMC research (Pena & Hancock, 2006) and arguably reflects the complexity of users’ consideration about the event:

“ 32 dead, god rest their souls ”  
April 16, 2007 at 1:47pm

The first phrase in the posting is task-based in that it offers information, asserting that those 32 who were previously posted as having been “shot” are now “dead.” The second is socioemotional content (Rice & Love, 1987): “god rest their souls.” Specifically, this second phrase is explicit emotional communication (Derks et. al, 2008), expressing a wish for action (p. 767), in this case by God, on behalf of the dead. The entry of god into the group’s discussion also provides a textual cue for communication norms in a group named “Long Live the Hokies,” this kind of textual cue is particularly important because it provides new users with a sense of how to treat communication about the event in the group (Hiltz & Turoff, 1978). It should be stated that, as noted in chapters four and five, I read the invocation of god in the group as reflective of the Judeo-Christian influence in American society and culture, rather than an explicit statement

about the religious character of the group. In taking this reading, I follow sociologists of death and dying, such as Leming & Dickinson (2010). These five initial postings, culminating in the fifth, help establish “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” as a space for emotion communication, especially directed towards the victims of the shootings. The fact that the emotion communication is explicit in each of these three cases, rather than implicit, further speaks to the fresh, still-unfolding nature of the event. Though the initial appraisal of the event appears to have helped negotiate the initial shock, users are still grappling with the shootings as the first hour progresses.

### **Emotion Communication in 1<sup>st</sup> Hour: Group Focuses on Victims, Rather than Event**

The emotion communication within the group becomes slightly more personal in the middle of the first hour, and the group’s emotional appraisal shifts slightly, from shock to characterization of the event as a tragedy in view of the victims.

Figure 37: Postings Six through Thirteen Demonstrate Shift Towards Victims

This is almost surreal. My best wishes to everyone.  
April 16, 2007 at 1:54pm

Took a shower and shave. Had to phone fight with a credit card company. Turned on the TV and freaked out. All my prayers for everyone involved.  
April 16, 2007 at 2:01pm ·

i have no idea what to say, i cant believe it. kinda puts ur own life into perspective when u hear of things like this... you just never know anymore when your gonna wake up and tragedy strikes... peace.love.prayers to all  
April 16, 2007 at 2:08pm ·

I am a Canadian student that has looked into a few shootings over the past while and the correlation with the media jumping on video games. I dunno much about this one, but, there was a 1st shooting?  
April 16, 2007 at 2:08pm

according to my friends at the hospital nearly all the wounded have died, leaving a body count now of 49  
April 16, 2007 at 2:09pm ·

God bless those students and their families.  
April 16, 2007 at 2:12pm

love for the hokies !  
April 16, 2007 at 2:14pm

The sixth posting continues the process of grappling with the event, and it contains two distinct forms of direct emotional communication; the first phrase is an rather negative emotional appraisal of the situation (“almost surreal”) (Derks et. al, 2008), while the second (“my best wishes to everyone”) is a socioemotional expression of solidarity with those affected by the event (Rice & Love, 1987). The user is inserting themselves (“my best”) into the text of the posting and offering well-wishes to those affected. The phrase “my best wishes” further reflects that the emotional tone of the communication in the group is moving away from being entirely negative and, ever so gradually, becoming somewhat more positive.

“ This is almost surreal. My best wishes to everyone. ”  
April 16, 2007 at 1:54pm

One subsequent off-topic posting, the only such posting in the group, does not appear to have much negative impact in the group because it does not lead to conflict (Turnage, 2007), and the group quickly returns to the event at hand. At this point, almost one hour into the group, users begin explicitly writing about their emotions regarding the event. In terms of emotion communication, this shift is crucial because it suggests that users are more fully coming to terms with what has occurred; they are able to utilize “verbal emotion labels” (Derks et. al, 2008) and able to place into context, to an extent, what has recently taken place:

“Took a shower and shave. Had to phone fight with a credit card company. **Turned on the TV and freaked out.** All my prayers for everyone involved.” (bold mine for emphasis)  
April 16, 2007 at 2:01pm

The event is still fresh in users' minds, of course, and this posting suggests the event as especially jarring to this particular user's day, which I discussed in chapter four. This posting also reinforces Facebook as a platform for immediate, interactive and public expression across a great distance during a time of crisis, because one gets the sense that the group may be functioning to relieve the user's tension (Rice & Love, 1987) associated with having "freaked out," though I cannot be certain, based on the text, that the user actually achieved a sense of emotional release.

Verbal emotion labels continue throughout the second-half of the group's first hour. Characterizing the event as a "tragedy" suggests an antagonistic relationship to the event (Rice & Love, 1987); a sense of helplessness in the face of such events, but the fact that the user is able to assert this sense of helplessness, is a further "verbal emotion label" for the shootings; the user is working towards emotional recognition about how the event has affected their emotional state (Derks et. al, 2008):

"i have no idea what to say, i cant believe it. kinda puts ur own life into perspective when u hear of things like this... **you just never know anymore when your gonna wake up and tragedy strikes...** peace.love.prayers to all" (bold mine for emphasis)  
April 16, 2007 at 2:08pm

The early contextualization of the event continues, which suggests the user may have gained a very small amount of emotional distance from the event and its aftermath). The group achieves a further sense of distance from the event towards the end of the first hour, as the shootings are not directly mentioned in the final two postings of the first hour:

"God bless those students and their families."  
April 16, 2007 at 2:12pm

"love for the hokies ♥"  
April 16, 2007 at 2:14pm



The impact of not mentioning the shootings is a more positive emotional communication in each case (Derks, et. al, 2008). A negative event, the shootings, is certainly the catalyst, but the text of the postings appears to look beyond that catalyst and focus on the aftermath of the event. These two postings mark the first moment in the group that socioemotional content (text) in the group does not contain at least some negative elements; the heart emoticon in the 2:14 p.m. posting, in fact, seems a distinct expression of solidarity (Rice & Love, 1987) with those affected by the event. With each of these two postings, we see the first hour conclude with the group's emphasis squarely on the victims; who are now the focus of blessings and expressions of love. The victims, rather than what has happened to them, slowly become the focus of the group. As I will discuss in the next section, this brings an increase in the frequency of emotional expressions of solidarity within the group.

### **Focus on Victims Brings Expanding Emotion Communication of Solidarity**

In terms of the relationship between emotion and CMC, the hallmark of the group's second, third and fourth hours are users' expressions of solidarity with those affected by the event. In fact, as shown below, twelve consecutive second hour postings (shown below in reverse chronological order) demonstrate expressions of solidarity emerging as a core theme in the emotion communication within the group. In particular, expressions of solidarity often take a religious tone, such as "my prayers are with all of you and your loved ones," which is to say that users often employ prayer-themed expressions of solidarity directed towards those affected by the event. This is significant, too, because the group seems to turn away, at least for a time, from socioemotional expressions of tension (Rice & Love, 1987). Users' emotion communication in hour two

is beginning, however slowly, to recast the event as an opportunity for solidarity among students and young people around the country and the world.

Figure 38: Expressions of Solidarity Become Prevalent in Hour Two

What a tragedy, my prayers are with all of you and your loved ones

April 16, 2007 at 3:14pm · Flag

My prayers go out to you and your families.

April 16, 2007 at 3:13pm · Flag

You are all in my thoughts and prayers. May God be with all the families and loved ones in mourning of those lost today.

April 16, 2007 at 3:12pm · Flag

what a tragedy....my prayers go out to all of the victims as well as their families, may God be with them

April 16, 2007 at 3:12pm · Flag

our paryers our with you all...

April 16, 2007 at 3:12pm · Flag

bless u guys

April 16, 2007 at 3:06pm · Flag

my thoughts and prayers go out to Virginia Tech and allthe families affected by this tragedy. God Bless!

April 16, 2007 at 3:05pm · Flag

Thoughts and Prayers from Penn State for the VT family. God Bless April 16, 2007 at 2:54pm · Flag

This is such a terrible day... God Bless the families of the students/professors that lost their lives.

April 16, 2007 at 2:52pm · Flag

may god be with everyone who was killed. also may he be with the families. the death toll is now 32.

April 16, 2007 at 2:50pm · Flag

May God be with you, guys. The whole world in watching in horror.

April 16, 2007 at 2:48pm · Flag

please join and show support on this tragic day!

April 16, 2007 at 2:41pm ·

As I discussed in chapter four, there is a broadening in the group's conception of victims at this point in the group and that sense of broadening is met with expanded expressions of solidarity. While the twelve consecutive hour two postings demonstrate the emerging prevalence of the theme, the broadening sense of solidarity is best conveyed through a few postings across the afternoon hours of day one. To that end, consider the

three postings below, from hours two, three and four, respectively. I have emphasized text that suggests solidarity (Rice & Love, 1987) in bold type. In the three postings below, the expressions of solidarity expand to include first “the victims as well as their families” then to “everyone involved,” in a posting that draws a Columbine shooting (1999) parallel and seems more directed at the campus community as a whole, and then, in the third posting below, the expression extends statewide “My prayers are **with all of you in Virginia!**”

Nearing the end of hour two:

“what a tragedy....my prayers go out to **all of the victims as well as their families**, may God be with them”

April 16, 2007 at 3:12pm

Nearing the end of hour three:

“Those of us located near Columbine have a sense of what you are all going through. We are 3 days short of 8 years and it feels just like it happened yesterday. **We are there to pray for everyone involved and try to help carry you through all of the emotions and difficult times ahead. Just keep talking and getting it out and it will eventually get better.** Time heals all wounds! May God Bless everyone involved in this horrible tragedy!”

April 16, 2007 at 4:13pm

Hour four:

“what a tragedy :( God Bless all the families and friends that were affected by this tragedy! My prayers are **with all of you in Virginia!**”

April 16, 2007 at 4:42pm

The expanding scope of the event in the afternoon hours on day one, which I discussed at some length in chapter four, brings an expanded sense of emotional communication, specifically solidarity within the group. By 4:42 p.m. the solidarity expressed, is for the sake of millions of Virginians, and not only for the 32 killed, as it was only hours earlier in the group. As these three postings (above) do well to demonstrate, the group begins to contextualize the event in historical terms. The implications of this contextualization are

to present emotion communication of solidarity in increasingly historical terms. The event is still receiving decidedly negative emotional appraisal, but expressions of solidarity have begun to transcend the personal or collegiate arenas, towards a broader, national expression of solidarity. Users recognize campus shootings as an ongoing problem in American society, and their emotion communication begins to probe the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings on a socio-cultural level. This probing occurs, interestingly, alongside enduring expressions of solidarity for the victims, which suggests users' maintaining two streams of communication at this point on the evening of day one: the first is emotional appraisal of the event (negative emotion communication) and the second is enduring expressions of solidarity for the victims (more positive emotion communication). Specifically, the postings consider the event and its victims as two core elements of the shootings, seeming to address each one in a distinct manner.

### **Negative Emotional Appraisal of the Event Meets Enduring Expressions of Solidarity for Victims**

With this expanded solidarity, the emotional communication becomes somewhat more antagonistic (Rice & Love, 1987). Having banded together in solidarity, users begin emotionally appraising (Derks et. al, 2008) the act of committing such shootings. Emotional appraisals of the event at this point in time are negative. In the four example postings below, the negative emotional appraisal begins with a consideration of the shootings themselves, expands, in two cases, to consider campus response in a decidedly negative manner and, finally, appraises the event as an "American problem." Though the postings have a sweeping trajectory in this way, the negative emotional appraisals in the group are usually followed, as they are in these four examples, with a positive emotional communication of solidarity. In this way, even when the emotional communication is

critical of the event, the focus on the victims is characterized by decidedly positive expressions of solidarity. In this way, the group does not, ultimately, lose sight of its emotional focus on the victims:

**“this is such a cowardly thing to do....** i'm in a state of awe. all of my thoughts and prayers *go out to everyone at VT. stay strong!*”  
 April 16, 2007 at 5:32pm (emphasis mine in bold to represent negative emotional appraisal, emphasis mine in italics to represent continued positive expressions of solidarity)

From the broad emphasis on the shooting, the group moves to a specific emphasis on campus security. In this way, many users reflect on their own experiences as college students, a phenomenon which I consider in view of the news cycle in chapter four. For the purposes of emotion and CMC, this personalization of the event is direct emotion communication and negative emotional appraisal, which is often presented within the context of the user's personal experience. As in the case of the above posting, though, the emphasis on the victims is retained here through a positive expression of solidarity to conclude the posting:

“ It is a sad event and believe me when I say that MAJOR changes are about to be made at large universities around the nation. I go to Ohio State and there are some lecture halls with 500+ people wiht only 2 exits. Imagine that. This is very sad and this has been a problem for some time. **Security needs to be changes at colleges and schools.** Regardless, we cannot live in fear. *Thoughts and prayers for everyone involved* from everyone at The Ohio State University. God Bless. ”  
 April 16, 2007 at 5:33pm (emphasis mine in bold)

As the evening hours progress, the magnitude of the blame becomes somewhat more heated; in the posting below, the security response is addressed using direct emotion communication and particularly negative emotional appraisal (Derks et. al, 2008) that is, as “truly unacceptable” {sic}. Tensions appear to be building within the group (Rice & Love, 1987) as the socioemotional content gradually becomes more pointed, even accusatory, in tone. Consider the leap that the group takes during the seven o'clock hour;

emphasis moves, in just one minute, from the school to the nation, that is, from the specific to the general:

**“ I was completely shocked by the school for not having a lock down after the first shooting is truly [sic] unacceptable** and I know that God is taking care of those who pairshed today, but I hope and pray that nothing like this ever happens again. *My prayers and thoughts are with the students, staff, and faculty. I recite the Morner's Kaddish(Jewish Prayer) for the familes of the victims.*”  
April 16, 2007 at 7:33pm (emphasis mine in bold)

“ This stuff gets worse every year **Its one big efn American Problem**, I just cannot believe it happened at a College *We mourn with you VT*”  
April 16, 2007 at 7:34pm

While tensions mount, the users retain their focus on the victims, but this focus will falter slightly during arguably the group's most contentious period, a debate about gun control.

### **The Gun Control Debate: The Emotional Emphasis on the Victims' Gets Lost in Anger**

Figure 39: Consecutive Postings in Gun Control Debate

**Robin Vandenko** MORE RESTRICTIONS ON GUNS!!! PERIOD!  
April 16, 2007 at 8:37pm · Flag

i agree with robin, its time the US does something about all the guns that are floating around that country. maybe something like taking away that stupid right to bear arms bullshit. stupidest law ever.  
April 16, 2007 at 8:51pm · Flag

i dont know robin, but i agree with him too.  
April 16, 2007 at 8:54pm · Flag

Speaking of guns did you know that the security guards at virginia tech are not allowed to carry guns? they are there for protection and they should have the means necessary to protect meaning access to guns. Just because it is a gun free campus does not mean that a person intent on violence is going to abide by it. I also believe that the campus should have been shut down. it doesn't matter that the police had reason to believe that it was an isolated incident, the killer was still at large! there is no excuse for it. the campus should have been shut down and the students informed of the shooting in a better way. Not everyone checks their email hourly or even daily. there needs to be a better system set up to inform students of important happenings on campus. this may have been prevented if better steps had been taken and we need to implement them before it happens again.  
April 16, 2007 at 9:01pm · Flag

the gunman probably has a facebook account....i wonder if any indications were present before the shooting on his myspace or facebook account  
April 16, 2007 at 9:08pm

The gunman was a 24 year old chinese national who imigrated to the US through San Fransico in October 2006  
April 16, 2007 at 9:10pm · Flag

all my prayers go out to the Family's of the victims in this horrific misfortune. :(  
April 16, 2007 at 9:17pm · Flag

**Sara Berry (Group Creator)** Although we are all entitled to our opinion, I have removed pictures that could be found offensive to some. This group is in memorial for all those who have lost loved ones, and not for political opinions. Please respect the nature of this group.  
April 16, 2007 at 9:31pm · Flag

The debate ostensibly begins with a posting from Robin Vandenboch criticizing gun control laws:

“ MORE RESTRICTIONS ON GUNS!!! PERIOD! ”  
April 16, 2007 at 8:37pm

Here, there is only negative emotional communication (Derks et. al, 2008) and antagonism (Rice & Love, 1987) about gun laws; the victims, at least momentarily, are not directly addressed in the group. This suggests that the increasingly heated, antagonistic, debate has the emotional impact of removing the emphasis from the victims and placing it instead onto gun laws. Following Vandenboch's posting, there is a rare expression of agreement (Rice & Love, 1987) within the group, which, rather than agree about the victims, further amplifies the antagonism about gun laws:

i agree with robin, its time the US does something about all the guns that are floating around that country. maybe something like taking away that stupid right to bear arms bullshit. stupidest law ever.  
April 16, 2007 at 8:51pm

The above posting contains perhaps the most profane direct emotional expression of anger within the group (Derks et. al, 2008). After a few more postings debating gun control, the group's founder is able to redirect the group's focus onto the victims:

Although we are all entitled to our opinion, i have removed pictures that could be found offensive to some. This group is in memorial for all those who have lost loved ones, and not for political opinions. Please respect the nature of this group.

April 16, 2007 at 9:31pm

Group members do “respect the nature of this group,” and within a few postings the group's anger, which boiled for approximately four hours before the gun control debate began, subsides almost entirely for the evening. The group retains its focus on positive emotion communication (Derks, et. al, 2008), especially expressions of solidarity (Rice and Love, 1987) directed towards the now-expanded conception of the victims.

The group survives the contentious gun control debate, and remains especially active for approximately another twenty-four hours. I use the word survival purposefully in this context, because, as has been widely discussed in scholarly and popular literature, online groups are sometimes driven off-topic after periods of disagreement (Turkle, 2011). I assert that the popular image of online communication is of users fighting amongst one another, in a kind of “free-for-all” manner (Keen, 2007). That the group does not fall completely off-topic at any moment in time, but particularly following the contentious gun control debate, seems a testament to at least two factors: (1) the respectful tone of emotion communication throughout the group—with very rare expressions of outright anger—and (2) the users' decision to respect the wishes of the group's founder, when she posts in the group and asks that the conversation retain its memorial focus.



As the users retain that focus on the group as a memorial, the late evening hours bring more emotional distance from initial shock of event. The ten o'clock hour, for example, returns the group to users' expressions of emotional distance from the event, which began mid-to-late afternoon. Characterizing the event as a "horrific misfortune," the shock that seemed so palpable in the group's initial emotional communications (Derks et. al, 2008) is no longer as pronounced within users' postings.

On the first day, the group has traversed a variety of forms of emotion communication. The initial negative appraisal of the event (hour one), including socioemotional expressions of tension, was followed by an outpouring of expressions of solidarity, especially from students around the country and the world (hour two). These expressions of solidarity take on a more historical and cultural sensibility during the late afternoon and early evening of day one, which slowly gives rise to an contentious period during which gun control is debated in the group. This is the only moment in which the group seems to momentarily lose sight of the victims of the shootings. Seemingly spurred by a posting from the group's creator, the gun control debate largely ceases on the evening of the first day, and the group returns quickly to its developed focus on the victims of the shootings, broadly conceived. On the second day, users revisit the event and its victims in their emotion communication. They tend to do so in a way that emphasizes their own recollections of first learning about the event and, especially, users are emphasizing the group as a memorial to the victims of the shootings.

### **Day Two Brings a Shift in Emotion Communication: Socioemotional Recollections of the Event and Memorializing Victims**

The second day opens with users recounting how they first heard of the shootings. When users recall the shootings (on day one or day two) they always reference their

socioemotional state (Derks et. al, 2008) uniformly one of tension (Rice & Love, 1987) and sometimes note the media channel through which they heard of the event. Consider this excerpt:

“i don't even live in virginia...but i heard on the news when the first shooting happened. i thought, "oh. big deal. another shooting..." and i was totally wrong. my best friend called me a few hours later and said, "sabrina, turn on CNN." so i did. and the first thing she said was, "it's worse than columbine." for everyone who died and was wounded, and even those who survived, you're all in my prayers. stay strong, and keep holding on. you all have a lot of support throughout this.”  
April 17, 2007 at 7:12am

Here, the user implicitly situates utilization of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” as something that occurred *after* interpersonal communication (the phone call from the friend) *and* viewing news about the event on television. This finding seems to reinforce “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” as a platform for immediate, interactive and public expression. By the morning, the postings have also become more reflective. The passage of time allows users to place the event into a more hyperpersonal (Walther, 2007; 1997; 1996) context. Expressions of emotion on the morning of day two also seem less urgent; they are presented within the context of yesterday’s news event. The “memorial” postings of mid-morning emphasize how users are, and will be, remembering those affected in the previous day’s events. Consider “race car decals” in the posting below:

We will be getting some VA Tech decals on our race cars this weekend to honor and remember those who lost their lives yesterday. VA TECH...i think its safe to say that the country and the world has your back!  
April 17, 2007 at 11:12am

The expressions of solidarity in the mid-morning on day two, like the expressions of tension, reveal a sense of distance in users’ emotional communication. Users employ the text-based CMC medium to emphasize the memory of those affected in the shootings rather than the shootings themselves. The focus of emotion communication shifts

midmorning: from how users heard about the event to what users are doing in the aftermath of the event. The emotion communication in the early afternoon is focused on the statement “we are all hokies,” which is first invoked after 2 p.m.:

“We are all Hokies today. So senseless that one person can have such a devastating effect on everyone else. Thoughts and prayers are with everyone. ”

April 17, 2007 at 2:41pm

### **“We are all Hokies”: From Hurting to Healing in Emotion Communication**

This statement represents positive emotion communication (Derks et. al, 2008) and socioemotional content expressing solidarity (Rice & Love, 1997). “We are hokies” suggests a crucial emotive development within the group: a turn from hurting for those affected by the event, as evidenced through socioemotive expressions of tension or antagonism, to healing with those affected by the event. The event of the shootings has been recast in positive emotion communication and expressions of solidarity. “We are all hokies” becomes a ‘rallying cry’ within the group by the evening of day two, reflected in Robin Vandenko’s final posting:

“The amazing thing that happens here though is that all of a sudden, there are no rivalries, there is no violence or hate between universities, and there is unity. Everyone steps back and realizes that we are all the same. A Buckeye is the same as a Wolverine, a Gator is the same as a Seminole, a Sooner is same as a Longhorn, and a CAVALIER is the same as a HOKIE. We are all HOKIES this week just like that quote says. America unites with the students and faculty at VA Tech. WE ARE VIRGINIA TECH! WE ARE VIRGINIA TECH! Great speech by the lady at that ceremony. God Bless”

April 17, 2007 at 5:34pm

The event has been recast through emotion communication, and especially the expressions of solidarity on the afternoon and early evening of day two. In less than thirty-six hours, the event shifts from negotiating the initial shock to expressing solidarity with those affected by the event. Expressions of solidarity with those affected are especially evident in postings 182 through 185:

Figure 40: Day Two Evening Posts Further Demonstrate Shift from Hurting to Healing

I wish so much that there was some way I could help from here, but just like all the other American's **I can still pray, and that's what I am, and will continue to do.** God Bless and stay strong.!

April 17, 2007 at 10:14pm · Flag

**I will always remember those lost & will continue to pray for those left behind,** I hope everyone else will do the same.

April 17, 2007 at 10:18pm · Flag

I am not going to try and imagine what all of you Virginia Tech students are feeling. I just wanted to join this group to let you all know that Canadians morn with you. We are also deeply saddened by this terrible event. **To all those who were lost, you will be deeply missed and to all those who survived. we hope you have a speedy recovery. We love you !**

April 17, 2007 at 10:27pm · Flag

**Bluefield College is praying for you!**

April 17, 2007 at 11:16pm · Flag

These users have especially recast the event in terms of a shared sense of healing; the users are pledging to remember the magnitude of what has happened in their hearts and, particularly, in their prayers. Prayers, specifically, seem to be employed as a healing device. These users are pledging to carry forward, via their actions, the memory of those students who were killed in, or affected by, the shootings. The emotion communication, in this way, has shifted from hurting for those affected to healing with those affected.

This sense of healing is central to Nikki Giovanni's speech during the day two convocation, and it further suggests that users on the evening of day two have taken Giovanni's "We are Hokies" message of healing and solidarity seriously in their emotion communication.

This finding suggests the importance of the unfolding news event in contextualizing the specific object of users' emotion communication: (1) the event of the shootings on day one (2) the aftermath of the shootings and the memorialization of the

shootings by mid-morning of day two and (3) Nikki Giovanni's speech, especially the phrase "we are hokies" by the evening of day two. Users' emotion communication often seems tied to one of these three points in the larger trajectory of the event.

The group was especially active in hour three on the first day (seventeen postings) and hour thirty-three on the second day (nine postings that hour), as users are coming to terms with the death toll and the impact of Giovanni's "We are Hokies!" speech, respectively. Though the speech is certainly the catalyst for day two communication, the group never retains the frequency of communication that it enjoys in the first three hours. This finding may suggest that *Facebook* memorial groups are most active in the immediate hours following their establishment. It seems notable, that those initial hours, when the group is most active, are when the news about the shootings spreads around the world. In this way, news may be driving users to seek a platform for emotion communication. As a platform for immediate, interactive and public expression across a great distance during a time of crisis, "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" seems to provide just such a platform for emotion communication.

The emotion communication that typifies day two, expressions of solidarity in view of the phrase "we are Hokies," is reinforced via photoshopped images that are posted to the group's "Photos" section. Users use images to continue the emotion communication that began in text on the group's wall; the posted images reinforce the day two sense of solidarity.

### **Group's Photoshopped Images Reinforce "We are Hokies" Sense of Solidarity**

Thirty-three such images appear in the group, and they uniformly utilize explicit emotion communication (Derks, et. al, 2008) to express solidarity (Rice & Love, 1987) with those affected by the shootings. The images are first posted on April 17, 2007, and

continue through June 21, 2007. Initial images are posted by the group's founder, but many subsequent images are posted by group members. This example image below, from June 21, 2007, does well to suggest the group's core member-base: American students without a direct or geographic connection to the event, who nonetheless, often on the basis of their collegiate ties, feel compelled to express themselves within the group:



Figure 41: VT-Auburn “Today, we are all Hokies” image

In the above image, the date of the shootings appears in maroon, a kind of homage to Virginia Tech's school colors and a black ribbon, appears behind the school's VT logo; I analyze the black ribbon as a symbol of the somber mood associated with the aftermath of the shootings, especially because the shootings resulted in student deaths. Below that ribbon, the emblem of Auburn University appears, and the close proximity of these two items suggests solidarity between Virginia Tech and Auburn University during this difficult time. Below the two images, the text “Today, we are all Hokies” is set in italics. I analyze the text as reinforcing the solidarity that is conveyed through the images. This photoshopped image, characteristic of the images as a whole, suggests group members' emphasis on the aftermath of the event as an opportunity for unity among students around

the country and the world. This finding reinforces the role of uses and gratifications theory in this case, because the posted images are content that is expressly produced by users for the purpose of gratifying their particular needs. Here again, users are participating in a dialog with traditional journalism, responding to one aspect of the event: the victims. With this assertion of their desired gratification, the users who post these images are especially calling for an expanded conversation in traditional journalism, one that both recognizes users without a direct geographic connection to unfolding news events and gives fuller voice to their expressions about the victims. In this way, the photoshopped images, posted from April 17, 2007, until June 21, 2007, provide users with an opportunity to emphasize particular aspects of a moment in the past (van Dijk, 2007), and, by extension, to present the enduring significance of the event in a specific manner. The images, like the day two group postings, present emotion communication that is somewhat more positive, specifically focused on the shootings as an opportunity for solidarity.

The emotion communication of the group, as reflected in day one and two wall postings, as well as photoshopped images, carries a general trajectory in which users are, on day one, hurting for those affected and then, on day two, healing with those affected by the event. This emotional shift appears motivated, in large part, by users' status as college and university students. Though users do not have a direct or geographical connection to the event, their expressions of tension and antagonism on day one, and of solidarity on day two and via the photoshopped images into June 2007, suggests users' emotion communication is closely tied to the developing news event: to the death toll of the shootings on day one and Nikki Giovanni's call for solidarity, "we are Hokies" on day two.

The Virginia Tech shootings remained in the news after April 17, 2007, but never to the extent that it was on those first two days. With this in mind, it is not at all surprising that postings decrease considerably after the first 185 considered in this dissertation. As of early July 2011, there are fewer than 250 total postings in the group. This suggests, after the emotional communication of the second day, and the shift from hurting to healing, the group had, to a considerable extent, run its course. Without major news events to carry the story forward, I certainly understand the decreased frequency of wall postings; 185 in the first two days and approximately 65 in the four years after that time-period. Regarding the “life” of memorial groups, the presence of fresh information seems likely a prerequisite for continued activity, specifically continued wall postings, within the group. Taken together, the analysis in this chapter suggests three emotional dynamics, which will be considered in the next section of this chapter.

### **Learning from the Trajectory of the Group’s Emotion Communication: Three Emotional Dynamics**

The analysis in this chapter suggests three emotional dynamics. The first emotional dynamic in the group is that, across the 185 wall postings, (1) users’ emotional communication seems to be, at least to a considerable extent, responding to the trajectory of the news event, at that particular point of time. Specifically, socioemotional expressions on day one are likely to focus on the event of the shootings, or, more frequently, to focus on the victims, especially as the notion of who the victims are in this event expands on the afternoon of the first day. Comparatively, socioemotional expressions on the morning of the second day find users’ reflecting on their media use and reflecting on how best to memorialize those affected by the event. Finally, socioemotional expressions in the late afternoon and evening of the second day focus on



the notion “we are Hokies” which was the central element of poet and Professor Nikki Giovanni’s speech, as I discussed at some length in chapter four. This first emotional dynamic feeds into the group’s second identifiable emotional dynamic.

(2) Users who log in to the group seem to consider “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” as a space for expression about the developing news event: as the news event evolves, so too do the group’s expressions. The shootings themselves, in terms of emotion communication, were only the catalyst for the group, and day two (or even late day one) postings sometimes do not reference them at all. This suggests that a day-one only user may have a somewhat different experience in the group than someone who visited the group on day two, or, for that matter, on both days one and two. “In Memorial: Virginia Tech,” as a platform for expression, is dynamic rather than static, in terms of emotional communication. The group often has a forward-thinking orientation that emphasizes the present, or the future, associated with the event of the shootings.

Perhaps as a result of this forward-thinking orientation, the third emotional dynamic in the group is as follows: (3) the second day of the group contains somewhat more positive emotional communication than does the first day (Derks, et. al, 2008) and expressions of tension (Rice & Love, 1987) also seem to decrease on day two, especially when compared with the early afternoon of day one. As I have suggested in the day two analysis, there is likely more at work here than the mere passage of time, the aspects of the news event that are emphasized within the day two trajectory, specifically, the aftermath of the event and memorialization and, especially, the convocation speech are somewhat more positive in tone, at least in comparison to the very negative tone of the shootings on day one. The convocation speech, and the phrase “we are hokies” specifically suggests resilience and rebuilding in the aftermath of the event, and this may

help explain the more positive tone in emotional communication late in the afternoon and evening of day two. The event, as suggested in the second point, is truly a dynamic event and in fact each of these three emotional dynamics reflect the ever-evolving nature of expression, particularly in terms of socioemotional expression, within the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group.

### **Socioemotional Expressions and Uses and Gratifications Theory**

The analysis in the socioemotional expressions chapter strongly suggests two desired gratifications among “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users: to experience tension relief in the initial aftermath on day one of the group and to express solidarity with surviving members of the Virginia Tech campus community on day two of the group.

This marked shift especially reveals the news as integral to social media users’ gratifications in this case. This finding sheds needed light on the process of explaining the uses and gratifications of traditional journalism within a social media context (Zerba, 2011; Hanson et. al, 2010). These users employ particular news items—the death toll on day one and the phrase “We are Hokies” from Giovanni’s convocation speech on day two—to reinforce and strengthen their desired gratifications in this case. This news anchors users’ uses and gratifications and provides added legitimacy to their affected outsider status. Through the gratifications of tension relief and solidarity, respectively, these users appear especially able to make sense of, and bring meaning to, the lives and deaths of the victims in these shootings. While the previous two analysis chapters have strongly suggested the visibility and ubiquity of expression in the age social media, this analysis chapter and these resulting gratifications most fully reveal the trajectory of the group’s 36-hour conversation.

The tension relief and solidarity gratifications, in fact, anchored in specific news items, do well to explain how journalism in the age of social media is a “conversation” (Kovach & Rosensteel, 2010) between traditional journalism on the one hand and users on the other hand. Traditional journalism, in the form of these two news items, provides the catalyst for the group’s conversation, while users’ expressions about those news items very much appear to facilitate their tension relief on day one and their expressions of solidarity with members of the campus community on day two.

The tension relief and solidarity gratifications that emerge from this analysis chapter especially reveal the complexity of users’ desired uses and gratifications in the age of social media, which may well be further heightened because of their participation during this time of crisis. These gratifications add evidence to the emerging notion in social media and uses and gratifications scholarship that social media usage goes beyond “noise” (Chen, 2011) and has nuanced and meaningful implications within the broader communication environment. In the conclusion, which follows this chapter, I will present the implications of this case for journalism and mass communication.

VII.

The Implications of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech”  
for Journalism and Mass Communication

## **The Uses and Gratifications of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech”**

In the analysis chapters, I described the case along three lines of analysis in the context of similar research. In the conclusion, I will discuss the analysis and findings in the broader context of uses and gratifications theory (Hanson et. al, 2010; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Ruggiero, 2000; Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). This theory offers an informative explanatory framework for theorizing these findings and speculating about the broader implications of this case for journalism and mass communication.

The analysis in this case suggests “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users have four desired gratifications in their social media use: (1) the social media cycle strongly suggests they desire to build a legacy for the victims; (2) the expressions of public memory strongly suggest they desire to memorialize the victims; and the socioemotional expressions strongly suggest they desire (3) to experience tension relief in the initial aftermath of the shootings and (4) to express solidarity with surviving members of the Virginia Tech campus community. Taken together, these four desired gratifications help explain the “particulars” (Stake, 1995) of how “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users make sense of the lives and deaths of the victims in the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings.

### *Legacy Construction*

This audience of users is thus revealed to be extraordinarily active in both content production and gatekeeping, which, as I have noted, mass communication scholar Shayla Thiel-Stern has perceptively identified as central elements of the social media audience (in press, p. 2). “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users appear committed to producing content that serves their desired uses and gratifications, and they are keen to emphasize those elements of the group’s conversation that follow a trajectory that makes sense of and brings meaning to the lives and deaths of the victims. If content unrelated to this

desired trajectory is introduced into the group, it is usually ignored or barely acknowledged. This is one form of gatekeeping within the group. In the case of the gun control debate the group's creator, Sara Berry, urges the group to return its focus to the victims. By doing this, Sara is performing a more traditional gatekeeping role, not unlike a newspaper editor. The linear progression of the group's conversation suggests that both content production and control must be actively managed in the social media environment—especially in this case, where users have complicated, specific uses and gratifications.

News items tailored to these needs and gratifications—the death toll to make sense of victims' deaths and the phrase “We are Hokies” from poet and professor Nikki Giovanni's convocation speech to bring meaning to victims' deaths—reflect that this audience, even in the age of social media, asserts traditional journalism as a persuasive vehicle through which to help build a legacy for the victims, one that will resonate with students nation- and worldwide. These users actively select two news items to bookend their legacy construction because doing so grounds the legacy in a fact-based, empirically verifiable foundation: the event that was a tragedy has also become an opportunity for unity.

### *Memorialization*

While the news items do well to facilitate the desired gratification of building a legacy to victims, these users are especially motivated to memorialize the victims in these shootings. The expressions of public memory likely fulfill this gratification for users, because they are affirming the memory of the victims in their posted content. The prevalence of expressions of public memory within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” suggests that the social media audience might be using their active participation to

memorialize the deceased in a novel manner. In the age of social media, user expressions within a mass communication context are more visible and ubiquitous than ever before. Not only are users deciding to make their usually private memorial sentiments public, but their decision to employ the social media environment may mean that they are seeking a sense of “informal camaraderie” (Chen, 2011) with the event.

Placing expressions of public memory in this networked environment strongly suggests these users wish to affirm themselves as affected by the event despite their geographic distance from the campus itself. Even if, and perhaps especially if, these users feel an earnest need to memorialize these victims, this case suggests active participation in online public memorials may carry with them an element of “status seeking” (Hargittai & Litt, 2011) behavior, as users may desire the gratification of actively participating in a memorial event. Users’ status as active participants is revealed to themselves, as it is to others, in the form of publically accessible content. While the event of victims’ tragic deaths lasted only minutes, the event of the memorial is dynamic, fluid, and enduring. Posting an expression of public memory often allows users to invoke their shared student status as they affirm the enduring legacy of the event, to inspire unity among college students around the country and the world.

In this way, the expressions of public memory affirm “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” as a memorial group in name and in practice. This finding suggests these users, as an active audience, have a firm understanding about how to gratify their needs for memorialization during an unfolding news event. They recognize the social media environment—immediate, interactive, and public—as the location where their memorial gratification needs are only a few clicks away (Hess, 2007; Wang & Gloviczki, 2008; Carter, 2008). These users therefore may have had past experience participating in online

memorial groups; the prevalence of public memory expressions may suggest a sense of “habit strength” in satisfying this gratification (Diddi & LaRose, 2006) that was possibly developed over time.

*Tension Relief in Initial Aftermath, Solidarity after Convocation Speech*

Expressions of emotion strongly suggest the specific emotion gratification that users likely obtained at various moments in the group’s trajectory. The invocation of the death toll appears to have brought tension relief to some users, because the enormity of the event was made more manageable once the death toll became quantified. Similarly, the phrase “We are Hokies” from the convocation speech appears to have brought some users a sense of feeling solidarity with members of the Virginia Tech campus community, because it suggests the event of the shootings and their aftermath has now become an opportunity for unity among college students around the country and the world. The tension relief and solidarity gratifications, respectively, reinforce the news—and by extension, traditional journalism—as providing socioemotional affirmation for users’ uses and gratifications within the group. The socioemotional dimension of users’ active participation within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” suggests the two specific news items inspired a tension relief gratification on day one and a solidarity gratification on day two among users that reinforced—and perhaps strengthened—their memorial and legacy gratifications for the victims in these shootings.

Taken together, the users’ four desired gratifications revealed in this case—legacy construction, memorialization, tension relief and solidarity—suggest that uses and gratifications in the age of social media are both complex and closely attuned to the particulars of an unfolding news event.



Within the group, the prominent role of the death toll on day one and the convocation speech on day two suggests that traditional journalism not only helps fulfill users' information needs (Diddi & LaRose, 2006) but, even more importantly, specific, "selectively chosen" (Quan-Hasse & Young, 2010; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) news items also provide a framework through which users work to satisfy their expressive needs as well. Journalism in the age of social media is strongly suggested in this case to be a "conversation" (Kovach & Rosensteel, 2010) between traditional journalism and social media, with users drawing actively from the "information surplus," (Chuyi, 2005) choosing specific media to satisfy their particular needs.

This case, especially these four gratifications, reveals pressing implications for the future of journalism and mass communication; these implications impact journalists, journalism scholars, and journalism educators.

### **The Implications of This Case for Journalism and Mass Communication**

#### *Social Media Calls for Social Journalism:*

#### *News as Legacy Construction, Co-Produced between Journalists and their Audience*

Social media calls for social journalism. Traditional journalists need to first recognize legacy construction as a desired gratification among affected outsiders and work to integrate the legacy of the event into even the earliest reportage about unfolding events. At the most basic level, this means integrating the perspectives of students around the country and the world into day one reportage about a campus event. This basic level requires journalists to engage individuals in the social media environment, listening to their stories and encouraging their voices. In the aftermath of crises, social media must become a prominent field site for traditional journalists. The one journalist who posted within "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" does not appear to have received any responses, but

that journalist nonetheless had a perceptive sense of the future of journalism and mass communication. More journalists should strive to integrate themselves into social media spaces, as journalist and journalism educator Charlie Beckett advises: “It’s really about understanding your audience and what the project looks like from their point of view. It takes a long time to build an engaged and valuable community” (2010, p. 10). Today’s media audience will construct a legacy for unfolding events in the minutes and hours following the event; journalists and mass communicators need to expand the reach and scope of their work in recognition and embrace social media users’ desired legacy construction. Members of the audience should recognize, too, that integrating into traditional journalism will allow their voices to travel across a great distance during a time of crisis. As CNN.com participation director Lila King recently told the Nieman Journalism lab: “we’re creating a scenario where people can very explicitly say who they are and what they think and what they want to contribute to” (Garber, 2011).

Traditional journalists and social media users should work in cooperation, not competition; certainly, this is a daunting task for each party, but traditional journalists have vast resources to share affected outsiders’ stories with a (larger) mass audience and social media users have a perspective—as individuals often without a direct, geographic connection to unfolding events—that appears, at least in this case, to largely fall outside of the purview of traditional journalism. The potential for a mutually beneficial relationship exists so long as traditional journalists and social media users recognize and accept their respective roles in this process. Traditional journalists have the potential to assert the “relevance” (Zerba, 2011) of their coverage and thus ideally attract a larger, more committed audience. Moreover, constructing victims’ legacies in partnership with traditional journalists has the potential to become an even more gratifying experience for

users; their carefully constructed narrative could find more people in more places, owing to the reach and scope of major media organizations.

If social media encourages social journalism, news has the potential to more fully become co-production. The emergence of such a system would essentially combine the bedrock foundational values of journalism (Kovach & Rosensteel, 2010) with the novel perspective of a massive user-base. Journalists Bill Kovach & Tom Rosenstiel (2010) offer an intriguing example of this possibility with their “knowledge pages,” which are dynamic and updatable pages that collect all available information about an unfolding news event. Journalists should encourage the legacy of the event be integrated into such online spaces, and users should seek out these spaces for legacy construction.

*Social Media Calls for Social Scholarship:  
Beyond “News Sharing,” Towards Understanding the Construction of Event Legacies*

Social media requires social scholarship as well. Scholars need to investigate and engage social media audiences with an eye towards their changing relationship with digital and mobile communication practices. Mass communication scholar Shayla Thiel-Stern’s (in press, p. 2) assertion about the changing state of the audience in the age of social media is helpful to contextualize the implications of this shift: “First, the audience is now also a producer and gatekeeper. Second, the audience is now its own audience (and perhaps even more crucially, that audience is aware that it has an audience).” This assertion resonates through the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.”

The audience in this case as producer is strongly suggested through the vast wall postings and posted photographs; user-generated content forms the nexus of the group’s communication (Jenkins, 2010). The audience as gatekeeper in this case is strongly suggested because of the selective emphasis (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Bennett &

Iyengar, 2008) in the group's recasting of the aftermath of the shootings, and especially through Sara Berry's function as a kind of editor, keeping the "gates" of the group set around the victims following the gun control debate (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Audience activity in this case is a delicate balance of production and control, made all the more challenging because of the interplay between traditional journalism content and personal expression in the group's conversation.

The audience-as-audience is strongly suggested in this case because of the tightly-bound trajectory of the group's conversation. These users have a goal and a keen sense of how to maximize the available news and information to construct their desired narrative in the immediate, interactive, and public social media environment. Active participation is not only helpful; it is essential to work towards users' desired gratifications in this case.

This finding extends knowledge about "news sharing" as a social media gratification (Lee, Ma & Goh, 2011, p. 132) because "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" users are not simply sharing news to reflect or indicate their interests; they are sharing news to construct a "purposive" narrative (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010) that aims to help satisfy their desired gratifications related to the victims in the aftermath of these shootings.

Without the group's "selective emphasis" on the death toll and the "We are Hokies" convocation speech, the group would have lacked the past-and-future points of reference that appear to have been integral to the legacy gratification. These two news items encapsulate the event for these users and further motivate their desired gratifications.

To this end, journalism scholars should also investigate users' legacy construction as a kind of immediate history about the perceived impact of unfolding events. Recognizing that history is a contested, interpretive space (Emery, Emery & Roberts, 1996), cases such as "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" potentially reflect a kind of virtual oral history

about what it means to live through a particular event at a specific moment in time. As the Smithsonian Institution helpfully counsels in the oral history process: “The memories, stories, and traditions of the people you interview grow out of firsthand knowledge and experience. Created and shaped in community life, they are continually being adapted and changed to meet new circumstances and needs.” Content analyses (Babbie, 2010) of compelling cases (Yin, 2003; Stake, 1995) of posted content in the online world have the potential to yield compelling insight into social media users’ needs and gratifications during unfolding news events.

For their part, mass communication scholars should continue active study of these emerging clusters and their users’ media use. As I noted in chapter one, journalism and mass communication scholars have sometimes historically overlooked the study of single instances, in part because of the highly-quantitative orientation in mass communication (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995). In small ways, though, this tide appears to be gradually shifting. New media scholar Sue Robinson’s (2011) study of *The Capital Times* newspaper in Madison, Wisconsin, which is cited in this dissertation, reveals some broader implications of the changing media environment through the lens of that news organization. Similarly, journalism historian Kathy Roberts Forde’s (2008) *Literary Journalism on Trial: The Case of Masson v. New Yorker* received major awards from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC). Neither Robinson nor Forde employed a case study research strategy (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003), but the broad recognition of their work suggests that the single instance may be gaining additional currency in mass communication.

The time is ripe for researchers to increase the profile of the case study research strategy in mass communication. Social media users’ behavior, especially as it continues

to occur within clusters, may be especially well suited for examination via bounded single case studies. Just as “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” revealed the dynamic trajectory of users “needs and wants” (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1972) other groups on other social media platforms, especially mobile platforms, can shed needed light on the complexities of individual media users’ uses and gratifications in the age of social media.

The findings in this case strongly suggest that social media users will likely have some information needs and some expressive needs (Hanson et. al, 2010; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010) in the aftermath of unfolding news events, and that they will likely employ traditional journalism to gratify their information needs and social media to gratify their expressive needs (Pew, 2011; Robinson, 2011; Kovach & Rosensteel, 2010), but this process may be changing. The February 2012 death of actress and singer Whitney Houston was first reported on *Twitter* (Murphy, 2012), more than 20 minutes before traditional journalism reported on the story. Journalism scholars should especially investigate how news stories first reported in social media gain their foundation. Without the fact-based foundation provided by traditional journalism—which was so vital to the case of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech”—there exists the possibility that future stories will lack the needed content and context for users’ to gratify their information and expressive needs in the aftermath of unfolding news events. Without a fact-based foundation, in fact, it seems rather challenging to construct a legacy to the victims of an unfolding news event, because the past, and the imagined future, may well appear murky at best. Social media users should therefore recognize that journalism provides a catalyst for the gratification of their information and expressive needs, as well as for their legacy construction, and seek out multiple traditional journalistic sources to verify news events that are first reported in the social media environment, as was Houston’s death.

Journalism scholars should open lines of research to examine whether, to what extent and with what kinds of motivations users follow up on the veracity of unfolding news events first reported in the social media environment.

*Social Media Calls for Dynamic Education:  
Educators Need to Caution Against Reporting Gratification Entitlement*

The changing media audience risks developing a sense of gratification entitlement. Social media users, recognizing their capacity for both content production and gatekeeping, might, in certain instances, seek to construct skewed legacies or inaccurate portrayals of unfolding events to gratify their needs. Journalism educators have a strong responsibility, therefore, to teach future journalists and mass communicators how to utilize, and become proficient with, a vast array of communication technologies and platforms (Hansen et. al, 2011). Concurrent media use will likely continue to be the norm (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010), and as journalists and scholars seek to more fully report and investigate the changing media environment (Beckett, 2010), they would be well served to investigate the veracity (Hardin & Ash, 2011) of social media audiences' claims, especially about the legacies of unfolding events. The user-structured social media environment continues to make it possible for to circulate potentially misleading information (Gurak, 1997) using a computer or computerized device. Working to combat misleading information may be one of the ways journalists, scholars and educators can continue to not only "save" journalism in the future (Mersey, 2010), but also work to extend the importance of journalism in the social media age. Constructed legacies should be grounded in verifiable information, preferably information that has at least some journalistic reportage, because of the rapidly evolving nature of unfolding news events in the age of social media.

Just as journalists ideally serve as the “fourth estate”<sup>xiv</sup> of government (Kovach & Rosensteil, 2007), there is a need for young students to be taught to occupy a role of performing checks and balances on social media users and the legacies constructed within particular clusters. In this effort, educators should advance a broad-based curriculum to their students; one that combines skills-based education with strong theoretical underpinnings about the values of journalism as a vital organ of free society. Journalism in the age of social media will, ultimately, only be as valuable as its future purveyors are well-trained. Today’s educators need to teach tomorrow’s journalists and mass communicators that, as new media scholar Sue Robinson instructs, “journalism is a process” (2011). In this process, traditional journalists must stand alongside the audience, comprised of evermore active and mobile media users, to engage them while also seeking their engagement.

### **Social Media May Reconceptualize Memorials: Users are Stakeholders in Victims’ Legacies**

As I introduced when discussing uses and gratifications of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” at the beginning of this chapter, these users, for the most part, assert themselves as stakeholders in the process of constructing victims’ legacies. Through the social media cycle, expressions of public memory and expressions of emotion, these users forward a dynamic narrative that sheds light on how (and why) users forget and especially how (and why) users remember in the age of social media. Forgotten from the group’s conversation, most notably, is the shooter; he appears to have been largely omitted from the group’s posted content because his inclusion would only take attention away from the victims and, especially, from users’ need to more fully make sense of their lives and deaths. Remembered in the group’s conversation are the victims, especially in the form of



expressions—in text and images—posted on the group’s wall. These expressions assert victims’ legacies as inspiring solidarity among college students around the country and the world. For the most part, these users wish to assert that the victims have not died in vain. Users’ “purposive” (Hanson et. al, 2010) decision to tailor their social media experience in this way helps them make sense of and bring meaning to the lives and deaths of the victims in these shootings. Memorial expression, so long bound to sacred spaces, including churches and cemeteries (Leming & Dickinson, 2010; Goodhead, 2010), has become untethered and, this case suggests, has migrated into the online world. The memorial is now an immediate, interactive and public event, one which grows, evolves and firmly bears the mark of its users.

Times of crisis in American culture have often been moments when, paradoxically, there is limited public engagement—individuals retreat into their homes to come to terms with the gravity of the event—*and* mass public engagement, as individuals gather around mass mediated settings (next to televisions or radios) to examine the gravity of the event, especially during sanctioned public events such as funerals or memorial services (Leming & Dickinson, 2010; Goodhead, 2010; Kitch & Hume, 2008; Zelizer, 1993; Schudson, 1979).

Today’s audience of users is technologically connected, personally invested and social media savvy. Simply remembering these victims would not gratify their needs; they desire to construct a more positive future in the aftermath of these shootings. Users’ sense of technological connectedness is strongly suggested by their concurrent usage of both traditional journalism and social media (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010); users’ personal investment is revealed in their student status—many users mention their campus affiliations and a few even discuss past experiences with school shootings. Users’ social

media savvy is especially revealed in their ability to post text and construct images within the group. These three characteristics seem to especially motivate users' participation with a purpose within "In Memorial: Virginia Tech." This case, therefore, may suggest that users are willing to connect with strangers during times of crisis to satisfy their needs and gratifications. "Sociability" as a social media gratification (Ellison et. al, 2007) may need to be extended and further conceptualized into distinct leisure-time categories, where users seek to be social with their friends, and crisis-time categories, where users are more willing to be social with strangers. Journalists, journalism scholars and educators should continue to examine how users employ memorial groups during times of crisis, and what those changing uses may mean for the evolution of "sociability" as a gratification for social media usage.

A recent tragedy, a second shooting on the Virginia Tech campus in December 2011, suggests a fair amount has already been learned, by both mass communicators and users, in the five years since the case of "In Memorial: Virginia Tech," about responding to an unfolding news event.

### **A Second Shooting on Campus: Applying the Lessons of "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" to the Social Media Response**

Social media does seem to have encouraged, at least in small—yet meaningful—ways, a more social journalism. In early December 2011, a Virginia Tech campus police officer was shot and killed while making a routine traffic stop on-campus. *The New York Times* has reported that the alleged gunman apparently then took his own life as well. Within seven minutes, Virginia Tech administrators used *Twitter* to alert individuals on campus about the situation.<sup>xv</sup> Describing the 2011 response in an article for *The Christian Science Monitor*, journalist Mark Guarino wrote:

“A communications system installed after the 2007 shootings enabled the dispatcher to trigger a single alert, which could be transmitted to personal and public media throughout the campus. At the push of a button, the alerts went out as text messages, [Twitter](#) updates, e-mails, and notices flashing across 5,000 digital message boards across campus.”

In a *Washington Post* article on the 2011 campus response across multiple communication platforms, a campus administrator was quoted as saying: “We deployed them all, and we deployed them immediately” (deVise, 2011). With this emphasis in their reportage of the shooting, traditional journalism is now prioritizing what was users’ initial concern within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech”—the ostensibly delayed campus response, specifically, the 2-hour timespan between the first and second 2007 shootings.

Although neither *The New York Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor* nor *The Washington Post* directly integrated affected outsiders into their reportage on the 2011 shooting, journalists seem to be, at the very least, more mindful of users’ 2007 concerns in the aftermath of the shooting that killed 32 people as well as the gunman. In the 2011 case, traditional journalists once again established the fact-based foundation for the event: two dead on campus, a campus police officer and the gunman, who, it is made clear, was not a student at the school.

Users do not appear to have actively congregated in the social media environment in the aftermath of the 2011 shooting.<sup>xvi</sup> Within “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” two postings *were* made, including one that suggested: “Now we need to add today to this tribute.” Though this posting earned one “like,” the group does not appear to have been revived in a significant way, beyond two postings<sup>xvii</sup>, as of February 10, 2012.

This lack of a fuller return to active status may be due, at least in part, to the prompt administrative notification and traditional journalists’ prioritization of the administrative response. These two factors might have helped gratify some potential

users' need to make sense and bring meaning to this unfolding event. Furthermore, viewed from a uses and gratifications perspective, the case of "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" especially helps explain the relative lack of social media response following the 2011 shooting.

In 2007, users' student status motivated their need to bring meaning to the senseless deaths of the victims on campus; participation in "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" is "goal-directed" to gratify this need (Hanson et. al, 2010; Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1972). The death of a police officer is certainly an unspeakable tragedy, but it does not necessarily motivate a need for expression among college students in the same way as the death of students. Without a pressing need, students do not seek out social media for gratification. Campus police officers would seem a more likely cluster of users to seek out social media in the aftermath of the 2011 shooting, because of the profession of the victim.<sup>xviii</sup> Focus groups and interviews with campus police officers would be explanatory (Zerba, 2011) in helping reveal whether, and to what extent, this group of individuals had expressive needs and engaged in some form of media use to gratify them, but that gratification does not initially appear to have taken place on a large scale in the social media environment. The lessons of "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" call for further consideration of the most affected cluster, campus police officers, in the aftermath of the recent shooting.

Across social media clusters, from students to campus police officers and beyond, concurrent media use seems to continue to come of age, rendering less relevant the notion of "switching" that uses and gratifications scholars Anabel Quan-Haase & Alyson Young (2010) emphasized less than two years ago. Both the 2007 shootings and now the

2011 shooting—which brought a brisk, administrative social media response—suggest users’ social media use is paired with at least one other concurrent form of media use.

The development for which noted uses and gratifications scholar Thomas Ruggiero had hoped: “to situate a ‘modernized’ U & G theory within this new media ecology” (2000, p. 29) may not yet have fully arrived, but the lessons of this case suggest that concurrent media use within social media clusters may be the vital element for understanding and studying uses and gratifications in the future of mass communication research.

### **More Recent Lessons for Journalists Reporting Death in the Age of Social Media**

Since the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings, many other events have taken place that illustrate the uses and gratifications of social media during unfolding news events and affirm the lessons of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” case. In this section, as two examples, I briefly discuss the March 2011 tsunami in Japan and the February 2012 death of actress and singer Whitney Houston.

On March 11, 2011, an 8.9 magnitude earthquake occurred in Japan that gave rise to a tsunami and a nuclear crisis (Tabuchi, 2011; Maeda, 2012). On March 14, 2011, Damon Kiesow of The Poynter Institute noted the rapid use of *Twitter* to discuss the unfolding crisis: “Two primary hashtags — [#tsunami](#) and [#prayforjapan](#) — are trending on Twitter with thousands of tweets per second discussing the topic” (Kiesow, 2011). Some individuals utilized *Twitter* to offer expressions directed towards the victims, just as in “In Memorial: Virginia Tech,” while others offered shelter to strangers displaced in the aftermath of the natural disaster (Gaudin, 2011). The former development suggests the enduring use of social media as a platform for expression across a great distance during a time of crisis, while the latter development lends support to the notion that the “sociability” (Ellison et. al, 2007) as a social media gratification may need to be

expanded during times of crisis to include a desire for connection with strangers. In fact, the desire to connect with strangers might now have intensified, for at least some users, to a desire to help strangers in need.

Social media has not only facilitated the sharing of news and information, but it has arguably made the need to share news and information more pressing. This development was especially evident following the February 2012 death of actress and singer Whitney Houston. As Vanessa Jimenez told *The New York Times* following Houston's death:

“For some strange reason, there is this desire, or need, or maybe some sort of competitiveness, that drives me to want to be one of the first people to post about a major event, or to say something new about it. I felt compelled to weigh in on it in my own way” (Lovett, 2012).

Users know they can share information at the click of a button, which seems to further encourage this practice. Whitney Houston's death was, in fact, first reported via *Twitter* (Lovett, 2012; Murphy, 2012). Traditional journalism faces today, in the age of social media, the very real possibility of being bypassed entirely by social media users. Users have the means of mass communication in their hands. This marked shift suggests the profound need for traditional journalism to provide a fact-based foundation for unfolding events, and to do so as quickly as possible. Being first is important for journalism, being best, providing the core content and context about an unfolding event, is essential.

For users, journalists, scholars, educators and others, recasting a tragedy—whether the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings, the March 2011 tsunami in Japan or the February 2012 death of Whitney Houston—is certainly a daunting task. There is a need to negotiate the gravity of the event with the uses and desired gratifications that emerge in the aftermath of the event. To recast the Virginia Tech shootings from a tragedy to also

an opportunity for unity, “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users are extraordinarily selective (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Bennett & Iyengar, 2007) drawing primarily on the death toll and the “We are Hokies” convocation speech as news items to drive forward their own trajectory of expressions. This selective focus facilitates users’ remembering of this event, and certainly impacts what is, deliberately or not, left out of the group as well. How we remember and how we forget are two processes that will continue to evolve with the development of computer-mediated communication. Making new the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings is an ideal to strive for, rather than a necessarily achievable goal. The element that can be influenced, at least to some extent, by users is the conversation following the event. This conversation, as journalism continues into the age of social media, is becoming evermore important.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Mass communication scholars studying the digital media environment have recently asserted two broad gratification categories: “information and communication” (Kaye & Johnson, 2011, p. 241). This case strongly suggests “communication” as a gratification category that requires further development and specification. “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” users employ two news items—the death toll and the convocation speech—to communicate their desired legacy for the victims in the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings. In this way, news not only fulfills a communication gratification, it especially suggests these users specifically desire legacy construction as a gratification from their use of “In Memorial: Virginia Tech.”

The user-structured social media environment appears, in this case, not only to be blurring the line between information and communication, but the emerging role of the audience suggests a strong sense of both content production (Jenkins, 2010) and

gatekeeping (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), which supports mass communication scholar Shayla Thiel-Stern's (in press, p. 24) conception of "the 'super' audience" in the age of social media. "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" users strongly suggest that audience activity in the age of social media requires an extraordinary level of maintenance; this is an active process, one that requires users to be mindful of content inclusion and content exclusion, in a way that goes beyond earlier notions of "surveillance" (Blumler, 1979). In the age of social media, this case suggests the truly active audience does not simply watch a group, or does not simply participate, they participate with a purpose.

Although some mass communication scholars have begun asserting the relationship between social media use and active participation as vital to social media gratification (Chen, 2011), this case more fully reveals the "particulars" (Stake, 1995) of active participation. "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" users appear to recognize that they must acknowledge victims' past (their deaths) before beginning to imagine the future (their legacies). The two news items employed in this group, as bookends within "In Memorial: Virginia Tech's" conversational trajectory, strongly suggest active participation alone may not always be sufficient for users to achieve their desired gratification, users must participate with an extraordinarily specific "goal" in mind (Hanson et. al, 2010). Media critics sometimes ridicule social media as the domain of instant gratification (Gladwell, 2011; Keen, 2007), but this case suggests social media gratification as a decidedly deliberate, rather than an instant, audience activity.



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## **Dissertation Appendices**

This dissertation contains six appendices, which are included for two primary reasons. First, I include them to give the reader as full a sense of the group as I have gained in approximately one year of studying it. Second, I welcome future research that extends the work of this dissertation. In accordance with the request of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) I have taken every necessary step to protect the privacy of the group's users. Within the body of the dissertation, I have utilized pseudonyms when referring to specific users. Within the appendices, I have taken what I consider reasonable steps to protect users' privacy. Specifically, in Appendix A, I have redacted users' full names (First and Last) from their postings. I urge future researchers to similarly guard the privacy of these users.

Appendix A: First 185 Wall Postings

Appendix B: Screenshots of 33 Publically Posted Images in the Group

Appendix C: First Twelve Associated Press Reports of the 2007 Virginia Tech Shootings

Appendix D: Expressions of Public Memory in the Group

Appendix E: Web 2.0 is not an Eden: The Example of TMZ.com

Appendix F: Historical Overview of Uses and Gratifications Theory

## In Memorial: Virginia Tech

**Wall** Info Photos Discussions

Share:  Post  Photo  Link  Video

Write something...



[Invite People to Join](#)

### Information

Category:  
Student Groups - General

Description:  
This group is a tribute to all who lost loved ones or were affected in any way by the shootings that occurred on 4/16/07. Please keep everyone in your thoughts and prayers.

Long Live the Hokies!!!

## Appendix A: First 185 Postings in Reverse Chronological Order

Read and comment, please. <http://usao.facebook.com/notes.php?id=122300893>

April 17, 2007 at 11:51pm · Flag

Bluefield College is praying for you!

April 17, 2007 at 11:16pm · Flag

I am not going to try and imagine what all of you Virginia Tech students are feeling. I just wanted to join this group to let you all know that Canadians morn with you. We are also deeply saddened by this terrible event. To all those who were lost, you will be deeply missed and to all those who survived. we hope you have a speedy recovery. We love you ♥

April 17, 2007 at 10:27pm · Flag

I will always remember those lost & will continue to pray for those left behind, I hope everyone else will do the same.

April 17, 2007 at 10:18pm · Flag

I wish so much that there was some way I could help from here, but just like all the other American's I can still pray, and that's what I am, and will continue to do. God Bless and stay strong. ♥

April 17, 2007 at 10:14pm · Flag

im sorry for everyone in this especially the shooter... i am so sorry for him that he was driven to do this for no one would want to. only someone who has serious phsycological probs. i feel bad for the guy and especially all the others affected.

April 17, 2007 at 10:07pm · Flag

"Rest in Peace" for those who have died, "Hold Strong" for those who have loved ones who were killed, "keep fighting" for the injured ones, and to the rest of the world "Stop the anger, stop the war, find peace."

April 17, 2007 at 10:05pm · Flag

may all the victims rest in place! amen! virginia tech hokies ferevuh!!!!

April 17, 2007 at 9:58pm · Flag

Both of my brothers go to Tech, but luckily, they were not harmed yesterday. I feel sorrow for those families whose sons and daughters...brothers and sisters....and loved ones were taken away from them and us....as we are all family....we all unite as Americans....I thank GOD my brothers are okay. Keep on praying....

April 17, 2007 at 9:43pm · Flag

Canadians from east to west stand behind you in support.

April 17, 2007 at 9:42pm · Flag

RIP Leslie Sherman & Mary Read. xoxo- ♥ Megan  
 April 17, 2007 at 9:38pm · Flag

It is hard to see something like this and know that it could of been any of us. Not just VT but anywhere. I feel horrible for all the families and friends that have to deal with this tragedy first hand. My prayers are with you and my god bless!  
 April 17, 2007 at 9:36pm · Flag

tayyaba habar: my friend elita habtu is injured, she got shot in her jaw and her wrist. please keep her in your prayers!  
 April 17, 2007 at 9:22pm · Flag

i did not know any of these people, but they have all touched me. Just stay strong and i give my condolences to the families and friends of anyone affected  
 April 17, 2007 at 8:29pm · Flag

Va Tech for life  
 April 17, 2007 at 8:24pm · Flag

i want to say something here but im not sure exactly what to say or how to put it. everyone affected by this tragedy is in my thoughts and prayers. stay strong you can make it through. ♥ ♥  
 April 17, 2007 at 8:16pm · Flag

It is unimagineable that something like this could happen. Everyone associated with the Virginia Tech community are in my thoughts  
 April 17, 2007 at 7:58pm · Flag

It is terrible what has happened, and you are in my thoughts. I am sorry that this unfortunate event happened, especially to innocent people. We are praying for you!  
 April 17, 2007 at 7:46pm · Flag

my friend megan was in the place where the shooting began  
 April 17, 2007 at 7:39pm · Flag

I just want you guys to know that we are praying for you here in Australia. I'm originally from Texas, but moved here last May for mission work. We'll never forget! Keep fighting and stay strong! We have an awesome God! Take care and God Bless!  
 April 17, 2007 at 7:29pm · Flag

I would also like to send my prayers out to the victims at Tech..My friend tabby who goes to VCU her friend Elita who attends tech was also shot. She was shot in the jaw and her wrist..Please keep her in your prayers as well..  
 April 17, 2007 at 7:23pm · Flag

I would like to send my thoughts of love to all the victims and their loved ones, as well as all the other students effected by yesterday's tragic events at Virginia Tech. I want

you know that I am sorry for the losses and grief you all have been forced to endure, and that you are in my thoughts, my heart and my prayers. ~Jessica  
April 17, 2007 at 6:40pm · Flag

This is so sad. It breaks my heart. Everyone that was affected by this are in my prayers. May those that died R.I.P. God bless.  
April 17, 2007 at 6:37pm · Flag

This is so sad to me I remember last year which was my sr year in high school a well respected football player was shot it was so hard just looings one person i can't imagine loosing 33. My heart is with you and we are praying for you here in Georgia!!!!  
April 17, 2007 at 6:29pm · Flag

my thoughts and prayers are with all who had to deal with this tragdy. As I am watching all the news coverage I am realizing how strong all you are and could not imagine myself in this position. My thoughts and prayers are with all!  
April 17, 2007 at 6:28pm · Flag

My prayers and condolences are with all the victims of Virginia Tech and everyone affected. God Bless you all.  
April 17, 2007 at 6:28pm · Flag

My thoughts and prayers are with the victims, survivors, and the families of this tragedy. May your soul find peace, may your memory live on, and may our nation learn and heal from this horrific lesson.  
April 17, 2007 at 6:12pm · Flag

My prayers and condolences go to all victims of Virginia Tech may you rest in peace...  
April 17, 2007 at 6:10pm · Flag

I send my condolences to all those at Virginia Tech. We are grieving with you.  
April 17, 2007 at 6:08pm · Flag

My most sincere condolences to the victims' friends and familys. North Dakota sends its love and support.  
April 17, 2007 at 6:00pm · Flag

my thoughts and prayers are with everyone from VT...  
April 17, 2007 at 5:53pm · Flag

My heart and prayers go out to all in the Virginia Tech Community, all the way from Sudbury, Ontario, Canada.  
April 17, 2007 at 5:46pm · Flag

My sorrows and prayers go out to all families and victims... May God give ya'll strength to deal with this heartbreak.  
April 17, 2007 at 5:45pm · Flag

The amazing thing that happens here though is that all of a sudden, there are no rivalries, there is no violence or hate between universities, and there is unity. Everyone steps back and realizes that we are all the same. A Buckeye is the same as a Wolverine, a Gator is the same as a Seminole, a Sooner is same as a Longhorn, and a CAVALIER is the same as a HOKIE. We are all HOKIES this week just like that quote says. America unites with the students and faculty at VA Tech. WE ARE VIRGINIA TECH! WE ARE VIRGINIA TECH! Great speech by the lady at that ceremony. God Bless  
 April 17, 2007 at 5:34pm · Flag

heart, thoughts and prayers go out to everyone affected. this could of happened to any one of us at any college or university. it's crazy to think that is all happened so fast. may all the victims rest in peace, may their memories and heroics never fade.  
 April 17, 2007 at 5:15pm · Flag

My thoughts and prayers go out to all friends and famililes of the victims!  
 April 17, 2007 at 5:09pm · Flag

My love and sorrow goes out to everyone affected by this horrible tradgedy. sarah, england just remember every countries students are with you all right now!  
 April 17, 2007 at 5:03pm · Flag

To everyones family my prayers are with you all.....  
 April 17, 2007 at 4:42pm · Flag

Everyone's thoughts at the University of Calgary and Canadians across the country go out to the victims familities, the staff and student body of Virginia Tech after this horrible incident.  
 April 17, 2007 at 4:39pm · Flag

Hi! I'm studying out of the country and saw the news on the internet. I am extremely sorry for those who have been closely affected by this tragedy. You are in my prayers. Please, everyone, pray for the souls that departed as a result of this evil, and for those who are suffering for their loved ones. May God bless you all and the Blessed Virgen Mary protect and keep you safe.  
 April 17, 2007 at 4:33pm · Flag

Theres just no words to describe how i'm feeling..  
 April 17, 2007 at 4:09pm · Flag

my thoughts and prays go out to all the victims and their familys....  
 April 17, 2007 at 4:03pm · Flag

yes ma'am...yesterdAY was a devastating day for the United states and all post secondary students around the world.  
 April 17, 2007 at 3:47pm · Flag



there aren't any words to describe this event. i just hope everyone realizes how precious each day is and to rememeber that this is possible, anywhere at anytime. Please be safe, and god bless all the familiies of these victims.

April 17, 2007 at 3:41pm · Flag

my prayers' and condolences go out to everyone effected by this tragedy...

April 17, 2007 at 3:33pm · Flag

only the good die young..may you rest in peace..you will never be forgotten♥

April 17, 2007 at 3:09pm · Flag

I pray for all of you at Virginia Tech, it is a sad and horrible thing that has happened.

April 17, 2007 at 3:04pm · Flag

The nation's thoughts and prayers are with you.

April 17, 2007 at 3:00pm · Flag

We are all Hokies today. So senseless that one person can have such a devastating effect on everyone else. Thoughts and prayers are with everyone.

April 17, 2007 at 2:41pm · Flag

literally can't wrap my brain around it. my thoughts and condolences go out to anyone and everyone affected by this absolute tragedy. ♥

April 17, 2007 at 2:36pm · Flag

Prayers are with all the victims those who have passed away and those who have been affected...

April 17, 2007 at 2:30pm · Flag

All the victims and families have all my prayers. I hate that something like this happened and it makes you stop and think.

April 17, 2007 at 2:12pm · Flag

It's upsetting that it takes a tragedy of this magnitude to bring the world together like this, but it shows just how much we all band together in support and reverence in times of great sadness and shock. The world is here for you, and the victims and the families and friends of the victims are in our hearts and in our prayers. In this time of great sadness be there for each other, and others will be there for you. xxx

April 17, 2007 at 2:07pm · Flag

I am so glad to be a part of the 2594 people who are now supporting those at Virginia Tech. We love and pray for all.. Its great to know how much everyone cares for each other in respect to tragic things like this. God bless.

April 17, 2007 at 2:07pm · Flag

I cant even begin to imagine the pain and sorrow inflicted upon Victim and their loved ones. My heart goes out to all the family and friends of Victims. Its just beyond

Tragedy. May their souls rest in peace. God bless.  
April 17, 2007 at 1:51pm · Flag

Im praying for ya guys.. God will heal all the hurt..  
April 17, 2007 at 1:41pm · Flag

My heart goes out to everyone at VT. May peace come to you with time.  
April 17, 2007 at 1:27pm · Flag

All of VT is in my prayers  
April 17, 2007 at 1:03pm · Flag

My most sincere sympathies to everyone. Nothing I think to say seems adequate. My prayers go out to the lives lost, the families and friends hurt.  
April 17, 2007 at 1:03pm · Flag

The victims, victim's families, students, faculty, and staff, you all are in my prayers and may you be comforted in this time of tradgedy. Your in the nation's prayers especially those of college students everywhere. Once again your in my prayers.  
April 17, 2007 at 11:45am · Flag

I could not even imagine the immense heartache that the students and staff of VA Tech must be feeling. My thoughts and prayers are with you. "If I could tell the world just one thing It would be that we're all OK And not to worry 'cause worry is wasteful And useless in times like these I won't be made useless I won't be idle with despair I will gather myself around my faith For light does the darkness most fear"  
April 17, 2007 at 11:12am · Flag

We will be getting some VA Tech decals on our race cars this weekend to honor and remember those who lost their lives yesterday. VA TECH...i think its safe to say that the country and the world has your back!  
April 17, 2007 at 11:12am · Flag

Hey guys, just wanted to offer my sympathies, keep your chin up...  
April 17, 2007 at 11:10am · Flag

My prayers go out to all the loved ones and victims who are suffering from this terrible tragedy.  
April 17, 2007 at 10:55am · Flag

May god bless each and every family that's suffering from this tragedy!  
April 17, 2007 at 10:45am · Flag

My sister graduated from such a wonderful campus in December 1999, and I cannot believe such a horrible thing could happen to such a beautiful place. I am, however, happy that a classmate of mine is safe. But, I pray for those who lost their lives and those affected by such a tradgic event.

April 17, 2007 at 10:10am · Flag

I am a reporter from the Palm Beach Post, looking for current VT students or alum from PB County. If you would be willing to talk with me for a story I'm writing about yesterday's tragedy, please email me at: [lgreen@pbpost.com](mailto:lgreen@pbpost.com)

April 17, 2007 at 10:00am · Flag

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sb\\_IY\\_E4l](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sb_IY_E4l)

Ow&mode=related&search --> its a compilation of photos from that day. Watch it.

April 17, 2007 at 9:52am · Flag

cho seung hui ... seung hui cho... Dont know...

April 17, 2007 at 9:42am · Flag

To Family, Freinds, Staff and students of V Tech thoughts and prayers are with you all , God Bless and be with you in this time of need.

April 17, 2007 at 9:18am · Flag

My thoughts and prayers are with those victims families and the students who had to live in this numb feeling shock of a tragic event. GODSPEED TO YOU ALL. Thanks to the quick action of the police. to those who criticize the university, hindisght is 20/20 if they knew what was gonna happen as they do now i am sure they do things differently. But what done is done. MAY EVERYONE have a speedy road to recovery. PEI CANADA VT friend

April 17, 2007 at 9:09am · Flag

My thoughts and prayers go out to the families and friends of the victims of this tragic day. I hope for the best for the students who have to return to school. I thank all law enforcement agencies who responded to this event for their bravery and everyday dedication. Hang in there Virginia Tech...our prayers are with you. Montreal Police Department

April 17, 2007 at 8:43am · Flag

they have identified the shooter as a Cho Seung Hui. It is also confirmed that one of the weapons used in Norris Hall was used in the dorm. but it is not still certain whether an accomplice was involved. This whole thing really has me downtrodden.

April 17, 2007 at 8:39am · Flag

Keep your head up. May God bless you all and stay strong.

April 17, 2007 at 8:27am · Flag

My heart and prayer goes out to my best friend and her family... Uma, I love you darling if you see this, but I'll be calling you anyway... I know you'll stay strong!!! This is for your father and those students.

April 17, 2007 at 8:03am · Flag

My condolences go out to the family and friends who lost a loved one in Virginia Tech. But, remember that they are in a better place now, and that they are with you wherever you go.

April 17, 2007 at 7:49am · Flag

everyone here is in my prayers.

April 17, 2007 at 7:14am · Flag

i'm only fourteen years old, about to be fifteen in june. and i don't even live in virginia...but i heard on the news when the first shooting happened. i thought, "oh. big deal. another shooting..." and i was totally wrong. my best friend called me a few hours later and said, "jordan, turn on CNN." so i did. and the first thing she said was, "it's worse than columbine." for everyone who died and was wounded, and even those who survived, you're all in my prayers. stay strong, and keep holding on. you all have a lot of support throughout this.

April 17, 2007 at 7:12am · Flag

a prayer goes out to the families and loved ones of the victims at Virginia Tech

April 17, 2007 at 5:11am · Flag

dont know names of victims but i do have a story of y it happened..

April 17, 2007 at 1:31am · Flag

in response to someone's question: yes just four days before the 8th anniv. of columbine. what really gets me is that it took them 2 HOURS to send out a warning to their students AFTER the shooting started. To those who lost their lives...you will forever be in my prayers.

April 17, 2007 at 12:46am · Flag

My prayers are with you.

April 17, 2007 at 12:35am · Flag

Why it should happened why can anyone tell us,sometimes we sit and think why it happened.

April 17, 2007 at 12:01am · Flag

anyone have names of any of the victims?

April 16, 2007 at 11:56pm · Flag

havent like columbine and the others including the virginia tech tragedy fallen on the same week? i wonder why that is very odd. like could it have to do with season change.. i have no clue. but weather does effect violence in people...so thats interesting... im sorry for all.

April 16, 2007 at 11:44pm · Flag

This is the TIME when WE need GOD more THAN ever! Everyone should take this time LOVE and HONOR your family n friends dearly. R.I.P VT students...KNOW that u are

LOVE n NEVER forgotten!  
 April 16, 2007 at 11:27pm · Flag

Everyone at Virginia Tech will be in my prayers....puts life into persepective  
 April 16, 2007 at 11:22pm · Flag

The victims and their families are in my thoughts tonight. Beautiful lives lost to senseless acts. Many prayers coming from Prince Edward Island, Canada.  
 April 16, 2007 at 11:15pm · Flag

other sites are saying to wear orange & maroon tomorrow in remembrance and support. we should all do it.  
 April 16, 2007 at 11:06pm · Flag

Dear Hokies and your families, Be strong, be diligent, 'persevere in prayer'. The thoughts, hearts, and prayers of myriads are with you during this time of tragedy and mourning. Hold your heads high! Despite the media, the actions of one, of a few, do not define Virginia Tech and it's Hokies. It is your Pride, your Spirit, your Unity, that will forever be embedded within us all. "Let us resolve to be masters, not the victims, of our hisory, controlling our own destiny without giving way to blind suspicions and emotions." --JFK  
 April 16, 2007 at 10:58pm · Flag

All of Eureka College's prayers and condolences go to the families and friends of those killed today...may peace be with them.  
 April 16, 2007 at 10:48pm · Flag

All of our prayers and condolences from the ATL go out to the families and friends of those killed in this unfortunate event...God bless...  
 April 16, 2007 at 10:39pm · Flag

Mine and my family's prayers and condolences go out to the family and friends of the victims of this horrific experience that took place today.  
 April 16, 2007 at 10:27pm · Flag

all our prayers from Memphis Tennessee go out to the Family's of the victims in this horrific misfortune  
 April 16, 2007 at 10:18pm · Flag

Like i said, the guy would have found ways around gun restrictions. Drugs such as marijuana are downright banned, but people still have ways of illegally obtaining it. What makes you think guns would be different?  
 April 16, 2007 at 10:09pm · Flag

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. -Romans 12:21  
 April 16, 2007 at 9:38pm · Flag

If this group is not to further political idealism then maybe everybody who is complaining about gun control should respect your wishes... But of course we all need to blame inanimate objects so why not. I have a better idea...TRY STUPID PEOPLE CONTROL

April 16, 2007 at 9:36pm · Flag

Although we are all entitled to our opinion, i have removed pictures that could be found offensive to some. This group is in memorial for all those who have lost loved ones, and not for political opinions. Please respect the nature of this group.

April 16, 2007 at 9:31pm · Flag

all my prayers go out to the Family's of the victims in this horrific misfortune. :(

April 16, 2007 at 9:17pm · Flag

The gunman was a 24 year old chinese national who imigrated to the US through San Fransico in October 2006

April 16, 2007 at 9:10pm · Flag

the gunman probably has a facebook account....i wonder if any indications were present before the shooting on his myspace or facebook account

April 16, 2007 at 9:08pm · Flag

Speaking of guns did you know that the security guards at virginia tech are not allowed to carry guns? they are there for protection and they should have the means necessary to protect meaning access to guns. Just because it is a gun free campus does not mean that a person intent on violence is going to abide by it. I also believe that the campus should have been shut down. it doesn't matter that the police had reason to believe that it was an isolated incident, the killer was still at large! there is no excuse for it. the campus should have been shut down and the students informed of the shooting in a better way. Not everyone checks their email hourly or even daily. there needs to be a better system set up to inform students of important happenings on campus. this may have been prevented if better steps had been taken and we need to implement them before it happens again.

April 16, 2007 at 9:01pm · Flag

stricter gun laws would not have prevented the shootings at Virginia Tech. someone who is mentally unstable enough to murder 32 innocent students would have found ways to get around a few extra gun restrictions. i doubt that the weapons he did use were properly bought/registered following current regulations anyway. that being said, i live only a few hours from the VT campus and i can't begin to describe the sadness we are all dealing with here... almost everyone here has friends/family that go to tech. we're praying for all of you. God Bless Virginia Tech

April 16, 2007 at 9:00pm · Flag

i dont know derek, but i agree with him too.

April 16, 2007 at 8:54pm · Flag

i agree with derek, its time the US does something about all the guns that are floating

around that country. maybe something like taking away that stupid right to bear arms bullshit. stupidest law ever.

April 16, 2007 at 8:51pm · Flag

**MORE RESTRICTIONS ON GUNS!!! PERIOD!**

April 16, 2007 at 8:37pm · Flag

my condolences to the victims and their families. i go to Dawson College in Montreal and I was there the day of the shooting back in September. I know what they're all going through and it takes time

April 16, 2007 at 8:31pm · Flag

My thoughts and prayers are with everyone in the VT community.

April 16, 2007 at 7:38pm · Flag

Continuing, I mourn for the students of VT, and I only hope that should I ever have a family of my own, my children will not have to grow up in a world with things like this happening.

April 16, 2007 at 7:38pm · Flag

I believe the people of our generation grow from this, in a strange way. Going through grade school, and even up to the 9/11 attacks, people have been taught to pick someone out, and say "your fault." In this incident, no one is left to point a finger at, and society in a sense, must finally take a glance at how it is. In both how we treat each other, and ourselves. From what I'm told, this all started because of a relationship problem. Cheating. There was a time when cheating on your lover was taboo. nowadays, it's common. The guy that did those shootings, obviously lost it after he got back at that girl for breaking him down. And that's another thing, is how fragile people have become. You kill one or two people, and it all of a sudden becomes less of a terrible thing in your mind. I guess it's like the old saying says "We may be human, but we're still animals." And as animals, we need to learn to move as a pack. ~T.W.T.

April 16, 2007 at 7:36pm · Flag

This stuff gets worse every year. It's one big f--- American Problem, I just cannot believe it happened at a College. We mourn with you VT.

April 16, 2007 at 7:34pm · Flag

I was completely shocked by the school for not having a lock down after the first shooting is truly unacceptable and I know that God is taking care of those who perished today, but I hope and pray that nothing like this ever happens again. My prayers and thoughts are with the students, staff, and faculty. I recite the Mourner's Kaddish (Jewish Prayer) for the families of the victims.

April 16, 2007 at 7:33pm · Flag

At least 33 dead in rampage on Virginia campus, 15 others at Virginia Tech wounded in worst mass shooting in U.S. history. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18134671/?GT>

1=9246

April 16, 2007 at 7:07pm · Flag

Rivalry aside: when something like this happens, Hoos and Hokies come together. I am deeply saddened by the events of today and I pray for everyone affected.

April 16, 2007 at 6:41pm · Flag

as of like 4:00 33 were dead. i honestly cant imagine what would posses someone to do this! virginia tech is in my prayers.

April 16, 2007 at 6:28pm · Flag

Stay strong hokies, youre in our thoughts and prayers.

April 16, 2007 at 6:20pm · Flag

on another site it says for people to wear maroon & orange tomorrow, VT's colors, in mourning. just thought i'd pass that along.

April 16, 2007 at 6:20pm · Flag

my heart and my thoughts go out to everybody who lost somebody close to them during this horrible tragedy. my thoughts are with those who attend VT as well.

April 16, 2007 at 6:05pm · Flag

To the entire VT community, I'm saddened to hear the news about the loss of your own. I don't understand, how in the world would a civilized human being randomly ruthlessly gun down college students! This barbarism makes me sick--this show how low lifes', with their barbarous motivation would stop at nothing to make themselves known--they know nothing of civilization-- I can't comprehend what motivate such characters. One of my grade school bestfriend was gunned down about 6 yrs---I relate to the horrifying episodes VT community is going thru right now. VT you are in my thoughts and prayers--some senseless creature took your friends, boyfriends---girlfriends and classmates--.... Remember that who live in the hearts of others never die.... We are all one as we mourn this loss, you have my thoughts during this difficult time. Patrick Kluivert Ddiba

April 16, 2007 at 5:59pm · Flag

my thoughts and prayers are with everyone at VT!!! if anyone knows anything about Rachael Crownover let me know she is a friend of a friend they havent been able to contact her!

April 16, 2007 at 5:58pm · Flag

My thoughts & prayers are w. everyone during this horrible VA TECH trama!! ♥ my heart is w. you all ♥

April 16, 2007 at 5:53pm · Flag

my heart goes out everyone at VT

April 16, 2007 at 5:48pm · Flag

It is a sad event and believe me when I say that MAJOR changes are about to be made at



large universities around the nation. I go to Ohio State and there are some lecture halls with 500+ people with only 2 exits. Imagine that. This is very sad and this has been a problem for some time. Security needs to be changes at colleges and schools. Regardless, we cannot live in fear. Thoughts and prayers for everyone involved from everyone at The Ohio State University. God Bless.

April 16, 2007 at 5:33pm · Flag

this is such a cowardly thing to do.... i'm in a state of awe. all of my thoughts and prayers go out to everyone at VT. stay strong!

April 16, 2007 at 5:32pm · Flag

My Jesus, I believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love You above all things, and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.

April 16, 2007 at 5:32pm · Flag

On behalf of Michigan State, my condolences go out to the entire Virginia Tech community. Our prayers are with you!!

April 16, 2007 at 5:31pm · Flag

my prayers are to those who were killed, wounded and present at the massacre today at VTech campus. God be with you... Please let us know what we can do to help in anyway..

April 16, 2007 at 5:27pm · Flag

My prayers and thoughts are with everyone at VA tech. No one expected this, Keep your heads up. Peace&Love;

April 16, 2007 at 5:07pm · Flag

PRAYERS AND THOUGHTS ARE WITH THE VT FAMILY

April 16, 2007 at 5:07pm · Flag

VT has been in my thoughts and prayers all day. We're thinking of you all here in Buffalo.

April 16, 2007 at 5:05pm · Flag

Prayers are for everyone at VT from everyone in Canada.

April 16, 2007 at 5:02pm · Flag

on behalf of everyone in tampa bay our thoughts and prayers go out everyone affected by this terrible event...God Bless

April 16, 2007 at 4:59pm · Flag

My prayers go out to everybody down I Tech.

April 16, 2007 at 4:51pm · Flag

I can't believe something like this happened, in Blacksburg no less. Everyone at UNC is praying

April 16, 2007 at 4:49pm · Flag

what a tragedy :( God Bless all the families and friends that were affected by this tragedy! My prayers are with all of you in Virginia!

April 16, 2007 at 4:42pm · Flag

my thoughts and prayers go out to all the victims and their families at VT...God Bless

April 16, 2007 at 4:36pm · Flag

Hey to everyone at VT, its your ACC brothers to the south, just wanted to say that all us Seminoles are honorary Hokies today, we are all sad on our campus as well. . .

April 16, 2007 at 4:32pm · Flag

first off my computer deleted my post cause it's stupid....anyways Our prayers and thoughts from the frozen north are with those in Virginia. To qoutoe somewhat from blood diamond "I could see why other people would want to do thsi to us but I do not understand why our people would do this to themselves". May the guy who did this burn in hell, and may the victims be welcomed by Peter at the Pearly Gates.

April 16, 2007 at 4:32pm · Flag

Those of us located near Columbine have a sense of what you are all going through. We are 3 days short of 8 years and it feels just like it happened yesterday. We are there to pray for everyone involved and try to help carry you through all of the emotions and difficult times ahead. Just keep talking and getting it out and it will eventually get better. Time heals all wounds! May God Bless everyone involved in this horrible tragedy!

April 16, 2007 at 4:13pm · Flag

"I'm ok at VT" <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=23>

21223134&ref=nf

April 16, 2007 at 4:11pm · Flag

THIS IS CALLED A TERRORIST ATTACK! Do not you think so. Killing Students like that is Called Terrorism itself. I wish they kept him alive and taught him a lesson. I guess that what God want. Unfair Life... God Bless the families of the victims, I am not sure what they are thinking. Madness! Anger!?! God Bless

April 16, 2007 at 4:09pm · Flag

Our hearts and prayers go out to the love ones whom this tragic event has effected Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity

April 16, 2007 at 4:03pm · Flag

as of now 34 people are dead, including the shooter

April 16, 2007 at 4:03pm · Flag

Were shocked up here in Canada..we send our bets to every student at VT  
 April 16, 2007 at 4:02pm · Flag

this shit sucks!!! you guys have our mprayers from the US Army!!! we know what you  
 guys are going through but you can make it !!!! Good Luck and God Bless!!!  
 April 16, 2007 at 4:01pm · Flag

i got some friends form high school that goes to VT i hope they are ok cause they are not  
 picking up their phones  
 April 16, 2007 at 3:59pm · Flag

Prayers go out from Florida to all those who lost their lives or friends and family  
 April 16, 2007 at 3:58pm · Flag

From UW-La Crosse, my prayers and prayers of fellow students are with all of those  
 affected and their families.  
 April 16, 2007 at 3:52pm · Flag

They do not know yet. Prayers go out from Ohio  
 April 16, 2007 at 3:45pm · Flag

Was the shooter a student or a random person?  
 April 16, 2007 at 3:42pm · Flag

"I pray you'll be our eyes, and watch us where we go, And help us to be wise, in times  
 when we don't know Let this be our prayer, as we go our way Lead us to a place, guide us  
 with your grace To a place where we'll be safe..."  
 April 16, 2007 at 3:41pm · Flag

our prayers are with you from across the atlantic. x x  
 April 16, 2007 at 3:39pm · Flag

I have been watching this thing all day on FNC. Absolutely insane. Prayers go out to all  
 victims, students, and faculty involved. God Bless.  
 April 16, 2007 at 3:30pm · Flag

<http://charlestonsouthern.facebook.com/g>

[roup.php?gid=2357751564](http://charlestonsouthern.facebook.com/groupp.php?gid=2357751564)  
 April 16, 2007 at 3:28pm · Flag

32 confirmed dead. My thoughts and prays go out.  
 April 16, 2007 at 3:18pm · Flag

What a tragedy, my prayers are with all of you and your loved ones  
 April 16, 2007 at 3:14pm · Flag

My prayers go out to you and your families.  
April 16, 2007 at 3:13pm · Flag

You are all in my thoughts and prayers. May God be with all the families and loved ones in mourning of those lost today.  
April 16, 2007 at 3:12pm · Flag

what a tragedy....my prayers go out to all of the victims as well as their families, may God be with them  
April 16, 2007 at 3:12pm · Flag

our paryers our with you all...  
April 16, 2007 at 3:12pm · Flag

bless u guys  
April 16, 2007 at 3:06pm · Flag

my thoughts and prayers go out to Virginia Tech and all the families affected by this tragedy. God Bless!  
April 16, 2007 at 3:05pm · Flag

Thoughts and Prayers from Penn State for the VT family. God Bless  
April 16, 2007 at 2:54pm · Flag

This is such a terrible day... God Bless the families of the students/professors that lost their lives.  
April 16, 2007 at 2:52pm · Flag

may god be with everyone who was killed. also may he be with the families. the death toll is now 32.  
April 16, 2007 at 2:50pm · Flag

May God be with you, guys. The whole world in watching in horror.  
April 16, 2007 at 2:48pm · Flag

please join and show support on this tragic day!  
April 16, 2007 at 2:41pm · Flag

God Bless! <http://charlestonsouthern.facebook.com/g>

[roup.php?gid=2357751564](#)  
April 16, 2007 at 2:40pm · Flag

My prayers are with you all.  
April 16, 2007 at 2:40pm · Flag

What a very sad day. I'm praying for the kids who were killed and wounded, for all of the

kids at Virginia Tech, and for all of the parents and families of all these kids.  
April 16, 2007 at 2:35pm · Flag

Our prayers are with you all  
April 16, 2007 at 2:32pm · Flag

love for the hokies ♥  
April 16, 2007 at 2:14pm · Flag

God bless those students and their families.  
April 16, 2007 at 2:12pm · Flag

according to my friends at the hospital nearly all the wounded have died, leaving a body count now of 49  
April 16, 2007 at 2:09pm · Flag

I am a Canadian student that has looked into a few shootings over the past while and the correlation with the media jumping on video games. I dunno much about this one, but, there was a 1st shooting?  
April 16, 2007 at 2:08pm · Flag

i have no idea what to say, i cant believe it. kinda puts ur own life into perspective when u hear of things like this... you just never know anymore when your gonna wake up and tragedy strikes... peace.love.prayers to all  
April 16, 2007 at 2:08pm · Flag

Took a shower and shave. Had to phone fight with a credit card company. Turned on the TV and freaked out. All my prayers for everyone involved.  
April 16, 2007 at 2:01pm · Flag

Not to take away from this tragedy, but DiMeco, you're a pretentious fuck. Get out of this group.  
April 16, 2007 at 1:57pm

This is almost surreal. My best wishes to everyone.  
April 16, 2007 at 1:54pm · Flag

32 dead, god rest their souls  
April 16, 2007 at 1:47pm · Flag

Why weren't classes cancelled after the first shooting?  
April 16, 2007 at 1:42pm · Flag

32 shot  
April 16, 2007 at 1:33pm · Flag

wow : V

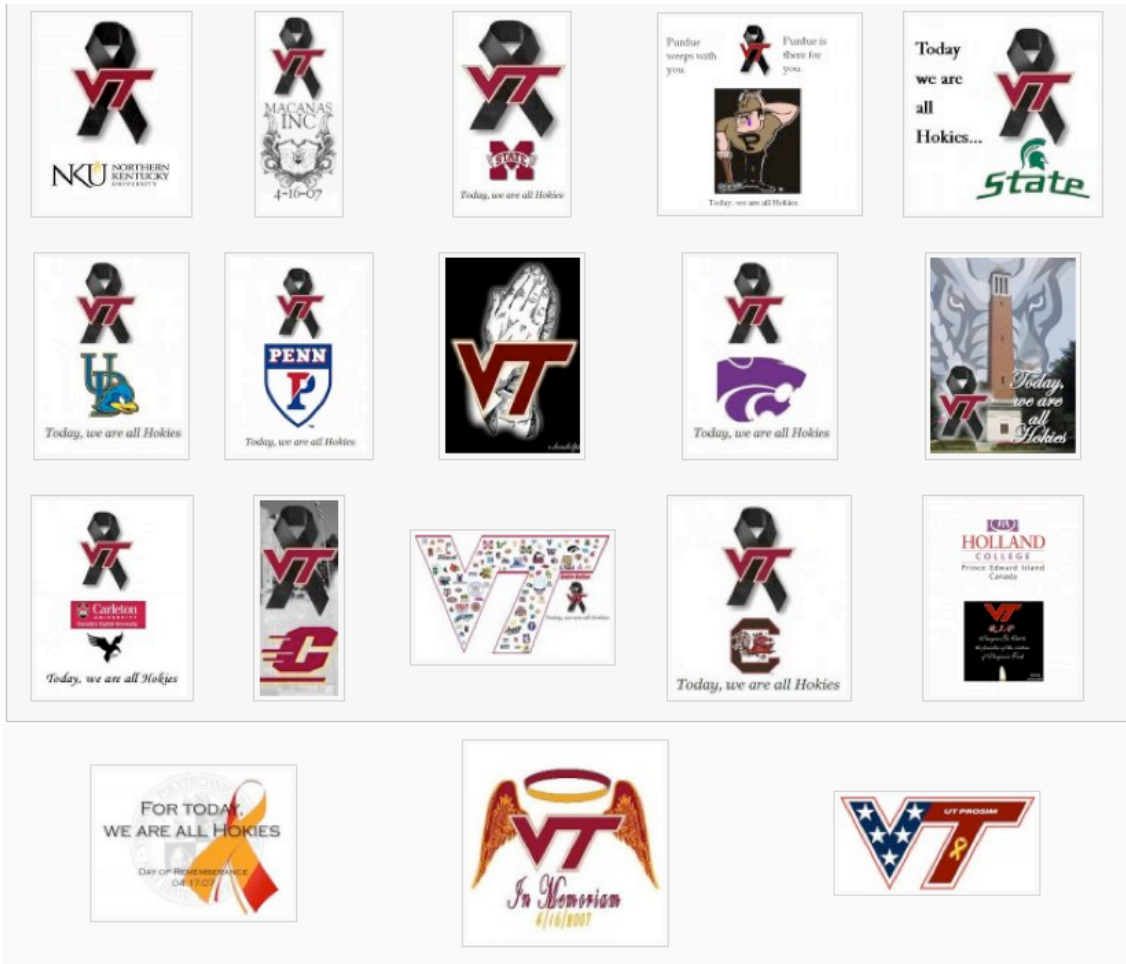
April 16, 2007 at 1:18pm · Flag

It is unreal. Campuses around the nation need to realize what just happened. The two shootings occurred 2 HOURS apart!!! That is way to long for police to respond!!

April 16, 2007 at 1:17pm · Flag

**Appendix B: Screenshots of Thirty-Three Publically Posted Photographs in Group  
(Presented in Reverse Chronological Order on This Page and Following Page)**







**Appendix C: First Twelve Associated Press Reports of the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings.**

A full ten of these reports were made before the first posting in the group. (Note: times posted are Greenwich Mean Time).

This news coverage is included, in full, in order to more fully frame the news climate associated with the time leading up to, and immediately following, the formation of the “In Memorial: Virginia Tech” *Facebook* group.

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The Associated Press

April 16, 2007 Monday 2:21 PM GMT

**Virginia Tech reports shooting, gunman on campus, tells students to stay inside**

**SECTION:** DOMESTIC NEWS

**LENGTH:** 25 words

**DATELINE:** BLACKSBURG Va.

Virginia Tech reported a campus shooting Monday and told students to stay inside their residences and away from windows.

No further details were available.

**LOAD-DATE:** April 17, 2007

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newswire

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The Associated Press

April 16, 2007 Monday 2:40 PM GMT

**Virginia Tech reports shooting, 1 killed**

**SECTION:** DOMESTIC NEWS

**LENGTH:** 139 words

**DATELINE:** BLACKSBURG Va.

A shooting at a Virginia Tech dorm Monday left one person dead and one wounded, a state government official with knowledge of the case told The Associated Press.

The state university posted an advisory on its Web site advising students that a shooting had occurred at a residence hall and a "gunman is loose on the campus." The university also told students to stay in their homes away from windows.

The shooting was reported at West Ambler Johnston Hall. Police were at the scene, Tech said on its Web site.

Officials ordered the campus closed, the second time in less than a year the 26,000-student campus was shut because of a shooting.

In August 2006, the opening day of classes was canceled and the campus closed when an escaped jail inmate killed a hospital guard and a sheriff's deputy involved in a massive manhunt just off the campus.

**LOAD-DATE:** April 17, 2007

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newswire

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The Associated Press

April 16, 2007 Monday 3:29 PM GMT

**Virginia Tech reports shooting, 1 killed, 1 wounded, campus closed**

**SECTION:** DOMESTIC NEWS

**LENGTH:** 231 words

**DATELINE:** BLACKSBURG Va.

One person was killed and seven or eight more were shot in a dorm and in a classroom on the Virginia Tech campus Monday before police arrested a suspected gunman, officials told The Associated Press.

Police confirmed they had a suspect in custody, the university said on its Web site.

On the Web site, Tech confirmed the shooting at opposite ends of the 2,600-acre campus at West Ambler Johnston, a residence hall, and reported "multiple victims" at Norris Hall, an engineering building.

The university said in a news release there were multiple victims. Government officials with knowledge of the case said there were seven to eight other "casualties."

Students were asked to stay in their homes away from windows.

"There's just a lot of commotion. It's hard to tell exactly what's going on," said student Jason Anthony Smith, 19, who lives in the building where shooting took place.

The shooting was reported at West Ambler Johnston Hall.

Officials ordered the campus closed, the second time in less than a year the 26,000-student campus was shut because of a shooting.

In August 2006, the opening day of classes was canceled and the campus closed when an escaped jail inmate allegedly killed a hospital guard off campus and fled to the Tech area. A sheriff's deputy involved in the manhunt was killed on a trail just off campus.

The accused gunman, William Morva, faces capital murder charges.

**LOAD-DATE:** April 17, 2007

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newswire

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The Associated Press

April 16, 2007 Monday 4:04 PM GMT

**At least 1 person killed in shootings at dorm, classroom at Virginia Tech; suspect arrested**

**BYLINE:** By SUE LINDSEY, Associated Press Writer

**SECTION:** DOMESTIC NEWS

**LENGTH:** 339 words

**DATELINE:** BLACKSBURG Va.

Gunfire erupted in a dorm and classroom at Virginia Tech on Monday, killing at least one person and wounding 17, authorities said.

The university told students to stay inside and away from windows as police swept the campus and worked to establish whether the gunman acted alone.

A hospital spokeswoman said 17 students were treated for gunshot wounds and other injuries.

On the Web site, Tech reported the shootings at opposite ends of the 2,600-acre campus at West Ambler Johnston, a co-ed residence hall that houses 895 people, and said there were "multiple victims" at Norris Hall, an engineering building.

Government officials with knowledge of the case told The Associated Press there were seven to eight other "casualties."

All entrances to the campus were closed and classes canceled through Tuesday.

"There's just a lot of commotion. It's hard to tell exactly what's going on," said student Jason Anthony Smith, 19, who lives in the dorm where shooting took place.

Aimee Kanode, a freshman from Martinsville, said the shooting happened on the 4th floor of West Ambler Johnston dormitory, one floor above her room. Kanode's resident assistant knocked on her door about 8 a.m. to notify students to stay put.

"They had us under lockdown," Kanode said. "They temporarily lifted the lockdown, the gunman shot again."

"We're all locked in our dorms surfing the Internet trying to figure out what's going on," Kanode said.

Madison Van Duyne, a student who was interviewed by telephone on CNN, said, "We are all in lockdown. Most of the students are sitting on the floors away from the windows just trying to be as safe as possible."

It was second time in less than a year that the campus was closed because of a shooting.

In August 2006, the opening day of classes was canceled and the campus closed when an escaped jail inmate allegedly killed a hospital guard off campus and fled to the Tech area. A sheriff's deputy involved in the manhunt was killed on a trail just off campus.

The accused gunman, William Morva, faces capital murder charges.

**LOAD-DATE:** April 17, 2007

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newswire

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The Associated Press

April 16, 2007 Monday 4:15 PM GMT

**At least 1 person killed, 21 wounded in shootings at dorm, classroom at Virginia Tech**

**BYLINE:** By SUE LINDSEY, Associated Press Writer

**SECTION:** DOMESTIC NEWS

**LENGTH:** 325 words

**DATELINE:** BLACKSBURG Va.

Gunfire erupted in a dorm and classroom at Virginia Tech on Monday, killing at least one person and leaving 21 injured before a suspect was arrested, authorities said.

The university told students to stay inside and away from windows as police swept the campus and worked to establish whether the gunman acted alone.

A hospital spokeswoman said 21 students were treated for gunshot wounds and other injuries.

On the Web site, Tech reported the shootings at opposite sides of the 2,600-acre campus at West Ambler Johnston, a co-ed residence hall that houses 895 people, and said there were "multiple victims" at Norris Hall, an engineering building.

All entrances to the campus were closed and classes canceled through Tuesday.

"There's just a lot of commotion. It's hard to tell exactly what's going on," said student Jason Anthony Smith, 19, who lives in the dorm where shooting took place.

Aimee Kanode, a freshman from Martinsville, said the shooting happened on the 4th floor of West Ambler Johnston dormitory, one floor above her room. Kanode's resident assistant knocked on her door about 8 a.m. to notify students to stay put.

"They had us under lockdown," Kanode said. "They temporarily lifted the lockdown, the gunman shot again."

"We're all locked in our dorms surfing the Internet trying to figure out what's going on," Kanode said.

Madison Van Duyne, a student who was interviewed by telephone on CNN, said, "We are all in lockdown. Most of the students are sitting on the floors away from the windows just trying to be as safe as possible."



It was second time in less than a year that the campus was closed because of a shooting.

In August 2006, the opening day of classes was canceled and the campus closed when an escaped jail inmate allegedly killed a hospital guard off campus and fled to the Tech area. A sheriff's deputy involved in the manhunt was killed on a trail just off campus.

The accused gunman, William Morva, faces capital murder charges.

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The Associated Press

April 16, 2007 Monday 4:27 PM GMT

**SECTION:** DOMESTIC NEWS

**LENGTH:** 24 words

**DATELINE:** BLACKSBURG Va.

A gunman opened fire in a dorm and classroom at Virginia Tech on Monday, killing 21 people and wounding another 21 before he was killed, police said.

**LOAD-DATE:** April 17, 2007

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newswire

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The Associated Press

April 16, 2007 Monday 4:36 PM GMT

**Gunman killed 21, wounds 21 at Virginia Tech shooting before being killed**

**BYLINE:** By SUE LINDSEY, Associated Press Writer

**SECTION:** DOMESTIC NEWS

**LENGTH:** 338 words

**DATELINE:** BLACKSBURG Va.

A gunman opened fire in a dorm and classroom at Virginia Tech on Monday, killing 21 people and wounding another 21 before he was killed, police said.

"Today the university was struck with a tragedy that we consider of monumental proportions," said university president Charles Steger. "The university is shocked and indeed horrified."

The university reported shootings at opposite sides of the 2,600-acre campus, beginning at about 7:15 a.m. at West Ambler Johnston, a co-ed residence hall that houses 895 people, and continuing about two hours later at Norris Hall, an engineering building.

One student was killed in a dorm and the others were killed in the classroom, Virginia Tech Police Chief W.R. Flinchum.

After the shootings, all entrances to the campus were closed and classes canceled through Tuesday.

"There's just a lot of commotion. It's hard to tell exactly what's going on," said Jason Anthony Smith, 19, who lives in the dorm where shooting took place.

Aimee Kanode, a freshman from Martinsville, said the shooting happened on the 4th floor of West Ambler Johnston dormitory, one floor above her room. Kanode's resident assistant knocked on her door about 8 a.m. to notify students to stay put.

"They had us under lockdown," Kanode said. "They temporarily lifted the lockdown, the gunman shot again."

"We're all locked in our dorms surfing the Internet trying to figure out what's going on," Kanode said.

Madison Van Duyne, a student who was interviewed by telephone on CNN, said, "We are all in lockdown. Most of the students are sitting on the floors away from the windows just trying to be as safe as possible."

It was second time in less than a year that the campus was closed because of a shooting.

In August 2006, the opening day of classes was canceled and the campus closed when an escaped jail inmate allegedly killed a hospital guard off campus and fled to the Tech area. A sheriff's deputy involved in the manhunt was killed on a trail just off campus.

The accused gunman, William Morva, faces capital murder charges.

**LOAD-DATE:** April 17, 2007

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newswire

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The Associated Press

April 16, 2007 Monday 5:06 PM GMT

**Gunman killed 21, at Virginia Tech shooting before being killed**

**BYLINE:** By SUE LINDSEY, Associated Press Writer

**SECTION:** DOMESTIC NEWS

**LENGTH:** 520 words

**DATELINE:** BLACKSBURG Va.

A gunman opened fire in a dorm and classroom at Virginia Tech on Monday, killing 21 people in the deadliest campus shooting in U.S. history. The gunman was killed, but it was unclear if he was shot by police or took his own life.

"Today the university was struck with a tragedy that we consider of monumental proportions," said Virginia Tech president Charles Steger. "The university is shocked and indeed horrified."

The university reported shootings at opposite sides of the 2,600-acre campus, beginning at about 7:15 a.m. at West Ambler Johnston, a co-ed residence hall that houses 895 people, and continuing about two hours later at Norris Hall, an engineering building.

Some but not all the dead were students. One student was killed in a dorm and the others were killed in the classroom, Virginia Tech Police Chief W.R. Flinchum.

The name of the gunman was not released. It was not known if he was a student.

Up until Monday, the deadliest campus shooting in U.S. history took place in 1966 at the University of Texas, where Charles Whitman climbed to the 28th-floor observation deck of a clock tower and opened fire. He killed 16 people before he was gunned down by police. In the Columbine High bloodbath near Littleton, Colo., in 1999, two teenagers killed 12 fellow students and a teacher before taking their own lives.

After Monday's shootings, all entrances to the campus were closed. The campus was to reopen Tuesday but classes were canceled.

The university set up a meeting place for families to reunite with their children at the Inn at Virginia Tech. It also made counselors available and planned a convocation for Tuesday at the Cassell Coliseum basketball arena.

After the shootings, students were told to stay inside away from the windows.

"There's just a lot of commotion. It's hard to tell exactly what's going on," said Jason Anthony Smith, 19, who lives in the dorm where shooting took place.

Aimee Kanode, a freshman from Martinsville, said the shooting happened on the 4th floor of West Ambler Johnston dormitory, one floor above her room. Kanode's resident assistant knocked on her door about 8 a.m. to notify students to stay put.

"They had us under lockdown," Kanode said. "They temporarily lifted the lockdown, the gunman shot again."

"We're all locked in our dorms surfing the Internet trying to figure out what's going on," Kanode said.

Madison Van Duyne, a student who was interviewed by telephone on CNN, said, "We are all in lockdown. Most of the students are sitting on the floors away from the windows just trying to be as safe as possible."

Police said there had been bomb threats on campus over the past two weeks by authorities but said they have not determined a link to the shootings.

It was second time in less than a year that the campus was closed because of a shooting.

In August 2006, the opening day of classes was canceled and the campus closed when an escaped jail inmate allegedly killed a hospital guard off campus and fled to the Tech area. A sheriff's deputy involved in the manhunt was killed on a trail just off campus.

The accused gunman, William Morva, faces capital murder charges.

**LOAD-DATE:** April 17, 2007

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newswire

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The Associated Press

April 16, 2007 Monday 5:20 PM GMT

**Statement by Virginia Tech's president after the fatal shootings of 21 students**

**BYLINE:** By The Associated Press

**SECTION:** DOMESTIC NEWS

**LENGTH:** 405 words

Statement by Virginia Tech President Charles Steger on Monday afternoon after the fatal shootings of 21 students:

Well, today the university was struck with a tragedy that we consider of monumental proportions. There were two shootings which occurred on campus. In each case there were fatalities. The university is shocked and indeed horrified that this would befall us, and I want to extend my deepest and most sincere and profound sympathy to the families of these victims, which include our students.

We are currently in the process of notifying next of kin. The Virginia Tech police are being assisted by numerous other jurisdictions including Montgomery County. Crime scenes are being investigated by the university police, the FBI and the state police.

We continue to work to identify the victims that have been impacted by this tragedy. I cannot begin to convey my own personal sense of loss over this senseless and incomprehensible heinous act. The university will immediately set up counseling centers. So far, centers have been identified in Ambler Johnston and the Cook counseling center to work with our campus community and their families.

Now here are some of the facts as we know them. At about 7:15 this morning, a 911 call came to the university police department concerning an event in West Ambler Johnston Hall. There were multiple shooting victims. While in the process of investigating, about two hours later, the university received reports of a shooting in Norris Hall. The police immediately responded.

The shooter in Norris Hall is deceased. There are multiple fatalities. The number of fatalities has not been confirmed. Victims have been transported to various hospitals in the immediate area in the region to receive emergency treatment. And we will proceed to contact the next of kin as the victims' identities are available. All classes are canceled and the university is closed for the remainder of the day.

The university will open tomorrow at 8:00 a.m., but classes will be canceled on Tuesday. The police are currently staging the release of people from campus buildings. Families

wishing to reunite with their students are suggested to meet at the Inn at Virginia Tech, the building that we're in today. We're making plans for a convocation tomorrow at noon in Cassell Coliseum for the university to come together to begin the healing process from this terrible tragedy.

That ends my prepared comments.

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**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newswire

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The Associated Press

April 16, 2007 Monday 5:21 PM GMT

**A list of deadly campus shootings**

**BYLINE:** By The Associated Press

**SECTION:** DOMESTIC NEWS

**LENGTH:** 380 words

A list of some fatal shootings that took place at U.S. colleges or universities in recent years. Monday's campus shooting at Virginia Tech was the deadliest in U.S. history.

April 16, 2007: A gunman kills 21 people in a dorm and a classroom at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va.

Sept. 2, 2006: Douglas W. Pennington, 49, kills himself and his two sons, Logan P. Pennington, 26, and Benjamin M. Pennington, 24, during a visit to the campus of Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, W.Va.

Oct. 28, 2002: Failing University of Arizona Nursing College student and Gulf War veteran Robert Flores, 40, walks into an instructor's office and fatally shoots her. A few minutes later, armed with five guns, he enters one of his nursing classrooms and kills two more of his instructors before fatally shooting himself.

Jan. 16, 2002: Graduate student Peter Odighizuwa, 42, recently dismissed from Virginia's Appalachian School of Law, returns to campus and kills the dean, a professor and a student before being tackled by students. The attack also wounds three female students.

Aug. 28, 2000: James Easton Kelly, 36, a University of Arkansas graduate student recently dropped from a doctoral program after a decade of study and John Locke, 67, the English professor overseeing his coursework, are shot to death in an apparent murder-suicide.

Aug. 15, 1996: Frederick Martin Davidson, 36, a graduate engineering student at San Diego State, is defending his thesis before a faculty committee when he pulls out a handgun and kills three professors.

Nov. 1, 1991: Gang Lu, 28, a graduate student in physics from China, reportedly upset because he was passed over for an academic honor, opens fire in two buildings on the University of Iowa campus. Five University of Iowa employees killed, including four members of the physics department, two other people are wounded. The student fatally shoots himself.

May 4, 1970: Four students were killed and nine wounded by National Guard troops called in to quell anti-war protests on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio.

Aug. 1, 1966: Charles Whitman points a rifle from the observation deck of the University of Texas at Austin's Tower and begins shooting in a homicidal rampage that goes on for 96 minutes. Sixteen people are killed, 31 wounded.

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The Associated Press

April 16, 2007 Monday 6:18 PM GMT

**Gunman kills 21 at Virginia Tech shooting before being killed**

**BYLINE:** By SUE LINDSEY, Associated Press Writer

**SECTION:** DOMESTIC NEWS

**LENGTH:** 933 words

**DATELINE:** BLACKSBURG Va.

A gunman opened fire in a dorm and classroom at Virginia Tech on Monday, killing at least 21 people in the deadliest campus massacre in U.S. history. The gunman was killed, bringing to death toll to 22, but it was unclear if he was shot by police or took his own life.

"Today the university was struck with a tragedy that we consider of monumental proportions," said Virginia Tech president Charles Steger. "The university is shocked and indeed horrified."

The name of the gunman was not immediately released, and investigators offered no motive for the attack. It was not immediately known if the gunman was a student.

FBI spokesman Richard Kolko in Washington said there was no immediate evidence to suggest it was a terrorist attack, "but all avenues will be explored."

The shootings spread panic and confusion on campus, with witnesses reporting students jumping out the windows of a classroom building to escape the gunfire. SWAT team members with helmets, flak jackets and assault rifles swarmed over the campus. Students and faculty members carried out some of the wounded themselves, without waiting for ambulances to arrive.

The bloodbath took place at opposite sides of the 2,600-acre campus, beginning at about 7:15 a.m. at West Ambler Johnston, a coed dormitory that houses 895 people, and continuing at least two hours later at Norris Hall, an engineering building about a half-mile away, authorities said.

Police said they were still investigating the shooting at the dorm when they got word of gunfire at the classroom building.

After the first shots were fired, students were warned to stay indoors and away from the windows. But some students said they thought the precautions had been lifted by the time

the second burst of gunfire was heard, and some bitterly questioned why the gunman was able to strike a second time, two hours after the bloodshed began.

Some of the dead were students. One student was killed in the dorm, and the others were killed in the classroom, Virginia Tech Police Chief W.R. Flinchum.

Up until Monday, the deadliest campus shooting in U.S. history was a rampage that took place in 1966 at the University of Texas at Austin, where Charles Whitman climbed the clock tower and opened fire with a rifle from the 28th-floor observation deck. He killed 16 people before he was shot to death by police.

The massacre Monday took place almost eight years to the day after the Columbine High bloodbath near Littleton, Colo. On April 20, 1999, two teenagers killed 12 fellow students and a teacher before taking their own lives.

The deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history was in Killeen, Texas, in 1991, when George Hennard drove his pickup into a Luby's Cafeteria and shot 23 people to death, then himself.

Founded in 1872, Virginia Tech is nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains of southwestern Virginia, about 160 miles west of Richmond. With more than 25,000 full-time students, it has the state's largest full-time student population. The school is best known for its engineering school and its powerhouse Hokies football team.

The rampage took place on a brisk spring day, with snow flurries swirling around the campus, which is centered around the Drill Field, a grassy field where military cadets who now represent a fraction of the student body once practiced. The dorm and the classroom building are on opposite sides of the Drill Field.

A gasp could be heard at a campus news conference when the police chief said at least 20 people had been killed. Previously, only one person was thought to have been killed.

Investigators from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives began marking and recovering the large number of shell casings and will trace the weapon used, authorities said.

A White House spokesman said President Bush was horrified by the rampage and offered his prayers to the victims and the people of Virginia.

"The president believes that there is a right for people to bear arms, but that all laws must be followed," spokeswoman Dana Perino said

After the shootings, all entrances to the campus were closed, and classes were canceled through Tuesday. The university set up a meeting place for families to reunite with their children. It also made counselors available and planned an assembly for Tuesday at the basketball arena.

After the shooting began, students were told to stay inside away from the windows.

Aimee Kanode, a freshman from Martinsville, said the shooting happened on the fourth floor of West Ambler Johnston dormitory, one floor above her room. Kanode's resident assistant knocked on her door about 8 a.m. to notify students to stay put.

"They had us under lockdown," Kanode said. "They temporarily lifted the lockdown, the gunman shot again."

"We're all locked in our dorms surfing the Internet trying to figure out what's going on," Kanode said.

Maurice Hiller, 21, a mechanical engineering student from Richmond, saw police and SWAT team members with guns drawn going toward Norris Hall. "This is something just totally beyond anybody's expectations," he said.

Police said there had been bomb threats on campus over the past two weeks by authorities but said they have not determined a link to the shootings.

It was second time in less than a year that the campus was closed because of a shooting.

Last August, the opening day of classes was canceled and the campus closed when an escaped jail inmate allegedly killed a hospital guard off campus and fled to the Tech area. A sheriff's deputy involved in the manhunt was killed on a trail just off campus. The accused gunman, William Morva, faces capital murder charges.

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The Associated Press

April 16, 2007 Monday 7:03 PM GMT

**President Bush described as 'horrified' by shootings at Virginia Tech**

**BYLINE:** By DEB RIECHMANN, Associated Press Writer

**SECTION:** WASHINGTON DATELINE

**LENGTH:** 315 words

**DATELINE:** WASHINGTON

President Bush was described Monday as shocked and saddened by the mass shooting at Virginia Tech, the deadliest incident of campus violence ever in this country.

"He was horrified and his immediate reaction was one of deep concern for the families of the victims, the victims themselves, the students, the professors and all the people of Virginia who have dealt with this shocking incident," White House deputy press secretary Dana Perino said. "His thoughts and prayers are with them."

"The president believes that there is a right for people to bear arms, but that all laws must be followed," Perino said, noting that Bush and Education Secretary Margaret Spellings held a conference on school gun violence last October. "Certainly, bringing a gun into a school dormitory and shooting ... is against the law and something someone should be held accountable for," Perino said.

In the House, which returned Monday from a two-week recess, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., interrupted proceedings to lead a moment of silence in remembrance.

A gunman opened fire in a dormitory and classroom at Virginia Tech, situated in the city of Blacksburg in southwest Virginia, killing at least 21 people. The gunman was killed but it was unclear whether he was shot by police or took his own life. After the shootings, all entrances to the campus were closed and classes were canceled through Tuesday.

The university reported shootings at opposite sides of the 2,600-acre campus first at about 7:15 a.m. at a coed residence hall that houses 895 people and about two hours later at an engineering building. One student was killed in the dorm and the others were killed in a classroom, according to Virginia Tech Police Chief W.R. Flinchum.

She said that federal assistance is available if Virginia authorities request help. Perino said it was premature to discuss whether Bush would travel to the Blacksburg area.

**LOAD-DATE:** April 17, 2007

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

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**APPENDIX D: EXPRESSIONS OF PUBLIC MEMORY IN THE GROUP**

POSTING #	DESCRIPTION OF KEY TEXT	VERBATIM KEY TEXT
5	Expression of support through a religious reference for the 32 dead.	god rest their souls
6	Expression of support through a secular reference	My best wishes
8	Expression of support through a religious reference for "everyone involved," which may refer only to those directly impacted in Blacksburg, or it may mean a wider impact	All my prayers for everyone involved.
9	Aubade that offers support through expression of peace, expression of love and expression of support through a religious reference to all affected	... peace.love.prayers to all
12	Expression of support through religious reference	God bless
13	Expression of love for those in the campus community	love for the hokies
14	Expression of support through a religious reference	prayers
15	Characterization of the day as sad	What a very sad day
16	Poster offers an expression of support through a religious reference	My prayers
17	Expression of support through a religious reference, emphasized through an exclamation point.	God Bless!
19	Expression of support through a religious reference, ostensibly directed towards those in Blacksburg who were killed or wounded.	May God be with you, guys.

20	Expression of support through a religious reference, directed towards those killed.	may god be with everyone who was killed.
21	Characterization of the day as terrible	This is such a terrible day...
22	Expression of support	Thoughts
23	Expression of support	my thoughts
24	Expression of support through a religious reference, directed to those affected	bless u guys
25	I am considered this misspelled word to mean prayers, and therefore considering it as an expression of support through a religious reference	Paryers
26	Expression of support through a religious reference to the victims and the families	my prayers go out to all of the victims as well as their families,
27	Expression of support, directed towards those affected	You are all in my thoughts
28	Expression of support through religious reference	My prayers
29	Expression of support through a religious reference	my prayers
30	Expression of support	My thoughts
32	This expression of support uses a religious reference (prayers) and extends to include "all victims, students, and faculty involved.	Prayers go out to all victims, students, and faculty involved
33	Expression of support through a religious reference	Prayers
34	Ostensibly either lyrics from a prayer or a religious song. Accordingly, I am considering this an expression of support through a religious reference, directed towards those affected	"I pray you'll be our eyes, and watch us where we go, And help us to be wise, in times when we don't know Let this be our prayer, as we go our

		way Lead us to a place, guide us with your grace To a place where we'll be safe..."
36	Expression of support through a religious reference	Prayers go out
37	Poster's expression of support through a religious reference	my prayers
38	Expression of support through a religious reference	Prayers
40	Expression of support through a religious reference, directed towards those affected. The poster seems to be speaking for a group (our prayers)	you guys have our mprayers
41	Expression of support to VT students	we send our bets to every student at VT
43	Expression of support	hearts
44	This phrase offers an expression of support through a religious reference, directed towards the families of the victims	God Bless the families of the victims
46	Second expression of support through a religious reference	May God Bless
47	This phrase suggests that the poster is speaking for a group, and offering an expression of support through a religious reference	Our prayers
48	Expression of unity (honorary Hokies today) in view of this event	are honorary Hokies today
49	Expression of support through a religious reference	and prayers
50	Expression of support through a religious reference	God Bless
51	This phrase suggests that, in the poster's view, he is speaking for those at UNC	is praying

	and they are expressing their support through a religious action (prayer)	
52	Expression of support through a religious reference	My prayers
53	Poster conveys expression of support from group	our thoughts
54	Expression of support through a religious reference	Prayers
55	Expression of support for Virginia Tech	VT has been in my thoughts
56	Expression of support through a religious reference, caps in original for emphasis	PRAYERS
57	Expression of support through a religious reference	My prayers
58	Expression of support through a religious reference	my prayers
59	Speaking for the group, the poster offers an expression of support through a religious reference	. Our prayers are with you!!
61	Expression of support through a religious reference	and prayers
62	Characterizes the event as sad	It is a sad event
63	Expression of support	my heart
64	Expression of support	My thoughts
65	Expression of support	my thoughts
66	Expression of sadness	, I'm saddened to hear the news about the loss of your own.
67	Expression of support	my heart
69	Poster expresses support, on behalf of an unnamed group	youre in our thoughts
70	Expression of support through a religious reference, directed towards the school.	virginia tech is in my prayers.
71	Poster expresses support through a religious reference, directed towards all affected	and I pray for everyone affected.
73	Expression of support	My thoughts
74	Expression of support	My prayers

	through a religious reference	
78	Expression of support	My thoughts
79	Expression of sympathy	my condolences
83	Poster speaks for that geographic group and offers an expression of support through a religious reference for all affected.	. we're praying for all of you.
87	Expression of support through a religious reference	All my prayers
92	This posting is an expression of support through a religious reference, and the use of the word our suggests that the poster is speaking for a group.	All our prayers
93	Expression of support through religious reference on behalf of family	Mine and my family's prayers
94	Expression of support through a religious reference, the use of the word our suggests the poster is speaking for an unnamed group	All of our prayers
95	Expression of support through a religious reference	Prayers
96	Expressions of support	The thoughts, hearts
97	The poster further encourages members' engagement in this practice.	We should all do it.
98	Expression of support through religious reference	Many prayers coming from
99	Expression of support through a religious reference, directed to everyone at Virginia Tech	Everyone at Virginia Tech will be in my prayers
100	Poster offers a religious blessing to students	R.I.P VT students...
101	The poster expresses sorrow for those affected	interesting... im sorry for all.
104	Expression of support	My prayers are with

	through a religious reference, directed towards those affected.	you.
106	Expression of support through a religious reference, directed to the dead	To those who lost their lives...you will forever be in my prayers.
107	Expression of support through a religious reference, directed towards the families and the loved ones of the victims	a prayer goes out to the families and loved ones of the victims at Virginia Tech
108	Reinforcement of expression of support	you all have a lot of support throughout this.
109	Expression of support through a religious reference, directed towards those affected	everyone here is in my prayers.
110	Expression of sympathy to the family and loved ones of the deceased.	My condolences go out to the family and friends who lost a loved one in Virginia Tech
111	Poster singles out best friend and family for an expression of support and an expression of support through a religious reference, this suggests the poster has a personal relationship with someone effected.	My heart and prayer goes out to my best friend and her family...
112	Expression of support through religious reference	May God bless you all
114	Expression of support	My thoughts
115	Expression of support	My thoughts
116	Expression of support	Thoughts
120	Expression of support through religious reference for dead and those affected	But, I pray for those who lost their lives and those affected
121	Expression of support through a religious reference	May god bless

122	Expression of support through a religious reference	My prayers
123	Exoression of Sympathy	Hey guys, just wanted to offer my sympathies
124	Poster suggests country and world supports VT	VA TECH...i think its safe to say that the country and the world has your back!
125	Expression of support through religious reference	and prayers
126	Expression of support through a religious reference	you all are in my prayers
127	Expression of support through a religious reference, directed towards those affected	My prayers go out to the lives lost, the families and friends hurt.
128	Expression of support through a religious reference directed towards the Virginia Tech community.	All of VT is in my prayers
129	Expression of support	My heart goes out
130	Expression of support through a religious action	Im praying
131	Expression of support	My heart goes out to all the family and friends of Victims.
132	Expression of support and expression of support directed towards all affected, on behalf of in memorial: virginia tech facebook group	We love and pray for all..
133	Encouragement for people to be supportive of one another, and they will then receive support in return.	. In this time of great sadness be there for each other, and others will be there for you
134	Expression of support through a religious reference, directed towards victims and families	All the victims and families have all my prayers
135	Expression of support	Prayers are with all

	through a religious reference, directed towards the dead and all affected	the victims those who have passed away and those who have been affected...
136	Expression of support to all affected	my thoughts and condolences go out to anyone and everyone affected
137	Expression of support through religious reference	Prayers
138	Expression of support through religious reference	and prayers
139	Expression of support through a religious reference, directed towards the Virginia Tech community	I pray for all of you at Virginia Tech
140	Heart emoticon emphasizes that sentiment.	♥
141	Expression of support through religious reference	my prayers'
142	Call for safety, and expression of support through a religious reference directed towards victims' families	Please be safe, and god bless all the families of these victims.
144	Expression of support	my thoughts
146	Extreme sadness for those affected, characterization of event as tragedy	I am extremely sorry for those who have been closely affected by this tragedy

147	Directed towards victims' families, staff and VT students	go out to the victims families, the staff and student body of Virginia Tech
148	Expression of support through a religious reference	my prayers are with you all.....
149	Expression of love and sadness	My love and sorrow
150	Expression of support	My thoughts
151	Two expressions of support	heart, thoughts
152	Expression of unity in terms of college mascots	Everyone steps back and realizes that we are all the same. A



		Buckeye is the same as a Wolverine, a Gator is the same as a Seminole, a Sooner is same as a Longhorn, and a CAVALIER is the same as a HOKIE. We are all HOKIES this week just like that quote says.
153	Expression of sorrow	My sorrows
154	Expression of support	My heart
155	Expression of support	my thoughts
156	Expression of sympathy	My most sincere condolences
157	Expression of sympathy	I send my condolences
158	Expression of support through religious reference	My prayers
159	Expression of support	My thoughts
160	Expression of support through religious reference	My prayers
161	Expression of support	my thoughts
162	Expression of sadness	This is so sad
163	Expression of sadness	This is so sad.
164	Expression of love directed towards victims and loved ones	I would like to send my thoughts of love to all the victims and their loved ones
165	Expression of support through a religious reference, directed towards victims	I would also like to send my prayers out to the victims at Tech..
166	Poster speaks on behalf of Australia, offers expression of support through religious reference	I just want you guys to know that we are praying for you here in Australia
168	Expression of support for those affected	and you are in my thoughts
169	Expression of support	Everyone associated with the Virginia Tech community are in my thoughts
170	Expression of support for all	everyone affected by

	affected	this tragedy is in my thoughts
171	This posting emphasizes that Virginia Tech will live on in the users' memory	Va Tech for life
172	No personal connection but affected by the victims	i did not know any of these people, but they have all touched me.
173	Request to keep injured person in prayers	please keep her in your prayers!
174	Expression of support through a religious reference, directed towards those affected.	My prayers are with you
175	Expression of support through a religious reference for two of the dead (Leslie Sherman & Mary Read). This direct address suggests that the poster had a possible relationship with these two victims, but the nature of that relationship is not explained in this posting.	RIP Leslie Sherman & Mary Read
176	Poster offers expression of support on behalf of that group	stand behind you in support.
177	Expression of sorrow for the dead and those connected to them	I feel sorrow for those families whose sons and daughters...brothers and sisters....and loved ones were taken away from them and us
178	Expression of support through religious reference, directed towards the dead.	may all the victims rest in place
179	Expression of support through a religious reference, directed towards the dead	"Rest in Peace" for those who have died
180	Expression of sorrow for all, especially for the shooter	im sorry for everyone in this especially the shooter
181	Expression of continued expressions of support through religious reference, taking the	but just like all the other American's I can still pray, and that's

	model of other Americans	what I am, and will continue to do
182	Expression of enduring support through religious reference	will continue to pray for those left behind
183	Expression of sadness on behalf of group of Canadians	We are also deeply saddened
184	On behalf of that group, expression of support through a religious reference, directed towards those affected	is praying for you!

**APPENDIX E: Web 2.0 is not an Eden: The Example of TMZ.com**

An education and media scholar, Postman worried about how 24-hour cable television would shape, and perhaps corrupt, young minds. He worried about the rise of *USA Today* as taking away from the news with its heavily emphasis on graphics, and about the problem of being promised all the world's news in just thirty minutes. For Postman, print was associated with reason, and television—because of its emphasis on entertainment—distinctly marked the shift away from reason. There certainly are websites that may point to Postman's and Keen's concerns about a lack of seriousness and cultural decline, through technological innovation. I offer the following vignette as one example<sup>xix</sup>:

On a spring morning in April 2010, I logged on to TMZ.com. I was greeted by an oversized photograph of the entertainer Lindsay Lohan. Lohan was pictured holding a wine glass in her hand, and her gaze is directed, almost dismissively, down into the glass. The photograph appeared under a headline that read: "Lindsay Lohan Parties Till 5 AM" If Las Vegas, Nevada, was the center of Neil Postman's (1985) entertainment-focused<sup>xx</sup> world in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, then the capital of today's entertainment environment may very well be a website such as TMZ. Below the lead story about Lohan, the TMZ reader was met with a photograph of adult film actress Jenna Jameson, smiling and with a bewildered expression on her face. The story mentioned Jameson's drug test for Oxycontin, with the headline: "I Tested Clean!" Entertainment journalism is clearly alive and well on TMZ.com. The website seems to function with the overarching goal of building and sustaining the audience. What is the outrageous content of the day?

The website may be searching for an answer to this question, and attempt to amass a large audience to laugh and smile along with them. Postman and Keen's concerns may be well founded, in fact, especially in view of websites such as TMZ.com.

## **Appendix F: Historical Overview of Uses and Gratifications Theory**

Rooted in the functionalist tradition of media research (Lasswell, 1948; Wright, 1959; 1960), Lasswell initially proposed individuals' media use performs three functions: "surveillance of the environment, correlation of environmental parts and transmission of social heritage" (Rubin, 2002, p. 526). Wright (1959; 1960) bolstered this model and included "entertainment" as a fourth function of individuals' media use (Rubin, 2002, p. 526). Though in a rudimentary manner, media researchers were beginning inquiries into individuals' media use, as early as the 1940s.

The uses and gratifications theory of mass communication research is considered within the media effects tradition (Ruggerio, 2000). Broadly speaking, mass communication research began from the presupposition that media have moderate to strong effects on the audience, which was initially perceived as susceptible to the content of media messages (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). In what was termed the "hypodermic needle" (Berger, 2002) or "magic bullet" theory of media effects (Bryant & Zillmann, 2002), early researchers worried about what media does to people, especially to children, who are exposed its content. This worry is principally reflected in the 1930s Payne Fund studies about the impact of early movies on children. Though there are still some instances of moderate media effects (see, for example, Bryant & Zillmann, 2002, on conversation about HIV/AIDS after basketball star Magic Johnson's televised announcement in the early 1990s of his having contracted the disease), early mass communication research began, by the 1940s, to shift towards what came to be called a more "limited effects" (Klapper, 1960) model of media effects.

The uses and gratifications theory of mass communication research fits into this limited effects model (McQuail, 1983). Some scholars, interestingly, argue that this shift towards limited effects began as early as the 1930s, following the relatively limited media effects of the "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast on those who heard it live (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). The advent and use of the radio in the 1930s and 40s, especially in the home, brought the first "new" medium into the modern era of communications. In 1944, researcher Herta Herzog conducted some of the first major research about how and why individuals listen to radio soap operas (Eighmey & McCord, 1998; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Though Herzog's initial findings were quite descriptive, rather than analytical, she found via surveys and interviews, that listeners primarily received three gratifications: "emotional release, wishful thinking and valuable advice for handling their own lives" (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995, p. 107). Specifically, listeners (1) enjoyed experiencing, however vicariously, the emotions of the characters portrayed, (2) they enjoyed imagining themselves in the life situations of the characters portrayed (which were sometimes more favorable than their own) and (3) they enjoyed receiving advice on dealing with everyday problems, such as communication with their husbands. Herzog's research arguably began the study of how (and why) individuals utilize the media.

Noted communication researcher Elihu Katz (1959, p. 2) posed the question: "What do people do with media?" which I consider a crucial moment for mass communication research, especially for the way it began to reconsider the role of the audience, as active, rather than passive, consumers of media.

Mass communication scholars Schramm, Lyle & Parker (1961) furthered the notion of the active audience when they studied children's television use, asserting: "It is the children who are most active in the relationship. It is they who use television, rather than television that uses them" (cited in Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974, p. 21). This notion, of individuals using media rather than being used by media, has been cited many times in explaining the central kernel of the uses and gratifications approach to the study of mass communication research (see, for example, Ruggiero, 2000). Schramm, Lyle & Parker (1961) made an important advance in the understanding of uses and gratifications theory as part of the limited effects model with the following conclusion in their uses and gratifications study titled *Television in the Lives of Our Children*, when they concluded:

"For *some* children, under *some* conditions, *some* television is harmful. For *other* children under the same conditions, or for the same children under *other* conditions, it may be beneficial. For *most* children under *most* conditions, most television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial" (cited in Lowery & DeFleur, 1995, p. 261).

As the above quotation suggests, uses and gratifications theory was slowly beginning to come into its own. The late 1960s and early 1970s were a dynamic time for the study and development of uses and gratifications theory. Lundberg & Hulten (1968) are often credited for first formalizing a "uses and gratifications model," but Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch (1974) especially brought the model to prominence in mass communication research.

#### *Uses and Gratifications Comes of Age in the 1970s*

Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch's (1974) work served two notable purposes for uses and gratifications research through the time of its publication. First, Katz, Blumler &



Gurevitch synthesized major existing knowledge about the theory to that date. Among the central elements of this synthesis, these authors endorsed McQuail, Blumler & Brown's (1972) four "factors" of media use—*diversion* (including escape from the constraints of routine and the burdens of problems, and emotional release); *personal relationships* (including substitute companionship as well as social utility); *personal identity* (including personal reference, reality exploration and value reinforcement); and *surveillance*" (1974, p. 23, emphasis mine in italics). This endorsement was arguably vital for the field of uses and gratifications research, because it built towards something of a shared understanding of what, specifically, mass communication scholars meant when they discussed the central elements of uses and gratifications theory, especially what individuals tended to gain from their media use.

Second, Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch expanded the theoretical foundations of uses and gratifications theory, particularly how the theory conceived of the audience and its media use. Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch specified five elements of the model (1974, p. 21-22):

- (1) The audience is both "active" and "goal-directed" in their media use.
- (2) Individuals are able to "link need gratification and media choice," that is, individuals select specific media to gratify particular needs.
- (3) These authors recognized that media use "compete[s] with other sources of need satisfaction," which means that some individuals may turn to non-media sources to satisfy some needs.
- (4) Individuals are "sufficiently self-aware" to be able to explain their reasoning for selecting specific media to satisfy particular needs.
- (5) Rather than making "value judgments about the cultural significance of mass communication," Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch asserted the importance of considering "audience orientations on their own terms." Ostensibly, these authors noted the importance of examining how and why the audience is utilizing media, instead of making normative claims about that media use as either beneficial or harmful.

Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch's model has been endorsed as central to uses and gratifications theory. Rubin (2002, p. 527) called these five elements the "initial tenets" of the theory. I similarly endorse this model, and as I show in *Conceptualizing the Audience in the Case of "In Memorial: Virginia Tech,"* I choose to apply this model to my understanding of "In Memorial: Virginia Tech" group members as an audience.

Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch's work was among several important milestones for the theory in that decade. Throughout the 1970s, uses and gratifications theory continued to be developed by American and international scholars across communication and related fields. Principally, scholars continued developing a social and psychological understanding of individuals' media use via the uses and gratifications perspective. Perhaps most notably, scholars sought to understand the needs for which individuals sought fulfillment through their media use. Katz, Gurevitch & Haas (1973, p. 166-167) identified five categories of needs:

1. Needs related to strengthening information, knowledge, and understanding- these can be called cognitive needs;
2. Needs related to strengthening aesthetic, pleasurable and emotional experience-or affective needs;
3. Needs related to strengthening credibility, confidence, stability, and status-these combine both cognitive and affective elements and can be labeled integrative needs;
4. Needs related to strengthening contact with family, friends and the world. These can also be seen as performing an integrative function;
5. Needs related to escape or tension-release which we define in terms of the weakening of contact with one's self and one's social roles"

Katz, Gurevitch & Haas's categories arguably brought a stronger sense of scholarly attention to what needs, exactly, individuals may be seeking to satisfy in their media use decisions. Rosengren (1974) asserted the importance of personal

characteristics as influencing individuals' particular motives for media use (see also, Ruggiero, 2000, on this trajectory). Spurred in large part by this coming of age for uses and gratifications theory, in the mid-1970s, six areas of research had emerged within the study of uses and gratifications paradigm<sup>xxi</sup>, as the theory continued to expand upon its earlier foundations. Criticisms began to be leveled, though, especially about theoretical underpinnings of uses and gratifications theory (Blumler, 1979; Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1985). Some, such as Ruggiero, (2000), have even suggested that the theory fell out of favor for a period of time, as some scholars were uncertain, especially, about the process of "how to measure the active audience?" (Blumler, 1979). Windahl (1981, p. 176) raises a reasonable objection to the theory, in fact, cautioning against conceiving of the audience "as superational and very selective." Members of any audience have their truly active and less active periods, of course. "In Memorial: Virginia Tech," for example, has largely run its course as a group. Its members were really only active, in the fullest sense, across the approximately 36 hour period studied in this dissertation. Rubin (2002) offers a compelling response to Windahl's criticism, recognizing the audience as active "on a continuum between being passive and between being active" (p. 534). To some extent, this criticism continues (Ruggiero, 2000), but the rise of computers, the Internet, and the WWW, which requires users to "point-and-click" (Ebersole, 2000), has helped emphasize that computer users are active media consumers.<sup>xxii</sup>

#### *Uses and Gratifications and Computers, the Internet and the Early Web*

The 1980s marked communication scholars' reconsideration of theories for the study of new media (Rice & Williams, 1984). Rafaeli (1986) provided an early

endorsement for the study of uses and gratifications and computers, emphasizing the role of the audience in their use, and the varied potential uses of the computer as a communications device. Uses and gratifications theory began to be applied to online communication with the rise of the Web in the mid-1990s. In fact, Newhagen & Rafaeli (1996) suggested the usefulness of bringing the uses and gratifications to the study of the Internet, citing the established research tradition of the theory in mass communication. Morris and Ogan (1996) provided another a considerable endorsement for the application of uses and gratifications theory to the study of the Internet, stating: "The concept of audience activity should be included in the study of Internet communication" ("Uses and Gratifications" para. 3).

Taking a uses and gratifications perspective, mass communication researcher Barbara Kaye (1998) identified: "entertainment, social interaction, passing the time, escape, information, and Web site preference" (p. 34) as categories motivating college students' use of the World Wide Web. (WWW) Similarly, Ebersole (2000) also studied college students' use of the WWW from a uses and gratifications perspective and found that students tended not to utilize the medium for educational purposes: "Analysis of sites visited indicated that by nearly a two-to-one margin students visited sites rated "unsuitable for academic research" versus sites rated "suitable" ("Conclusions," para. 3). In this way, (Kaye, 1998) and (Ebersole, 2000)'s early uses and gratifications research focused on the WWW arguably saw the medium as primarily providing entertainment, and diversion, gratifications. In his overview of the uses and gratifications research and its future applications, Ruggerio (2000, p. 28) did especially well to call for expanded

study of the online audience via the uses and gratifications perspective in mass communication research. “Communication on the Internet travels at unparalleled velocity. The Internet offers its audience an immense range of communication opportunities.” In this dissertation, I endorse Ruggiero’s call for expanded study of the online audience via the uses and gratifications perspective in mass communication research.

## Dissertation Endnotes}

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<sup>i</sup> Researcher danah boyd prefers that her name appear in lower case. I am honoring her request.

<sup>ii</sup> There are profound barriers to access, including lack of well-developed technological infrastructure across some of the less-developed countries of the world. Internet access remains a privilege. *The International Telecommunications Union, The World Bank and Freedom House*, to name just three organizations, do well to document the varying levels of Internet usage around the world.

<sup>iii</sup> In the United States, for example, 73 percent of individuals were identified as Internet users (ITU, 2009).

<sup>iv</sup> “The individual viewer in a campaign crowd with a cell phone can record a candidate’s gaffe, post it on YouTube or Flickr, and within days millions will be gasping or guffawing” (Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010, p. 555).

<sup>v</sup> Due at least in part to these structural tensions associated with traditional versus social media, scholarship about journalism and mass communication has for some time noted “uncertainty” about the future of journalism (Beam, Weaver & Brownlee, 2009, p. 278).

<sup>vi</sup> Although political campaigns are an instructive example, I take the position that there is a need to go beyond the expressly political arena in the study of social media in mass communication. I assume that Johnson and Perlmutter would agree with this assertion, too, and I do not mean to suggest that they view social media and mass communication in only political terms. That is simply the work in this field that most effectively captures the structural differences between traditional and social media to date.

<sup>vii</sup> I am thankful to the report prepared for Virginia Governor Tim Kaine regarding the shootings, which provided the specific timeline being referenced here. Available online: <http://www.governor.virginia.gov/tempcontent/techpanelreport.cfm>

<sup>viii</sup> A 1927 bombing in Maine that killed 44 people may be the deadliest act of school violence in American history, but these appear to be the deadliest campus shootings. ([http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/s/school\\_shootings/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/s/school_shootings/index.html)).

<sup>ix</sup> I have used pseudonyms as a courtesy to group members, and in accordance with my pledge to the University of Minnesota’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) to provide anonymity to them.

<sup>x</sup> My use of these categories will be explained in the later chapters.

<sup>xi</sup> In the later chapters, I will use content analysis to analyze the group’s conversation. In this chapter, I am simply providing the case narrative in order to set up that analysis.

<sup>xii</sup> *Facebook*’s privacy settings in April 2007 were very much different than they are in 2011—users did not yet have the opportunity to customize the visibility of their posted information to the extent that they can today, and the “newsfeed,” which centralizes posted information from users’ friends on the front-page, had yet to be invented. The group was still mostly populated by college students and individuals

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with a university affiliation, which made it something of an exclusive space in April 2007. I am very thankful for the support and assistance of the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board (IRB), which granted clearance to this study.

<sup>xiii</sup> In the conclusion, I discuss the February 2012 death of Whitney Houston, and the way that users are continuing to assert their voices in the immediate aftermath of unfolding news events, seeking immediate gratification, sometimes only an hour after a death.

<sup>xiv</sup> In a recent article in *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, mass communication scholars Robin Blom and Lucinda D. Davenport (2012) persuasively assert: "no matter the technology or format, the principle tenet of journalism has remained the same—using good news judgment to give people the news and information they need to make good decisions to lead productive lives" (p. 71).

<sup>xv</sup> Administrators are to be credited as well; not only for their brisk response but also for emphasizing that response to the press. In this way, officials are themselves utilizing the press to gain a particular gratification: to be presented in the traditional media as having learned from the 2007 shootings.

<sup>xvi</sup> One *Facebook* memorial page which is ostensibly a memorial to the victim has only one "like" and no posted content. Another memorial page, which specifies the police officer's name and contains a small amount of posted content, has less than twenty users as of February 5, 2012. Although future research should further investigate the 2011 Virginia Tech shooting, perhaps via a cross-case study (Yin, 2003) with the 2007 shooting, the 2011 shooting appears to have a much smaller presence in the social media environment.

<sup>xvii</sup> Prayers going up for the entire Hookie nation!!  
December 9, 2011 at 5:20pm  
Now we need to add today to this tribute. God Bless Virginia Tech.  
December 8, 2011 at 3:24pm

<sup>xviii</sup> I am not aware of any campus police officer-created memorial groups in the aftermath of the recent shooting.

<sup>xix</sup> I first wrote this vignette for a spring 2010 independent study. I return to it here because it does well to emphasize the occasional lack of seriousness in the social media environment.

<sup>xxi</sup> Rubin articulates these broad categories quite nicely: "(1) media use-motives as linked to media attitudes/behaviors (2) comparison of motives across media (3) the social and psychological circumstances of media use (4) links between gratifications sought and obtained via media content (5) the role of one's background in media use outcomes and (6) the method for measuring motivation" (2002, p. 532).

<sup>xxii</sup> It is not the action of "point-and click" itself, of course, but what that process represents (computer use) that is of the utmost importance. I make this clarification because the Internet has provided opportunities for social interaction for individuals with mobility impairments or physical disabilities, especially disabilities which make difficult the process of pointing and clicking the mouse.