

Tragedy Pulls People Onto The Internet

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The chatter began almost instantly.

This being the television age, information about yesterday's shooting at a suburban Denver high school was beamed around the globe by satellite within moments.

But this is also the era of the Internet, and so news of the killings -- and gossip, and rumors, and confusion and misinformation -- also whizzed around the globe via the computer network in dozens of hastily set up discussion forums, or "chat rooms."

On America Online, users logged into chat rooms titled "Denver Shooting LIVE!," "SCHOOL SHOOTING" and "Colorado Mishap." Or tried to, anyway. By early afternoon, most of the rooms were full and would-be users got a message telling them to try again later.

For those who did log in, the experience was a frenzied one, with sentence fragments about the shooting flying by.

"UPDATE ME: What has happened so far?" asked one person signed on as BearHntr22.

"Twin sisters are dead," responded CherLem.

"Two twin sisters dead," Nurse31455 replied at the same time.

"O god," said CdtAndrom.

"OMG. It gets worse," said Shugrboogr, using shorthand for "oh my God."

As in past disasters, the Internet yesterday became a strange cross between an instant information conduit and a sounding board.

Those who came seeking information found some. But in a weird mixing of old and new technologies, most of the news that was traded in the chat rooms came from television.

As events unfolded in Littleton, Colo., the most popular chatters were the ones with a television next to their computer.

The tidbits that made it on the air also made it online.

One person announced 10 to 15 people were dead. Another chatter said one suspect was dead. Moments later, a third announced that 25 students were dead inside the high school.

One chatter who claimed to live in Denver and attend Columbine High School tried to convince anyone who would listen that the whole thing was a farce:

"I live in Denver. I go to that highschool. And guess what? . . . It's all fake . . . nothing happened." That person was quickly derided by the other chatters in the group.

But even with the folks who were listening to television passing on information, much of what got said yesterday in the chat rooms had nothing to do with news. For many, it was more about letting off steam or making a point.

In one chat group, a handful of students talked about the pressures of being made fun of at school.

One person said the pressure can be intense, writing in all capital letters -- the equivalent of shouting on the Internet -- that "IF SOMEONE MADE FUN OF ME, WISHFUL THINKING WOULD COME INTO PLAY."