

As Always, the Internet Angle

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First came news of the shooting. Then followed live chat rooms and message board rumors – one of the shooters had posted a warning on his Web page; gay bikers were involved in the slaughter; tales of a vast black-trench-coat conspiracy. Then came extravagant text and photo packages from the major organizations – MSNBC and CNN Online. By midnight Tuesday the Internet was in overdrive.

But by 7 o'clock the morning after the Columbine High School tragedy in Littleton, Colo., the Internet had reverted to its outlandish form. Several America Online members, with screen names such as Intoxicated and TCMafia666, were engaged in a macabre form of capitalism. They claimed to be attacker Eric Harris, but they were really advertising their own Web sites – a Web design service and an X-rated videoconferencing company.

Still the question remained: Did the Internet play any role in warping the world views of the teenage killers?

With almost any major triumph or tragedy these days, there is an Internet component. The Internet is only a few years old and its impact and influence are difficult to gauge. About the only sure and pure thing on the Internet is: weirdness.

"The Internet is still rather new," said David Gunkel, professor of communication technology at Northern Illinois University. "It's feared, basically out of its newness."

Never before has there been a medium that connects people all over the world instantaneously. Never before have people – evil as well as good – been able to find each other so easily. There is something intensely personal and private about using a computer – from the comfort of one's own home. And, perhaps most important of all, on the Internet a person can speak his mind anonymously – even if his mind is a messy mass of wild, wicked and dangerous thoughts.

This was, from the beginning, a high-tech event. Kids trapped inside Columbine High School watched on television as law enforcement officers surrounded the building. One student used a cell phone to call the local TV station even before calling an emergency number. One TV reporter referred to the event as the first interactive crisis.

Eric Harris was a member of America Online. Many online discussions were based on Harris's AOL-based pages, which apparently included crude and gruesome drawings. Internet maverick Matt Drudge posted a notice on his Web site Tuesday afternoon saying that one of Harris's pages warned the world that Harris was going to do something grandiose on April 20, Hitler's birthday. AOL spokeswoman Tricia Primrose said that there was "no clear evidence" that Harris or the other attacker, Dylan Klebold, had issued any kind of online warnings. John Ryan, assistant general counsel at AOL, said his company deactivated Harris's account at 11 p.m. Tuesday and pulled all of his pages from the service. Ryan said that AOL was working with the FBI on the case and that AOL was still trying to determine if Klebold had been a member.

Another story making the rounds was that Harris and Klebold had found recipes for their pipe bombs online.

Milton Kleg, a sociology professor at the University of Colorado at Denver, said the teenagers may have learned about explosives online but "I don't think it was a cause-and-effect thing. Pipe bomb books are in local bookstores."

As the medium ages, certain patterns are emerging. Always there is a sinister side of the Internet, a creepy class of users without reverence for rules or truth or justice or life itself. But there is also a redemptive side.

For instance, in the aftermath of the shooting in May of two students in Springfield, Ore., Web sites sprouted up overnight to help the community and the nation deal with the tragedy. "Coming here helps you heal," wrote one visitor about the Thurston High School Shooting discussion forum.

In Paducah, Ky., where three students were killed in December 1997, several people have set up memorial Web sites to remember the deceased and to raise money for the families. In Jonesboro, Ark., the site is called "Remember the Fallen."

"You want to try to make sense of it," said Mike Godwin, general counsel of the Electronic Frontier Foundation and author of "Cyber Rights: Defending Free Speech in the Digital Age." "But teenage alienation can get positively murderous. Still, people look for something external to blame. The Internet component here was pretty tangential."

"In these sorts of situations," said Gunkel, "people will often blame the Internet as a source of bad information. The irony, of course, is that a lot of this information is also available in the public library. No one's saying anything about this information in the public library."

Godwin, whose foundation seeks to protect freedom of online speech, said criticism of the Internet is often misguided. "A lot of people assume that the pipe bombs came off the Internet," he said. "I have heard that [the attackers] talked about it on their Web site. I expect people to blame the Internet, just as they have blamed Marilyn Manson, the movie 'The Matrix,' the Goths."

On the Well, a San Francisco-based online network, the tragedy was the subject of several discussion groups yesterday, including one titled "Blame the Internet!"

Member Jonathan Davis wrote: "Frankly, I'm surprised it took a whole 24 hours for a sentence like this to find its way onto CNN's coverage of the school shooting: 'He said a computer was seized from the home of one suspect, but did not know if the suspects used the Internet to obtain bomb-making instructions.'

"Also," he added sarcastically, "one of the shooters 'had a Web site.' Gosh, with such an obvious early warning sign, how could this tragedy not have been averted?"