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# PERSONAL TECHNOLOGY

## Connecting in CRISIS

Virginia Tech victims widely mourned online

BY BOB KEEFE  
Cox News Service

In the aftermath of the recent tragedy at Virginia Tech, college students and their friends and families turned to the virtual world for solace.

On popular Internet social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook, thousands of users flooded virtual makeshift memorials with words of sympathy and sometimes fear.

In online blogs, Virginia Tech students notified family and friends they were OK, and in some cases gave personal accounts of the shootings that left 33 dead, including the gunman.

"Tears run as the death count climbs," a Virginia Tech student named Bryce Carter wrote on a blog at LiveJournal.com.

Another LiveJournal blogger wrote an ongoing account of waking up to the shootings, and later described his girlfriend's hospital recovery after being shot



A Virginia Tech cap hangs from a makeshift memorial for the school's shooting victims.



PHOTOS BY RICK MCKAY / COX NEWS SERVICE

On April 17, thousands of students gathered on the campus of Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va., to honor the victims of a shooting rampage the previous day. Many people used the Internet to express their thoughts and feelings relating to the tragedy.

in the hand.

Memorial sites honoring the dead and expressing grief popped up all across the Web like crosses on the roadside.

On MySpace, the "Hokies Nation" site is usually flooded with commentary about the school's athletic teams. After the shootings, it was inundated with virtual sympathy cards and condolences.

"Forget any college affiliations today," a user named Eric wrote. "For today, we are all Hokies."

At Facebook, a social networking site designed for college students, a user put up a site called "Always Remember Virginia Tech" after the shootings. It had attracted more than 10,000 "members" by one day after the tragedy.

It was just one of dozens of memorial sites created by Facebook members that served as communities for well-wishers. Others had names such as "Calgarians praying for Virginia Tech," "Arkansas gives condolences to Virginia Tech," and "A tribute from Muslim Students to those who passed at ... Virginia Tech."

An anonymous West Virginia blogger, meanwhile, started compiling a list of the MySpace profile sites of those who were killed to "help some to realize that the deceased are real people, not just names on a screen." Almost immediately after the

names of victims were released, visitors to the site weighed in with Web site links.

Karen North, director of the Online Communities program at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication, said the online outpourings show clearly that the Web has become the gathering place for today's college and high school students.

"They post things so they can share their thoughts and feelings, not just with one friend, but with many," she said. "And obviously this is an event that has hit very deeply with the college and high school crowd."

Social networking sites, of course, have become hugely popular with teenagers.

According to a survey by Web tracking company ComScore Inc., about 77 percent of all Internet users aged 18 to 24 said they visited a social networking site in March.

North said this is the first time such sites have really been tested as a place of community in the aftermath of a major campus tragedy.

But if another such event occurs, she said, the online outcome will likely be similar.

"We are now in a world where the communication that kids have ... instead of being one to one is one to many or many to many," she said. ■

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