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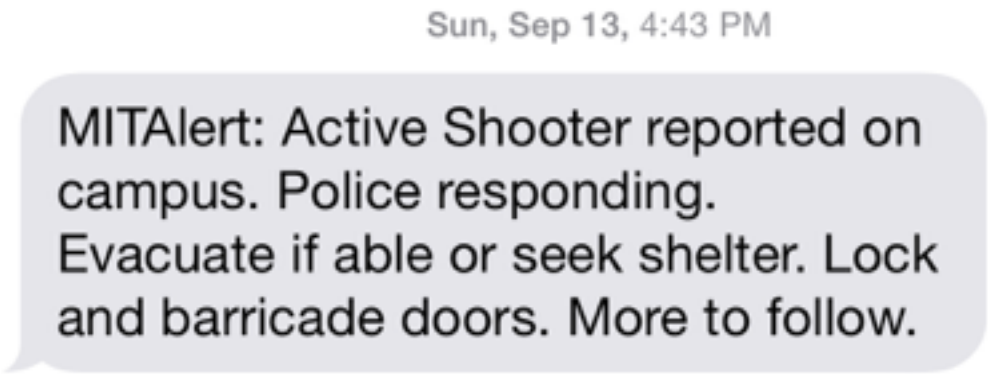
The Emergency System that Cried Wolf

What happens when alarms go wrong?



How do you write a horror story in five words? Try "Active Shooter reported on campus," the message that flashed across cell phones at MIT on a rainy Sunday afternoon three weekends ago. On September 13th at 4:43pm, the university issued a lockdown, instructing its community to barricade doors and seek shelter. It was a command that evoked chilling memories of the last time there was such a threat, when MIT Officer Sean Collier was tragically killed in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon Bombing two years ago. For two hours, a number of conflicting and alarming messages were spread, including the alarming suggestion for students to attack the shooter with improvised weapons.

But there never was a gunman on campus at any time on Sunday afternoon. A woman who was not affiliated with MIT was shot in the leg at the cross-section of Portland and Main, just out of the reach of campus. Although the police maintained that there was a definite need to warn the campus of the potential danger, an active shooter scenario was markedly different from what had actually occurred. According to Homeland Security, these scenarios are defined by their speed and scale, often occurring in confined and unsuspecting areas to random victims.

This perpetuates fear and warrants different approaches to safety from other acts of gun violence.

By the time the institute followed up with a letter of apology, two full work days had already passed, and business had long since returned to usual. "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 on Tuesday afternoon. The letter also verified that the redundancies and conflicting messages were due to human error.

"One thing about me is that I'm extremely honest and very transparent. We made a mistake, we made a mistake," said John DiFava, campus Chief of Police. In particular, it was a blunder that happens to many people while filling out forms online: selecting the wrong text box. An officer had even typed the correct message into the campus alert system, but in submitting it checked the pre-scripted section, which defaulted to send the "active shooter" alert.

In this case, that detail was crucial. The false message was shared instantly across cell phones, inboxes, web pages, and social media. The panic spread beyond Cambridge: a tweet warning of an active shooter quickly gained over a thousand re-shares, prompting responses across the internet, and comments about Sandy Hook, gun rights, and conceal and carry.

By the time the slip-up was discovered by the MIT Police, and a corrective message was dispatched, ten long minutes had already passed, a significant gap when considering that the average length of an active shooter spree, according to Homeland Security, is only two and a half minutes longer. Furthermore, ambiguities persisted: although the second message clarified that there was no active shooter on campus, it was unclear whether or not there had been an active shooter scenario at all.

"I found it disconcerting, as the texts kept coming in, that it became clear that information that was told earlier could endanger students," a researcher in the department of

Urban Studies said. Her concern was directed towards the first message, which asked students to evacuate if possible, potentially leading them straight into the area of the crime. Moreover, although this had not been the case, the corrective text messages gave off the impression that the police had an unclear assessment of the situation. “It didn’t put a lot of faith in that I should follow directions for future events,” she said.

When asked about how MIT would avoid this mistake again, DiFava cited the need for additional personnel on campus with the dedicated task of sending alerts, instead of relying on an officer via conference call who’s at home or elsewhere on the weekend. This position does not currently exist, due to lack of resources in the police department. In times of emergency, it’s all hands on deck, and the dispatcher has little attention to spare between handling radio and telephone lines.

Yet putting emergency operators on call 24/7 would be a potential waste of valuable personnel, since there are few major emergencies at MIT. Another option would be to create a “consolidated dispatch concept,” although it is not yet determined what that concept would be, or whether it is underway. DiFava is quick to add, however, that “everything being relative, one is enough and I never want to make a mistake like that again.”

The shooting on the 13th was not the first time that MIT has struggled with alerting the community in times of emergency. In February of 2013, two months before the Boston Marathon bombing, the campus received a false report of an active shooter. Although the threat was a hoax, concern was raised about the slow response of community alerts, which were not sent until an hour into the search. During the Marathon bombings, many students turned to social media, such as Twitter and Reddit, for fast and deeper news updates.

Still, MIT has not been alone in this challenge. Timely warnings, along with annual security reports, crime logs, and crime statistics, have been required of all universities participating in federal financial aid since the Clery Act was signed in 1990, and many universities have struggled with relaying information. Although the fine was eventually appealed by the university, Virginia Tech was initially charged with "failure to issue a timely warning” by the Department of Education in response to the massacre which left 32 dead in 2007, with complaints that warnings did not send until two hours after the event. It’s a delicate balance to strike, that between timeliness and accuracy. “All of the universities and colleges are really struggling with it because you either send it too early, you send it too late, you don’t send it with enough information, you put too much information— it’s really a struggle,” said DiFava.

There is also, of course, the added challenge of MIT’s location in a diverse urban environment. The incident on the 13th occurred two blocks away from the end of the Carnival parade that day, an event that has had an unfortunate correlation with violence in past years. Exactly one month before the most recent shooting, there was another case of gun violence which was initially reported, although later corrected, as occurring in Kendall Square, where MIT is located. In cities, where crime counts are expectedly higher, it can be a challenge to be as thorough as possible in warning the community, without making alerts seem commonplace and dismissible.

Soroush Vosoughi, a postdoctoral researcher who was working in the Media Lab building in the afternoon of the active shooter alert, recalls being calm during the lockdown, despite his proximity to the reported scene of crime. Even in a building whose walls are made entirely of glass on three sides, and in a see-through glass office, he was unfazed when the directions came to barricade doors and hide. After living through numerous alerts, during both the Boston Marathon Bombing and the shooting in August, he feels numb to react. "I would say [I'm] sadly more calm. I say sadly because it doesn't surprise me anymore," he said.