

COLUMBINE TAPE RELEASE WAS ONLY MATTER OF TIME

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The controversial release of graphic videotapes depicting the Columbine High School shootings serves as a potent reminder that there's often no preventing the instantaneous and sometimes undiscerning spread of explosive information.

Once a court ordered that the tapes be released to the victims' families, under the Colorado Open Records Act, it was almost inevitable that they would quickly become another vivid part of the broad public memory of the 1999 disaster.

Members of the victims' families continued to criticize officials Thursday for the broad dissemination of the tapes, which were put together by the Littleton Fire Department. More than 100 copies of the video at \$25 each were sold Wednesday, the first day they were available.

But legal scholars said officials probably merely accelerated the inevitable.

"Legally, what they did is reasonable," said Steven Lubet, a professor at Northwestern University School of Law. "They weren't going to be able to maintain confidentiality. Once information becomes available like this, it can't be withheld."

With the proliferation of the Internet and 24-hour cable news coverage, he said, "the value of secrecy and confidentiality has been changed. There's no such thing as somewhat confidential any longer, like there used to be."

What's more, the widespread availability of camcorders means scenes that usually are off-limits to professional photographers--such as the crime scene inside Columbine High School--can be photographed by amateurs who happen to be there or who come with their own agendas.

Witness the Littleton firefighters who wanted to impress their colleagues with a "training" video, set to music.

"With video cameras getting into so many people's hands, we're going to be seeing a lot more of this than we used to. There are going to be more images of everything, including sex and violence, and the ones we will focus on will be the most intense ones. It's going to take some getting used to," said Mitchell Stephens, author of "the rise of the image and the fall of the word" and a professor of journalism at New York University.

Jefferson County Atty. Frank Hutfless said late Thursday that his office and Sheriff John Stone had fought hard against the release of the tapes, denying hundreds of Open Records Act requests. But after lawyers for some Columbine families sued, and a judge ordered the release of the tapes, "we simply had no choice but to release the videotapes."

Hutfless said lawyers for the Columbine families could have requested the tapes as part of the discovery process in their suits against the county. In that case, he said, the videos would have been protected and not made public.

Portions of the Columbine videos appeared on national and local newscasts Wednesday and were posted on the Internet by news organizations. During the past year, an edited version--excluding the most graphic footage--has been shown at 82 presentations to fire and emergency medical groups across the country.

The Littleton Fire Department won't say why the music was added to scenes of violence and the horrifying aftermath of 13 murders and two suicides.

The employee who shot the video on his own time was trying to create an "effective presentation," a department news release said.

The widespread dissemination of images that arouse prurient interest isn't new: The Internet has broadcast live births, and videos and magazines have profited from bedroom scenes for years.

But an image of pools of blood from dead students, with identifying name tags close by, set to a popular song, underscores what some find a troubling progression.

Since Socrates complained about writing getting into everyone's hands without proper instructions from philosophers in ancient Greece, experts have warned that people won't know what to do with information when they get it, Stephens noted.

But he dismissed the concern, calling attention to images from last weekend's government raid on the home of Elian Gonzalez's relatives or the earlier video of Elian's appeal to his father.

"The reality is, not only do you get these pictures, you get all sorts of commentary on the pictures helping to explain what really went on. Everyone was so afraid of what the public would think, but once people read about it and thought about it, no one went nuts. It just shows that if you let information flow freely, good information will oust the bad," Stephens said.

In Colorado, there was an outpouring of distress and rage at the release of the Columbine videos, especially from the families of victims. Beth Nimmo, mother of Rachel Scott, who was killed eating lunch outside the school, said her daughter did not hear music while she died--she heard screams, shots and explosions. The tapes offered a sickening distortion, Nimmo lamented.

The lawyer for the county said someone almost immediately handed a copy of the tape to a television network. Only family members and their lawyers had access to the tapes at that time.

An ABC spokeswoman declined to comment on how the network got the tapes, which did not become publicly available until Wednesday afternoon.

On Thursday, calls from media outlets and individuals all over the country kept pouring into Jefferson County, which has sold 107 tapes so far and plans to produce up to 500. The \$25 fee covers the cost of postage, handling and staff time, a spokeswoman said.

Among the buyers Wednesday were Judy and Randy Brown, who warned Littleton police that Eric Harris, one of the Columbine killers, was dangerous a year before the high school slaughter. They wanted to see how the SWAT teams responded. Judy Brown said she was shocked by images of officers standing outside the school library, even when they seemed to have an opportunity to enter. Almost 20 lawsuits were filed last week by families who believe police or school officials did not respond adequately.

Last fall, when word of the tapes first surfaced, "everyone worried that if they became available someone would put music to it and make it look like MTV. And here, the fire department did it," Brown said. "Neither I nor anyone else can believe it."