Toughest question is still unanswered

TIM RUTTEN

LESS than two hours after the appalling events Monday at Virginia Tech, as news organizations scrambled to grasp the facts of what had occurred, a strangely disturbing phrase began to worm its way into the coverage.

As the number of confirmed fatalities mounted into the mid-20s, broadcasts, wire service reports and newspaper websites began to refer to the massacre as “the deadliest school shooting in American history.”

In other words, the readily accessible databases that now comprise the news media’s collective memory contain a category of atrocity labeled “school shooting” with enough entries to make comparisons relevant. (Ultimately, the Virginia gunman would nearly double the previous record, which had stood since the 1966 bloodbath at the University of Texas at Austin.) There’s nothing sinister or even particularly callous in this. This country’s recent history is what it is, and the parsing of tragedy is one of the journalist’s unavoidable obligations. And yet it’s hard to escape the suspicion that a practiced news media’s routinization of atrocity has made it easier for all of us to rationalize as unavoidable something we all ought to hold as horrifically aberrational.

Taken as a whole, the news media did a thorough, competent and humane job of covering the massacre at Virginia Tech, particularly over the story’s first 24 hours, when facts were most in demand and hardest to come by. That’s actually not surprising, because we’ve all been here before, in one way or another; print reporters and broadcast correspondents know how to cover these events. Perhaps because the reflexes we use to respond to outrages like the Virginia killings are so well conditioned, we blow right past a normative response that deserves far more deference than it now receives. The simple question: Why?

Why are the viciously unstable among us, the murderously angry, those inclined to evil for whatever reason, so frequently attracted to schools? It may not be an answerable question, but sometimes we need to inquire after the unknowable for the sake of our souls’ moral sanity.

Perhaps the killers target our schools simply because they are places where innocent victims congregate. It is, after all, the outrage against the innocent that hurts us the most, and making others suffer as they believe they have suffered seems to be the object of these obscurely wounded men and boys. Perhaps they choose schools because they’re “soft targets,” among the few remaining open institutions in a society painfully, if necessarily, preoccupied with physical security. We Americans invest a great deal of social idealism in our schools, and it's painful to come to grips with the suspicion that our children's education cannot take place in a time of idyllic physical safety and intellectual freedom that we'd wish it to be. One of the questions that begs to be asked is a particularly sad one: Do we exercise that wishful idealism at our children's peril — and do we do so because to do otherwise would be an admission of our own collective failure?

It's odd that in a time in which print and broadcast media are obsessed over "connecting" with their audience on an emotional level — endlessly asking of interview subjects and each other, "how did it feel … ?" — journalists remain wary of these deeper questions.

This is one of those areas where the entertainment and news media inadvertently have contributed to the coarsening of our culture’s sensibilities. You heard that Monday, when the traumatized Virginia Tech students were interviewed and automatically referred to the killer of their teachers and fellows as “the shooter.” This bland, police-report-neutral language is the stuff of tough-guy cop shows and hard-edged news reports and commentators. It is not part of the usual vocabulary of a young man or woman grieving for a dead friend or mentor.

It is — or should be — deeply unsettling that our journalistic technology and entertainment culture have implanted in the minds of so many young Americans a syntax of distance and dehumanization.

One of the things that distinguished reports on the Virginia Tech massacre was the fact that it represented the first such atrocity in which "new media" were coequal participants in the coverage. This is a process that emerged first during the...
terrorist attacks on the London transit system, in large part because Europe has run ahead of us in the adoption of camera phones and other handheld technologies. In that instance, ordinary people trapped in the carnage, photographed and recorded what was going on around them and then made it available to regular news organizations, particularly satellite television.

The collaboration intensified Monday at Virginia Tech, where media-savvy students used camera phones and Internet technology to "document" their experiences. If there were a journalistic star of the day, it was the preternaturally articulate VT graduate student Jamal Albarghouti, born on the West Bank and raised in Saudi Arabia, who provided CNN with video and personal accounts that the network still was airing a day later.

Albarghouti was one of a number of reporters-for-a-day enlisted by television and radio newscasts, and their contribution illuminated one of the new media's strengths, which is immediacy. On the other hand, it also was true that the students' video wasn't, in any traditional sense, very good. Its value was essentially voyeuristic rather than informative. To make that point is not to diminish it, but to acknowledge the fact that new media have the same limitations as old — it's hard to do words and pictures that genuinely add to our knowledge of a situation, particularly a fluid and dangerous one. Unless you're just plain lucky, it takes practice to do so, and that's called professionalism. Sensation is actually rather easy to communicate — and the students' videos, photos and social network entries did that — communicating something worth knowing is a little more difficult.

Similarly, new media's other face — the blogs — clearly displayed their major shortcoming. Their approach to even events like this is almost completely politicized, and facts are subordinate to ideology. Thus, within hours of the shootings, these sites — both left and right — already anticipated and were preoccupied by the possible political fallout of this latest mass murder.

Right-wing and conservative sites immediately began a defensive discussion of the event's implications for the never-ending debate over gun control and fulminated darkly over the loss of respect for teachers and adults generally, about the malevolent influence of Hollywood and violent video games. By Monday evening, when false reports that the killer was a Chinese immigrant began to circulate, an I-told-you-so denunciation of allegedly lax immigration policies began.

On the left, similar discussions of Virginia's gun laws, the lapsed assault weapon ban — no such gun was involved — and the pernicious influence of the war in Iraq broke out.

All of it was drearily predictable; none of it was at all helpful.

If there is a lesson to be drawn from our news media's treatment of the Virginia atrocity, it's that we're up to our neck in unsatisfactory answers and very short on the right questions.

timothy.rutten@latimes.com

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