

Ramapo College of New Jersey

UNDERSTANDING EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION PRACTICES & INFORMATION FLOW

During a critical incident, emergency, or lockdown on campus, information spreads rapidly.

This supplemental resource outlines how information (and misinformation) can flow during an active crisis, explains the institutional principles governing official communications, and provides actionable guidance for community members, families, and friends to help mitigate rumors and reduce anxiety.

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I. Institutional Communication Principles During a Crisis

An essential practice in higher education crisis management is that **the institution will not release unconfirmed information unless directed to do so by law enforcement.**

Why Official Communications Prioritize Verification Over Speed

- **Life Safety First:** During an active threat or emergency, the primary and absolute focus of the College and first responders is securing the safety of the individuals directly impacted on campus. First responders and administrators cannot divert critical resources to issue or correct speculative statements.
- **Preventing Harmful Misdirection:** Releasing incorrect details—such as a wrong building location, misidentified threat type, or inaccurate clear signal—can put students, faculty, and staff directly in harm's way or lead first responders to incorrect areas.
- **Operational Integrity:** Law enforcement operations require precise coordination. Tactical operations can be severely compromised if inaccurate information creates unnecessary panics elsewhere on campus.

"In higher education crisis communication, accuracy and transparency are fundamental ethical imperatives. Releasing unconfirmed or speculative information during an ongoing crisis undermines public trust, compromises safety protocols, and hinders effective organizational leadership." — Liu et al. (2021)

Acknowledging the Human Impact

- We recognize that the silence required to verify facts can be **anxiety-inducing** for families, partners, and friends awaiting updates outside campus.
- The delay in public updates is not a lack of transparency; it is a necessary protective measure.
- Every moment spent verifying a fact before it is publicly broadcast ensures that when an official alert is sent, the campus community receives life-saving, reliable instructions.

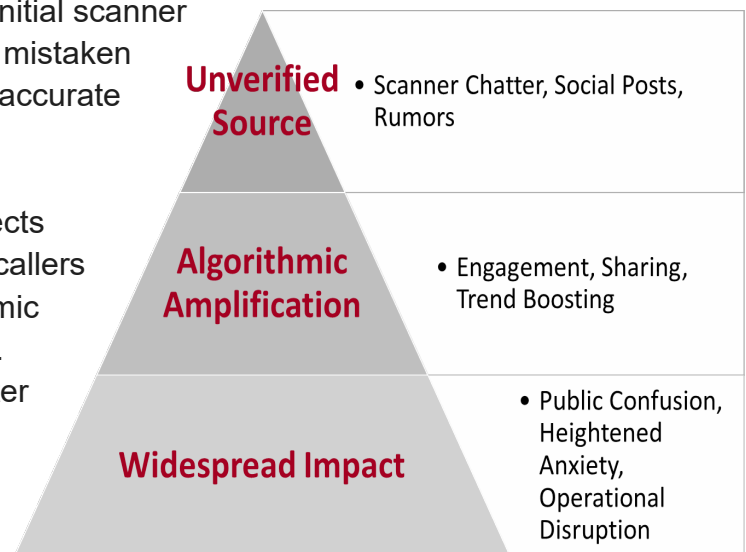
II. How Misinformation Flows During an Emergency

In high-stress situations, an "information vacuum" often opens faster than verified facts can be gathered. Unconfirmed details spread rapidly across modern communication channels, frequently leading to confusion or secondary panic.

Police Scanner Chatter & Blotters

- **Fragmented Reality:** First responders use tactical radio frequencies to communicate raw, unverified reports from the field. Initial scanner reports regularly contain false alarms, mistaken identities, misidentified locations, or inaccurate threat counts.

- **Lack of Context:** Radio dispatch reflects what is being reported in real time by callers or responding units assessing a dynamic situation—not confirmed, settled facts. Broadcasting or sharing scanner chatter treats preliminary noise as verified truth.



Unconfirmed Reports & Rumors

- **Phone Tree Cascade:** Eyewitnesses, bystanders, and individuals hearing noise nearby often share immediate reactions with peers. As details pass from person to person, subjective interpretations quickly transform into perceived facts (e.g., "I heard a loud noise" becomes "shots fired").
- **Sensationalism:** In the absence of official updates, speculative commentary often fills the gap, magnifying fear and complicating emergency responses.

Social Media & Media Algorithms

- **Optimization for Engagement:** Social media platforms use algorithms designed to prioritize high-engagement content. High-emotion, sensational, or alarming posts (click bait) receive rapid amplification regardless of accuracy.
- **Rapid Virality:** Re-posts, retweets, and group chat forwards can cause an unverified claim to reach thousands of people within minutes, creating an impression of confirmed authority through sheer volume.

III. How You Can Help: Mitigating Misinformation & Reducing Anxiety

Every member of the Ramapo College community—along with our extended networks of family and friends—plays an active role in maintaining safety and calm during a crisis.

Tips to Stop the Spread of Misinformation

- **Rely Exclusively on Official Channels:**
Trust only official communications delivered via the Ramapo College Emergency Notification System (emails, official SMS alerts, campus web banners, and verified institutional social media accounts).
- **Do Not Re-Post Unverified Content:**
Refrain from sharing, forwarding, or retweeting screenshots of scanner audio, unconfirmed group chat messages, or speculative social media posts.
- **Avoid Calling Campus for General Updates:** Phone lines must remain clear for active emergency calls. Do not call dispatch or emergency responders to ask for status updates.



Anxiety-Reducing Practices for Families and Friends

- **Establish a Pre-Planned Communication Protocol:** Discuss emergency expectations in advance. Agree that students inside an impacted facility may need to silence their devices and focus entirely on lockdown protocols before texting updates.
- **Designate a Family Point Person:** To avoid overwhelming a student or staff member on campus with dozens of incoming calls or texts, designate one family member as the main contact to receive updates and share them with the rest of the family.
- **Focus on Actionable, Verified Directives:** When receiving an official update, focus strictly on the instructions provided (e.g., *Shelter in place*, *Avoid the area*) rather than speculating on details not yet released.
- **Pause and Verify Before Acting:** If you see alarming news on social media, pause and check the official Ramapo College website or official alerts before reacting or spreading the information further.