

Gun Tragedies, Desensitization, and the Alarm System that Cried Wolf

The text message read like a line from a post-Columbine horror movie: “Active Shooter reported on campus. Police responding. Evacuate if able or seek shelter. Lock and barricade doors.” A few minutes later, an email: “If confronted by shooter, attack using improvised weapons”. Outside on Main Street, just moments ago and on the other side of a metal fence, the sound of bass filled the air and glittery bikinis the street. Now, a different kind of frenzy began to grow.

This is what happened on Sunday, September 13th, according to Cambridge police logs: a woman was shot in the leg at the cross-section of Portland and Main, in front of the Seven-Eleven. She was 25, not a MIT student, and a resident of Roxbury. At the time, the Cambridge Carnival, an annual Caribbean festival, had been drawing large crowds all day, the end of the parade just two blocks away.



(Image courtesy of Google maps)

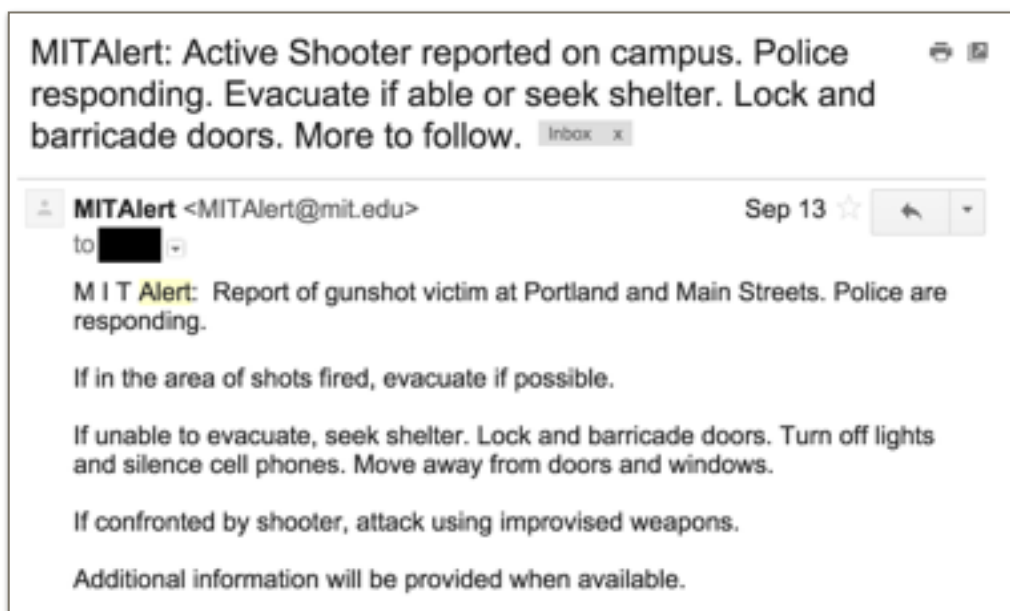
So how did another narrative— one of campus gun violence and fears reminiscent of past tragedy, garnering tweets about Sandy Hook and gun rights— emerge?

Part of the confusion was inherit in the chaos of violence itself: when the shot ran out, festival-goers began to run. Later reports from local news sources said that fights began

to break out after, and *that* was when the mass exodus from the heart of the parade began. Maybe there was another gun (or two) fired, and in the panic, likely more than one person was injured from trampling. **[Quotes from carnival attendees]**
In any large event, stories spread like a game of telephone, particularly those driven by fear.

But the story on the other side of the metal fence, where MIT's campus began, was of a different panic altogether.

V, a post-doctoral student at the MIT Media Lab, and a decade-old member of the MIT community (having first stepped foot on campus at seventeen year as an undergrad in 2004), was on campus that afternoon, not two blocks away. It wasn't unusual for him to drop by on weekends, and this one was no different— until he received his first emergency alert at 4:43 pm. For the next few hours, until the sky turned completed dark outside, **V** would be in lockdown—with two other lab mates—in his office, in a blanket of confusion. The irony, was, of course, that in the building's design tradition, **V**'s office walls—along with the walls of the entire building front— were made completely out of polished glass.



Over the next two hours, students would receive a variety of confounding alerts across several platforms— official emails and text messages along with department mailing lists, Twitter, and other social media, ultimately resolving in an apology email two days later, on Tuesday, September 15th.

[This paragraph about follow up and interview with MIT Police Chief]

[This paragraph about sensitization, quotes from V and other students who've been through bombings/shootings]