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Texting When There's Trouble

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April 18, 2007; Page B1 The evening before an ice storm swept over the University of Texas at Austin, in January, administrators sent an urgent message to its 67,000 students, faculty and staff: Stay home tomorrow.

Thanks to a state-of-the-art emergency communications system, students instantaneously received the alert as text messages on their cellphones and via email on their PCs. Building managers received a similar message on their pagers. And the university issued the warning live on local radio and television stations.

A sample text alert from Mobile Campus that says 'University Alert: classes canceled and campus closed tomorrow due to severe storm.'

The next day, the campus was empty, and there were no weather-related incidents. "It worked very well," said Rhonda Weldon, a member of the university's emergency communications team.

With administrators at Virginia Tech facing hard questions about how long it took them to notify students after the first killings in Monday's shooting rampage there, emergency communication is sure to become a pressing issue nationwide.

The ubiquity of relatively new technologies allows electronic alerts to reach more people faster than ever before. In the aftermath of several recent disasters -- including the tsunami in South Asia, Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast, and the terrorist attacks in New York, London and Madrid -- a growing number of governments, communities, school systems and universities have begun using automated electronic-alert systems that can send voice, email or text messages to residents and students, in addition to traditional broadcast emergency messages. The services mean that people no longer need to be listening to radio, watching TV, logged on to their email or near a home phone to be warned of trouble.

"We've never had a culture that was more accessible to being informed," said Gerard Braud, a Louisiana-based crisis-communications consultant, adding that "when you don't communicate rapidly either in advance of or during an event, people get hurt..

Emergency systems that include text messages are easily available and generally aren't very expensive -- some new pilot programs even are supported by advertising. Ms. Weldon says text messaging is particularly efficient because students carry their cellphones all the time. "They'll

see [text messages] before they open up their emails," she says. Not only do people need access to the Internet, she says, email is also slowest to reach recipients: It could take one hour to 1½ hours to send an email to all 67,000 users.

More traditional systems feature automated callers that can blast a prerecorded message to thousands of people in a matter of seconds. Teleparent Educational Systems LLC charges $3 to $4.50 per student per year for automated phone alert services. School administrators can go online and record their message and send it out right away.

Mobile Campus -- which provides text-message services to more than a dozen customers, including the University of Texas -- offers its services free of charge on the condition that the universities allow the company to send two promotional text messages per day to students who subscribe to their services. E2Campus, another text-messaging company that has more than 30 customers, charges $1 a year per student for universities to use their communications services. Both companies say that they received an overwhelming number of inquiries after the Virginia Tech shootings.

Businesses have also begun using such systems. APS Healthcare Inc., a health and disease management service provider in Silver Spring, Md., and ATA Engineering Inc., an engineering test company in San Diego, are both using an emergency alert service provided by Omnilert LLC, parent company of e2Campus. Omnilert charges companies $9,500 a year to send unlimited alerts to 10,000 users via email, text message, pager and the Internet.

Hundreds of communities and schools already have electronic communications systems. Westchester County, N.Y., can send residents email, text messages and phone messages in case of a serious emergency.

Virginia Tech students watch a convocation from the football field yesterday.

At Virginia Tech, emergency communications on Monday included email but not cellphone text messages. Amid questions about whether Virginia Tech administrators should have more quickly closed campus and canceled classes, what is clear is that the university lacks any means of immediately alerting its roughly 33,000 students, faculty and staff to an emergency.

Of course, any system is only as good as the information officials have at any time. At Virginia Tech, authorities originally thought the shooting of the first two students was a "domestic" dispute that wouldn't require a more robust response.

Two hours after the first two people were shot in a dormitory, the university sent the first of four email blasts to students, faculty and staff. The first note, sent at 9:26 a.m., warned all "to be cautious" and encouraged people to report any suspicious activity.

A 911 call about another shooting at a classroom building across campus arrived at 9:45 a.m., prompting another university email sent five minutes later: "A gunman is loose on campus. Stay in buildings until further notice. Stay away from all windows." No mention of the actual massacre

or its location in Norris Hall was sent until more than an hour after it occurred, according to reports.

The university also relied on its Web site and the dormitory phone system. But administrators have acknowledged that these methods can't reach the thousands who at any moment aren't logged on to the Internet, while the dormitory phone system can't reach the 17,000 students who live off campus.

The school began exploring the installation of an emergency alert-system that issues text messages to mobile phones last semester after having trouble spreading an alert in August about the escape of a jail inmate, who shot and killed two people and then hid on campus before being caught.

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