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

The text message was a horror story in seventeen words: “Active Shooter reported on campus. Police responding. Evacuate if able or seek shelter. Lock and barricade doors”. On Sunday, September 13th, MIT issued a lockdown throughout the afternoon, evoking chilling memories of the last time there was such a threat— and the tragic outcome it resulted in. For two hours, beginning at 4:43 p.m., a number of conflicting and alarming messages were spread, including the alarming suggestion to students that “If confronted by shooter, attack using improvised weapons”.

But there never was a gunman on campus at any time on Sunday afternoon. A woman who was not an MIT student was shot in the leg at the cross-section of Portland and Main, just out of the reach of campus. The incident occurred two blocks away from the end of the Carnival parade that day, a celebration that had an unfortunate correlation with violence in past years. Although the danger was a reality and the warning a necessity, the threat that actually occurred could not be pieced together by the many alerts spread throughout text messages, emails, website updates, and social media. Only two days later— on Tuesday afternoon, when the institute sent a letter of apology, did the dust finally settle— somewhat. “At no time on Sunday did we believe there to be an active shooter posing a threat to any member of the MIT community”, it emphasized. So how did the reporting go wrong?

According to John DiFava, it all goes back to the Clery Act. DiFava is the Chief of Police at MIT, and before that he held the top rank of colonel in the Massachusetts State Police, but he always introduces himself the same way, in three short syllables with a Boston-Italian accent: “John DiFava”. The Clery Act, named after Jeanne Clery, a 19-year old student who was raped and murdered in her dorm at Lehigh University in 1986, has required since 1990 that if a college or university is to participate in federal financial aid programs, it must record and report information about crime on and near campus, subject to audit by the Department of Education. “And very honestly, I think we do an excellent job here at MIT”, says DiFava. His policy, and as police chief, MIT Police’s policy, is to take a conservative and cautious approach, to take on more if possible in moments of ambiguity, even if it shows that MIT has a higher crime rate. “[W]e probably take on a little bit more than we should”, he admits, “but i would rather do that then… and survive an audit then be putting discredit or embarrassment on the institute”. DiFava emphasizes that it’s not about “playing to the audit per say” but about the community that he cares about, although, again, “ if they do decide to audit us i don’t want to embarrass the institute”.

Specifically what happened on that Sunday afternoon boiled down to pure human error: an officer, in typing the correct message as dictated by DiFava had filled out the wrong text box, sending instead the pre-scripted active shooter warning. But the decision to warn the MIT community about the incident— even though it didn’t take place clearly on campus grounds— was an intended one, motivated by the

“conservative" approach explained above, aside from the choice of language. **[insert pic one of wrong alert][pic 2 of corrected alert]**

Still, a little mistake in word choice goes a long way in times of emergency— and miscommunication at crucial times can yield devastating, even life-threatening consequences. In his letter to the student and staff body, Executive Vice President Israel Ruiz stated that he would be working closely with DiFava and the Commissioner of the Cambridge Police Department to make ensure the safety of the community in times of emergency. In asking DiFava about avoiding the same mistake in the future, his concern boiled down to a lack of resources in the police department. In times of emergency, a Bridge Line or “glorified conference call” between essential personnel is enacted to form a plan for policing, but there is no individual whose job is to ensure the correct delivery of alerts. “The likely place that that should exist is the police department, but I don’t have the resources, because when we have a situation, the dispatcher is out of his mind trying to answer the radio and the telephones, and the sergeant that’s running the station is trying to deal with helping the dispatcher”, he said. “However, everything being relative, one is enough and I never want to make a mistake like that again”.

Aside from additional fear and panic, the reporting error in the 13th’s shooting thankfully resulted in no student harm. Yet it shed light on a larger issue— the issue of just how difficult it is to properly dispatch warnings, and how deeply they rely on human, often an individual’s, judgement. One of the most notable violations of the Clery Act since its inauguration has been for “failure to issue a timely warning”, during the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre, in which 33 students were killed. Although ultimately fought and turned over by the university’s appeal, it highlighted the crucial role that campus alerts can have in saving lives. More recently, at the Umpqua massacre last week, there was report that some faculty and students had not received emergency notifications at all, a grave concern.

On the other hand, although being overly cautious is generally preferable in times of emergency, alarm systems that cry wolf— or erroneously report dangers— can also leave lasting psychological impact. When asked his perspective of the last lockdown on MIT campus, Soroush, a post-doctorate student at the MIT Media Lab, didn’t flinch. A decade-long member of the MIT community, he first set foot on campus as an undergraduate. After living through the Boston Marathon bombing as an MIT student and the shooting of Officer Collier, as well as witnessing the drive-by shooting several weeks before, he stated that his feelings are no longer the same when he sees a new emergency alert. “I would say [I’m] sadly more calm”, he said. “I say sadly because it doesn’t surprise me anymore. When the Boston Marathon thing happened that really surprised me. A big shock, a big big shock. But now having been through that, I have been kind of desensitized when it comes to this kind of thing”.