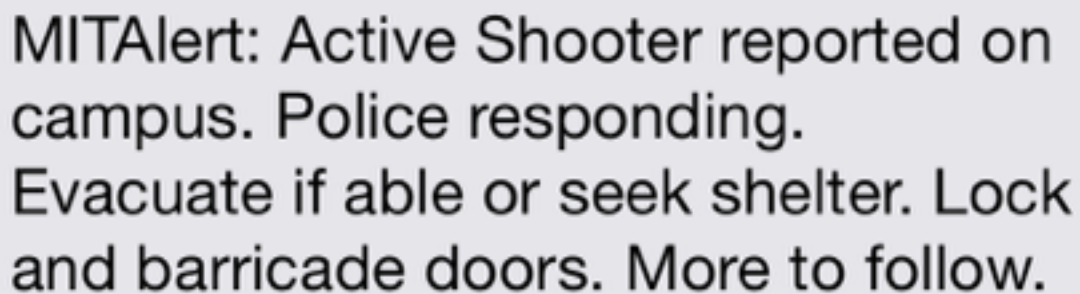Sophie Chou

Prof: Seth Mnookin

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The Alert System that Cried Wolf

MITAlert: Active Shooter reported on campus. Police responding. Evacuate if able or seek shelter. Lock and barricade doors. More to follow.

What happens when alarms go wrong?

On September 13th at 4:43PM, MIT sent a text to students, faculty, and staff, warning of an active shooter on campus and instructing those nearby to barricade doors and seek shelter. Panic ensued as community members sought refuge and watched as conflicting and alarming information poured in, including an MITAlert email with the instructions, "If confronted by shooter, attack using improvised weapons."

But not only were those instructions recklessly dangerous -- there wasn't even a gunman in the first place. Earlier that day, a woman not affiliated with MIT was shot in the leg about a block away from campus. The shooter had never been on campus grounds nor made threats to the MIT community.

"We made a mistake," said John DiFava, MIT Chief of Police. "We made a mistake." But while DiFava is quick to acknowledge the blunder now, at the time, the Institute's follow-up to its initial missive was much slower in coming. And DiFava's explanation -- that an MIT police officer selected the wrong text box on MIT's campus alert system -- doesn't explain the follow-up message instructing students to create their own weaponry.

"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 makes the claim that conflicting messages were due to human error.

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 about twelve minutes. 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. After the last incident in 2013, when Officer Sean Collier was killed by the Boston Marathon Bombers, students were understandably anxious.

Police at the crime scene following Officer Sean Collier's death, the last time there was a lockdown at MIT

"I found it disconcerting, as the texts kept coming in, that it became clear that information that was told earlier could endanger students," said a researcher in Urban Studies who asked that her name not be used. 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 having additional personnel on campus focused solely on sending alerts. But 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."

This most recent incident 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 <u>false report</u> 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.

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 1990, and many universities have struggled with relaying information. In 2007, Virginia Tech did not send out warnings until two hours after the massacre that left 32 people dead, which caused the Department of Education to charge the university with "failure to issue a timely warning." 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 September shooting occurred two blocks away from the site of a parade that had been linked with violent incidents 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, 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."