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Tragedy at Virginia Tech

In the aftermath of the [Virginia Tech tragedy](#), a national debate has emerged after videos and photographs of the gunman were aired on television and spread across the Internet. Does giving attention to killers send a dangerous message?

Having been the first to air the footage, NBC News finds itself at the center of this debate. Two days after the shootings, an overnight package containing what anchor Brian Williams called a "multimedia manifesto" of videos, photographs and writings arrived at the NBC Tower in New York City. Later that night on the *NBC Nightly News*, a portion of the package was aired.

Brian joins Oprah to discuss the decision. "I think it was, for us, the only decision, with some caveats here. An envelope arrives on our doorstep, a day late," Brian says. "This twisted, strange person sends an overnight envelope between mass shootings. He got our zip code wrong—he called it Rockefeller Avenue and not Rockefeller Plaza—so he was trying to have more impact, but it took two days to get to us."

Brian returned to New York from Virginia Tech's campus the day the package arrived, and he says he was immediately paged to his boss's office. "And I hold this document in my hands and we sit there at my boss's computer clicking on these boxes of new videos to open," he says. "We called the FBI. That was step one."

Did NBC ever consider *not* airing the videos? "To me there was never a debate. This was news. This is journalism," Brian says. "The debate was, how can we pare back, be as sensitive as possible in editing all of this garbage and profanity, to give a sense of what we have here."

In airing the videos, Brian says the news organization's aim was to answer the questions that had been asked in the previous days. "Did he act alone? Who is he? What was his motivation? What did he do in the two hours the campus wasn't locked down between shootings?" Brian says. "All those four questions were materially answered here."

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Brian says NBC News "didn't seek this role in this story." Still, he says they worked hard to remain sensitive while deciding what to include in their report. Of the "garbage" that Brian says was in the package, the network aired only 2 minutes and 20 seconds of the 25 minutes of videos it received and just 37 sentences of the 23 pages of writings. "But however uncomfortable it is, that it was on every front page the next day proves this was journalism," Brian says. "This was news and a material advance in this story."

Once the network realized the story had struck a nerve with the public, did NBC ever reconsider its decision? "We were very careful, very careful on *Nightly News*. We talked about it a lot. Seven and a half hours. We took the entire day and we winnowed it down to this small part. We introduced it carefully on *Nightly News*. Then everybody's tape machines were rolling. Then it was off to the races. And that night, by the time I got home, my wife and I turned on the cable channels...it was what we call wallpaper," Brian says. "We, in our house, ended up turning it off and looking away."

By the time Brian saw the footage at home, he says NBC had placed restrictions on the video. "So by the time the *Today* show came on in the morning, we were already being very careful as to how many pictures we were showing, and I think today, now, it has all but disappeared," he says. "We get it. We saw it. This is a madman. But it needed to be seen."

"It disappeared, Brian, because the people said, because the public said, 'We don't want to see it,'" Oprah says.

"Also because the news organizations who are made up of fellow citizens and moms and dads and husbands and wives said, 'Okay. We get it.' It spoke materially to the biggest story in our country," Brian says.

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When NBC received the gunman's package, NBC News president Steve Capus says his division reacted like many other news organizations would have. "The first thing, of course, your competitive juices kick in," he says. "But then we did something that doesn't always take place in newsrooms. We hit the brake pedal. We stopped. And we didn't even mention to the world that we had this material. We sat on it all day long, and we waited. And we thought about how to handle it and what to do with it. What was appropriate. What not to show."

Steve says the network decided to air what it did after having the head of NBC's policy and standards group and others look at everything and decide what was unusable, such as "over-the-top profanity and incredibly violent images."

At the time of the report, Steve says, the largest unanswered question was "Why?" Steve believes that airing some of the videos helped give the public insight into that question. "This was a videotape that showed somebody on the edge. Somebody who was ready to blow. ... To me, this started this dialogue again about what is going on in America. What about the society? What about the pop culture?" Steve says. "Sometimes good journalism is bad public relations. And I'm a father. Brian is. These are very difficult decisions."

If Steve had to make the same decisions again, would he? "I would. Because I believe it was newsworthy and I believe we handled it with as much sensitivity as we possibly could," Steve says. "This is a great discussion. ... But just as when we lost President Kennedy, we didn't diminish any of that pain or the loss by knowing who Lee Harvey Oswald was. And this was a horrible tragedy for America. That's the bottom line on all of it. There's no question about it."

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Brian acknowledges it can sometimes be hard to see certain images in the news. "Remember, Abu Ghraib, those were horrible pictures to look at. When Morley Safer was covering Vietnam and we saw our guys lighting the Vietnamese village in the background, that was tough to watch," Brian says. "But we aired it and we published it, and it spoke to something among us. A story that was going on. And people have to remember, with propriety, that is our role."

Brian says he hopes the videos are never shown in their entirety. "This stuff we didn't use, these videos that on Steve's computer we opened box by box, I hope may they never see the light of day. May none of us ever see this. And I'm sorry I did because it's profane and it is—it's beyond over the edge," Brian says. "We just wanted to see him, to give a picture of who this was and answer some of these ancillary questions. ... It got to be too much."