Investigating Disembodied University Crisis Communications during COVID-19

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Investigating Disembodied University Crisis Communications during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT
The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us many weaknesses in crisis communication, especially at universities where campus communities are often rendered as disembodied monoliths. In this article, we select a case example from our own institution to show that when bodies are erased from university crisis communication, power imbalances are reinscribed that render campus community members powerless. Using a critical feminist methodology, we end with several suggestions for more inclusive embodied institutional crisis messaging.

CCS Concepts
Social and professional topics → Professional topics → Computing and business → Socio-technical systems

Keywords
crisis communication, university communication, embodied communication, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION
In Fall 2020, Illinois State University (ISU) welcomed many of its 20,878 students (Planning, Research, and Policy Analysis, 2019a) back to campus amid the COVID-19 pandemic. While 79.89% of the university's courses were offered online, 10.53% were hybrid and 9.58% were face-to-face (F2F) (S. Kalter, personal communication, February 17, 2021). This was a shift from ISU's original plan. All summer they were planning on having close to half of classes in some kind of in-person capacity and a quarter as some form of hybrid, despite student, faculty, staff, and community protests. They made the decision to move to mostly online two weeks before the semester because they realized they would not be able to provide adequate testing capacity for the number of students on campus. Courses left as hybrid or F2F were mostly science labs and clinical sites.

ISU also pushed a “business as usual” narrative that promised students “the college experience,” so they welcomed many students back to live in the dorms. The campus and community also maintain permeable boundaries, with thousands of students living in the neighborhoods surrounding campus. As such, come August 2020, a large portion of ISU students returned in some capacity to Normal, IL, increasing not only their own risk for contracting COVID-19, but also the risk for community members—many of whom also include ISU faculty and staff who live in town but worked remotely—who would interact with them in public places such as grocery stores and restaurants. Students began hosting and attending parties and going out—often maskless—to bars and restaurants, which likely contributed to cases in the McLean County community skyrocketing. At one point over 1000 new campus cases were diagnosed in one week (“COVID-19 Campus Case Tracker,” 2021), and cases in McLean County hit record highs, potentially a ripple effect that started on both ISU’s campus as well as nearby Illinois Wesleyan University’s (IWU) and the surrounding student housing (Petty, 2020), although it would be difficult to prove this causal statement.

We open with this story not because we intend to criticize ISU’s decision to invite students back to campus amid a pandemic.
Indeed, we are by far not the only university that did so, as it seems most universities in the country had to balance the competing pressures of keeping students safe, keeping the institution solvent, and appeasing students and their families. This was certainly not an easy task, and some universities handled it better than others. Instead, we open with this story because when ISU and other colleges and universities decided to re-open campus and invite students back, they also took on a responsibility to ensure that the campus community closely followed COVID-19 health and safety protocols. However, ISU largely fumbled these attempts early in the semester. Not only were the handwashing and social distancing videos they created and circulated more of a legal necessity than actual guidance, but ISU also provided students, faculty, and staff with one thin nylon mask and a tiny bottle of hand sanitizer to last the semester, which also required in-person pickup.

Perhaps the area where ISU most failed its campus community, and by extension the larger Bloomington/Normal community, was through its university-wide crisis communication system. ISU began sending weekly “Coronavirus Updates” via email and created a webpage detailing their “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Response,” which also links to a “COVID-19 Campus Case Tracker.” This tool became available on the first day of the semester even though many students had begun moving in days and weeks prior. Importantly, this dashboard only keeps track of people who tested positive from a campus testing center. Nearby Bloomington also hosts one of Illinois’ major drive-through testing hubs, and students—especially those who live off campus—may have tested there instead of on campus. That center does not separate ISU students’ data from other testers’ data.

As a graduate student and a professor on ISU’s campus, we find that the attempts to communicate risk to students at the beginning of the Fall 2020 semester were not only inadequate but perhaps at times negligent. Early updates gave little direction about COVID-19 safety standards, which likely had an impact on our community shortly after ranking on The New York Times (“Coronavirus in the U.S.” 2021) list of metropolitan areas with the fastest increasing positivity rates in the country. At this time, rather than clarifying standards, exacting protocols, or providing resources, crisis messages from campus leaders served to highlight student transgressions, enact blame, and continually erase the campus community and their bodies.

Despite calls for increased investigation of university crisis communication (Pantelides et al., 2016; Powell, 2004), attention to and criticism of university crisis messaging remains increasingly exigent following the COVID-19 pandemic. This article seeks to help fill this gap by examining the erasure of diverse bodies in university crisis communication, or disembodied crisis communication, as we call it. Our goal for this chapter is to present concrete take-aways for how crisis communication theorists and practitioners can better represent and account for diverse bodies in university crisis messaging.

EXIGENCE AND CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

Scholarship and ongoing research in crisis communication is an interdisciplinary endeavor, rooted not only in the field of technical communications, but also in public relations and communications, with scholarship so vast that crisis communication has become a subdiscipline to itself (Heath, 2010, p. 1; Coombs, 2010, p. 23). Each orientation to crisis communication scholarship is dependent on the particular types of risks, contexts, and issues that each individual project demands, meaning that it is impossible to pin down a singular approach or guideline to successful crisis messaging. With the implementation of new media, such as the email messages we study in this article, communicators have expanded possibilities for the scope and effect of crisis messaging. Emails like the one we’ll examine in this article are especially important because of the direct way that they travel to electronic devices and are consumed quickly and widely. As Stephens and Malone (2010) assert, the use of new media crisis communication channels can “facilitate bi-directional communication, or dialogue” though “recent public relations research has found that organizations are doing a rather poor job taking advantage of the dialogic opportunities that new media such as websites provide” (p. 381). However, as Stephens and Malone (2010) explain (p. 390), new media invites wide potentials for improvement that proved vital for the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the possibilities for stakeholders to meet virtually, share emerging information, and form coalitions to improve crisis messaging. Throughout this article, we highlight the communication breakdown in relation to the possibilities of crisis dialogue, and outline some of the extended capacities of new media crisis communication still possible.

As demonstrated by our introductory details regarding COVID-19 on our college campus, academic crisis communication is complicated. The academic institution not only provides a response to a natural or human-created disaster, but also provides an extension of their commitment to the mission of the institution to keep students, faculty, and staff safe. These types of crisis communications are an instance when university meaning is communicated most overtly, but without attention to these messages, the norms and values which underlie these texts may be “out of sight” as Brian Paltridge (2013, p. 89) warns. These messages reveal the potential for university communication design to reproduce implicit power inequities, or to exclude “certain people from institutions of higher education, and the struggles of those same people to change higher education” (Powell, 2004, p. 460). University crisis messages are the first line of defense for keeping members of the campus community safe, yet they are also imbued with certain institutionally homogenized expectations of their audience’s material access, geographic knowledge, and prior experience of trauma and crisis (Sauer, 2002; Heath & Miller, 2004; Grabill & Simmons, 1998; Frost, 2018; Fearn-Banks, 2017). As such, when those who craft these messages fail to recognize their power to shape realities and craft campus narratives, or when they fail to consider the diverse embodiment of the campus community, they can fall short of even the most basic goals of safety. The vague action—and sometimes lack thereof—prescribed by these messages is in response to a standardized notion of identity, access, and antecedent knowledge, which ultimately divorces students, faculty, and staff from their diverse embodiment. As such, it is important to consider disembodied risk in university crisis communication.

As such, we examined email messages from ISU before and during the Fall 2020 semester, and we have chosen one demonstrative example to analyze here, highlighting how these crisis communications erase bodies by forcing users to acquiesce to institutionally defined pandemic norms that place the university over the health and safety of the campus community. To better understand this phenomenon and shed a critical light on messages like these, we examine a particular email from our university sent
out amid the highest spike of student infection. We have selected this email from the dozens at our disposal because we see this moment as one of the largest missed opportunities for ISU to reestablish safety and provide guidance for students, faculty, and staff. ISU frequently shares information on community-specific crisis situations—ranging from winter weather closures to updates regarding the COVID-19 pandemic—via email. On September 1, 2020, all ISU students, faculty, and staff received their first weekly Coronavirus Update. We chose to analyze this email because it showcases many of the most blatant issues with ISU’s crisis communication, especially as it pertains to technical framing and efficiency as well as assumptions about normalized embodiment and homogenized risk.

Containing an introduction explaining the purpose of the new weekly updates and sections on “Testing,” “Housing and Contract Cancellation,” and “Employee Flexibility,” this 870-word email is a marked break from prior communication. Whereas previous crisis messages and updates came from specific administrators—such as the university president and provost—this message was anonymous, with the sender named as “Coronavirus Update – Illinois State University” and the email listed as “MassEmail@illinoisstate.edu.” Much of the body of the email is composed of direct narrative quotes of previous communications from university administrators, giving the update the feel of a press release more so than a crisis message. For example, most of the first paragraph of the “Testing” section consists of quotes, such as the opening: “Illinois State University is working with the University of Illinois to become a partner in their saliva-based test,” said John Baur, professor of chemistry and COVID-19 testing coordinator. Baur is leading Illinois State’s testing efforts” (Coronavirus Update, Personal communication, September 1, 2020). In addition, rather than the previous formal letter-style communication, this message was broken up with subsections made up of short paragraphs and containing links to relevant resources.

The context of this email is important because, at a time when institutional trust was low, it provided very little to (re)establish trust with students, faculty, and staff. We put “re” in parentheses here because not all members of the campus community, particularly BIPOC, queer, and disabled students, felt they could trust the university even before the pandemic. The technical framing of the email assumes a neutral and objective tone that completely disregards the many contextual factors at play on both a local and national scale. The university had suddenly shifted its plans for course delivery barely a month prior—which contradicted the “business as usual” narrative it had been touting all summer, much to the dismay of many faculty, staff, and community members—leaving many students confused and unhappy and putting some faculty in the position of altering their modality with only two weeks to plan. This update also arrived in our inboxes the day our campus diagnosed its 1078th positive case, right in the middle of the biggest spike we have seen yet and right when campus diagnosed its 1078th positive case, right in the middle of the weeks to plan. This update also arrived in our inboxes the day our campus diagnosed its 1078th positive case, right in the middle of the pandemic—via email. On September 1, 2020, all ISU students, faculty, and staff received their first weekly Coronavirus Update. We chose to analyze this email because it showcases many of the most blatant issues with ISU’s crisis communication, especially as it pertains to technical framing and efficiency as well as assumptions about normalized embodiment and homogenized risk.

Given this context and the unlawful murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor that prompted a resurgence of Black Lives Matter protests over the summer, coupled with the local #AntiBlackISU movement that began in Fall 2019, institutional trust and accountability were shaken for many BIPOC, particularly Black, campus community members. Students, faculty, and staff of color, queer recipients, older and high-risk members of the community, and others such as first-generation and non-traditional students likely already felt less tangibly supported or acknowledged by institutional policy more broadly. As a result, shirking direct administrative accountability and instead inserting campus leaders as a means of expressing platitudes (such as the Vice President for Studies Affairs saying, “We know that flexibility is key” in the September 21 email) only widened the gap of distrust between the university and its marginalized community members.

A CRITICAL FEMINIST METHODOLOGY FOR EXAMINING UNIVERSITY CRISIS EMAILS

To analyze ISU’s crisis communication, we developed a critical feminist approach grounded primarily in scholarly work by Erin A. Frost (2016, 2018), Natasha Jones, Kristen Moore, and Rebecca Walton (2016), Kristen Moore (2016), and Rebecca Walton, Kristen Moore, and Natasha Jones (2019). These works value critical feminism, focusing on social justice aims and intersectional embodiment, which we agree should be at the core of university crisis communication. Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) recognize that technical communication can exist as “a discipline uniquely attuned to the human experience” in its orientation to concepts such as power, positionality, and privilege (p. 102). A critical feminist framework presents the importance of careful definition work in understanding the texts that filter through our lives, working to understand how technical texts are embedded and whom they directly impact, and how these implications vary based on the bodies that we occupy.

Erin A. Frost’s (2016) apparent feminism methodology helps us understand the ways in which feminist interventions are needed in university crisis communication and the importance of “demystifying the relationship between feminism and efficiency” (p. 16). First, apparent feminism recognizes that technical documents are “sites of culture making” (Frost, 2016, p. 13). Because university crisis communication goes out to entire campus communities, often prescribing action and ostensibly providing clear information, we see these documents as saturated in cultural norms and expectations. While they tend to privilege the idea of a standardized campus community that is more dream than reality, they echo and create campus cultural norms. Second, apparent feminism recognizes the damage that efficiency can cause when technical documents do not account for diverse users. That is, while efficiency is “defined as the balancing point at which we achieve
the best result from the least amount of energy,” Frost’s (2016) methodology “argues that being inclusive of cultural diversity contributes to the potential for efficiency” (p. 17). Documents that acknowledge and speak to their diverse audiences are overall more effective than ones that flatten contexts and identities.

Similarly, we must also consider the ways in which university crisis communication completes the definitional work of outlining the crisis through what Edward Schiappa (2003) calls the technical framing of an event. Technical framing presents the information as neutral and objective, because as Schiappa explains, “when a situation is defined by someone, especially someone in authority, we are encouraged to ‘see’ the similarity between the current situation and a prototypical exemplar and to behave accordingly” (2003, p. 156). Yet, due to the brevity and urgency necessitated by the role of crisis in shaping the text of the message, untangling the ways that these messages are technically framed also provides insight into the institutional authority, or ethos, that is at work. Melody A. Bowdon (2014) writes that emergency messages are “often virtually free of context, mak[ing] it relatively easy for an individual or an organization to promote its message, but it can be equally easy to make an embarrassing, harmful, and/or potentially damaging public misstep” (p. 36). In this way, crisis management is always technically framed in relation to the institutional context in which it occurs within and with consideration for the groups the communication will reach. It also influences response through audience antecedent knowledge because crisis communications encourage us to act how we have been taught is appropriate for a crisis, which is quite different from how we have been taught to behave in a ‘normal situation’” (Schiappa, 2003, p. 156). In crisis situations, technical framing has persuasive effects, and these implications are reflective of the normative renderings of the audience. Due to the technical framing that takes place in crisis communication design, audiences might not consider that these messages are partial and selected, relying on our socialized reactions, and composed in the interests of the institutional authority crafting these messages.

As such, when it comes to university crisis communication, we believe that it is of utmost importance to acknowledge users’ intersectional embodiments. Frost (2018) explains that “a focus on embodiment means more than just paying attention to the normative ways that technical documents too often construct bodies and critiquing the common assumption of an objective or default body (usually meaning a white, straight, able, male body)” (p. 25). Without consideration for diverse bodies, communicators cannot consider the embodied effects that their messages produce as a response to the crisis messages. When bodies are not centered in crisis messages, these emails instead construct a monolithic norm that can be alienating to many campus community members. These crisis messages call forth a specific response that makes assumptions about recipients and their response—thereby cementing oftentimes damaging norms.

But of course, technical communication is always embodied precisely because our minds exist in our unruly and divergent bodies: all written and spoken expressions are material and embedded in the lived experience of both the speaker and their audience (Helmers, 2006, p. 115). Our writing—regardless of the perceived technicality of the genre—takes place in real time, in real bodies, reflective of and shaping for the experiential realities the texts punctuate. Kristie S. Fleckenstein (1999) theorizes that our bodies are “neither a passive tabula rasa on which meanings are inscribed nor an inescapable animal” but instead, we are all individuals “within concrete spatiotemporal contexts” reflective of the material spaces we occupy (p. 281). Poststructuralist theories begin this work, whereas social epistemicism disregards the corporeal significance of the body in the process of meaning making (Fleckenstein, 1999, p. 282). Abby Knoblauch (2012) acknowledges the long history between the bodies and language, situating attention to embodiment back to classic rhetoricians such as Plato and Aristotle (p. 50). Embodied rhetoric works against “the view from nowhere” to center upon social positionalities and embodied knowledge—senses of knowing through the body—as facets of meaning making (Knoblauch, 2012, pp. 59, 52).

As such, any study of embodiment must necessarily also attend to the power—and sometimes lack thereof—that bodies have in certain spaces such as university campuses. In order to better understand the complexities of power and its relationship to marginalization and embodiment, our feminist approach moves past one-dimensional feminism and disarticulated attention solely to gender. Instead, throughout our analysis, we also attend to other intersecting identity factors such as race, disability, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class, as well as others. This means that we consider the idea of positionality more broadly, which Jones, Moore, and Walton (2016) define as a concept that “focuses on reflexivity and building relationships, builds from the assumption that subjectivity and, particularly, oppression are intersectional” (p. 221).

This study shows that, when university crisis communication is disembodied, it treats each body as accepted and provided for, which is a dangerous oversight. Knoblauch continues:

> To ignore the body in scholarship might, in some ways, aid those from minority groups, but only by asking them (us) to pass, to act as if our bodies, our experiences don’t matter, to act as if we are white, heterosexual, able-bodied, privileged men. And that just doesn’t sit right with me. (2012, p. 59)

Because our bodies and the bodies of everyone else in our campus community all differ from one another, they shape how we respond to texts and what we notice. In acknowledging that our bodies are performative and individualized, they can begin to act as sites of contemplation: there is no universal formula, no fitting template for all of the writing that we do because how we look and move are entirely distinct. Every person’s body has different needs because of the different social and cultural oppressions and pressures that come with their race, gender, sexuality, disability or mental health status, pre-existing medical conditions, age, and so many other identity factors and their intersections.

Our critical feminist commitments are also an outcome of our responsibility to social justice initiatives. Colton and Holmes (2018) explain that social justice research “strives to recognize injustices within institutional contexts in order to call for the revision or reimagining of these contexts” (5). Through taking a social justice approach in our analysis, we understand that the impacts of crisis events are not homogenized, and so we must consider how sociocultural perceptions of a crisis impact both the understanding of an event and the response that is made. By understanding risk in this way, we can recognize that the experience of crisis is already embodied because it considers how technical documents construct and accommodate some bodies while putting others at risk (Frost, 2018, p. 24).
Ultimately, we analyze how crisis message design constructs a certain type of subjectivity that sustains and normalizes power inequities, oftentimes because embodiment is not considered. Through rhetorically analyzing an example university crisis email, we seek to better understand how crisis messages fit into the larger institutional context, and how these messages could be better optimized with considerations of embodiment. Further, per our commitments as feminist rhetoric scholars, we consider factors such as access, embodiment, privilege, and positionality to complicate the rhetorical conceptions of audience, purpose, and context. By taking a critical feminist approach, our investigation of campus crisis communication will focus on marginalized identities in our campus community, placing issues of power, privilege, and positionality at the forefront (Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented institutional obstacles and necessitated complex decision making that could not be comprehensively detailed over the course of an email. Synthesizing these multifaceted plans and quickly changing currents of information into an email surely represented a tricky task, but in order for these messages to be actionable, inclusive, and usable, they must consider the embodied realities of the campus community.

COVID-19 MESSAGING AS DISEMBODIED CRISIS COMMUNICATION

The inaugural ISU Coronavirus Update does not consider these embodied realities, in large part because it follows from outdated crisis communication models that call for concision and efficiency, unidirectionality, and prescribed response. More recent work on crisis communication specifically disavows these rhetorical moves (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2017), but ISU (and likely other universities) still rely on these public relations approaches to communicating crisis that have the potential to cause harm even as they attempt to protect recipients. This section examines these three precepts and uses the email as an example of how they can fail recipients by erasing their embodiment.

**Problem 1: Efficiency erases nuance and takes antecedent knowledge for granted**

Under outdated models, crisis communication is often designed to be concise and efficient, containing only essential details and little stylistic distinctiveness and quickly sharing a message with a goal of having the largest impact while expelling the least amount of energy (Heath & O’Hair, 2009). It is composed without a stated author, written to solve a problem, and reflective of an organization’s goals (Markel & Selber, 2018, p. 10). Falkheimer and Heide (2010) note that this efficiency is often considered one of the hallmarks of “the communicator’s professional value” (p. 513). However, this efficiency can result in losing nuance and treating all experiences as if they are the same. But of course, a student’s experience of the pandemic is vastly different from a faculty member’s, which is vastly different from a staff member’s. And within each of these groups, people also have divergent experiences based on their intersectional identities. However, this email treats all recipients as if our campus experiences are the same.

For instance, the Coronavirus Update includes vague quotes from the university president saying things like “University leadership is closely monitoring positive test results received from on-campus and community testing and is in regular discussions with local government and health officials” and “I encourage as many faculty and staff as possible to work remotely if their position allows.” While on the surface both of these statements seem helpful, in actuality, they provide little usable information for most members of the campus community. For instance, what are these regular discussions related to positive test results about? Who is involved? What will the impacts of these discussions be on the campus and local community? With no details responding to our varying needs, this statement serves as another platitude meant to make the campus community feel safer; ostensibly the university is doing something to keep the community safe, despite the fact that this “something” is unclear.

The concise and efficient rhetorical framing of this email also overlooks a key component of the campus community’s ability to adequately understand it and respond/act accordingly: antecedent knowledge. While many faculty and staff have been at the university quite a bit longer on average than students—who are typically enrolled 2–5 years on average, depending on degree—students are often less integrated into the university and therefore don’t have access to the kinds of institutional knowledges that can aid in deciphering this email. Further, first-generation students—who are often, but not always, marginalized or multiply marginalized—have even less access to these kinds of knowledges than students whose parents or family members have attended college or university. The “Housing and Contract Cancellation” portion of this email calls on students to advocate for themselves if they choose not to live in the dormitories. This section details some ground rules for those who choose to stay (no guests) and safety measures that have been taken (regular cleaning, de-densified occupancy in rooms, closed areas, and physical distancing precautions), but contains very little information on how to cancel housing and dining contracts beyond a link to the “Housing and Dining portal,” which directs users to a webpage with little information about the process. Students and their families who have little or no experience navigating university infrastructures could find this vague information a deterrent to the flexibility promised in this section.

Further, this email presumes campus-wide antecedent knowledge of other policy documents created for the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the Redbirds Keep Learning Plan (RKLP), which is just one aspect of the range of updates and policies that students were expected to keep track of pertaining to the pivots and responses of pandemic policy. Much of the information and links in this message are specific to the changes in policy outlined in the RKLP—particularly relating to meal plan, housing, and work agreements—but the document itself is not included. This email makes no reiteration of the RKLP, no acknowledgement that it exists. As a result, we received an email that purports to care about our safety while providing almost no information about how to stay safe, access necessary resources, or connect with relevant administrators or campus offices. Instead, the email assumes that the campus community is affluent in its COVID-19 protocols and policies, when in actuality this information could easily have been lost in inboxes, opened but half read, unintentionally ignored, or perhaps even misunderstood, especially given that it was sent over the summer when many campus community members are less attuned to campus matters.

**Problem 2: Unidirectional messages raise more questions than they answer**

Second, these messages are usually unidirectional. While messages are sent across media, and although recipients may be directed
to other digital spaces where they may find more information, there is often no opportunity to ask questions, follow up, or seek clarification. When sending crisis messages, the university is prescribing a course of action while also restricting the channels of communication. For example, while this email states that faculty and staff have been given a directive to work from home if they are able to, it contains no guidance beyond a link to a “temporary work from home agreement” that they can fill out and submit to Human Resources. However, many questions remain: Who is eligible to work from home? Who else, such as a supervisor or department chair, should they talk to about this arrangement? Like the link to the “Housing and Dining portal” mentioned above, clicking through the link only takes the user directly to the temporary work from home agreement, but it does not provide any additional information. Instead, by attempting to efficiently reach the widest possible campus audience, these vague statements raise more questions than they answer, and the email provides no avenues for follow up information. The fact that recipients cannot respond to these messages or find out more detail directly is indicative of the rhetorical (in)action put in place and the lack of multi-directional communication fostered at the university. As a result, recipients are rendered passive through the lack of action prescribed in the message and silent in the inability to respond.

In addition, while crisis communication messages are more easily distributed through and designed for increasingly networked campus communities, they also risk the potential for becoming increasingly disembodied due to this digital delivery. Students, faculty, and staff reside within a communicative landscape that echoes with the consistent networked buzz of university alerts; although campus community members could obtain up-to-date information instantly through a range of media, direct messaging is among the most reliable and consistent. This is especially pertinent given the context of a pandemic, in which bodies are encouraged not to gather, but to instead isolate and keep away from each other, where digital means of communication become increasingly more important. However, we also need to pay attention to how these digitally mediated alerts construct the narrative of campus safety when students’ bodies are no longer centrally located on campus. Because students, as well as many faculty and staff, have been dislocated from most of the communal spaces that they typically share, the exactitude of the messages is more important than in prior crisis communication situations. For this reason, the embodied realities of the campus community as separate from the university are all the more important to the understanding of these messages and their effects.

**Problem 3: Calling forth a specific response collapses embodied difference**

Third, university crisis messages construct a type of reality that calls forth a specific response. They address and prescribe a normalized campus community while also making assumptions about recipients and their responses to the message—thereby cementing norms through a standardized notion of identity, access, and antecedent knowledge. But it is impossible to know what a “normal” response looks like when a crisis is ongoing, unexpected, and sometimes even unprecedented, and especially when the recipients represent a diverse range of embodiments. For instance, although ISU is a primarily white institution (PWI), with 72% of its population, or 13,165 of its students identifying as white as of Fall 2019 (Planning, Research, and Policy Analysis, 2019a), it also serves a more diverse population, including:

- American Indian/Alaskan Native (1.11%)
- Black or African American (9%)
- Asian (2.3%)
- Hispanic (10.8%)
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (1%)
- Non-US citizens (2.7%)³ (Planning, Research, and Policy Analysis, 2019a)

ISU’s students also identify 43.3% as male, 56.4% as female, and .2% as non-binary or not disclosed⁴ (Planning, Research, and Policy Analysis, 2019a). Further, 74.7% of the faculty (including both tenure track at all ranks, non-tenure track, and emeriti) identify as white, 3.6% as Black or African American, 2.4% as Hispanic, 6.1% as Asian, .2% as American Indian/Alaskan Native, as 2.5% are non-US citizens;⁵ 44.2% identify as male and 55.8% as female (Planning, Research, and Policy Analysis, 2019b). These numbers are similar to the U.S. national average for student and faculty makeup in a campus community. There is no statistical data on campus staff, which includes office administrators, program/unit directors, and other office staff, although they are included as recipients of the same crisis messaging as students and faculty.¹¹

Although these numbers skew toward a “standard” population of white students and faculty, this data does not include information about socioeconomic backgrounds, sexualities, disability statuses (including mental health), or pre-existing medical conditions, among many other private, undisclosed identity factors. Further, while the Fall 2019 report states that many of our students are in their twenties, no information is provided for faculty ages. All of these identifiers and more impact the ways in which the campus community interprets and responds to crisis messages, accesses and moves through campus, and otherwise comes to understand a crisis within the context of the university. The bottom line here is that there is no monolithic norm that can be exerted on a campus community, yet crisis communication often assumes a cis-heterosexual, white, and able-bodied standard.

In addition, the lengthy blocks—eleven paragraphs—of text signal a normalized view of the audience from an accessibility and usability standpoint. This format reveals a presupposition that students’ material resources are met, that they are in safe spaces (physically, mentally, emotionally) to understand the crisis communication content. But given the uncertainty brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, none of these can be taken for granted. With housing and food insecurity on the rise (particularly for Black and Latino households) (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2021), as well as the mental health issues brought on by increased isolation (Rogers, 2021) and virtual interaction fatigue (Stanford University Communications, 2021), we cannot assume that everyone in the campus community is safe, secure, and in a mental/emotional state that enables complete understanding of this message. Despite the context of the message, in which recipients would be looking for quick information and response, the text is not optimized for the realities of how this message would be received several weeks into a semester of uncertainty, in which the campus community is spiking with infection and response policies are in flux.

Pertaining to the readability of this text, there’s also a normalized assumption of able-bodiedness that permeates this message. Because the message is not optimized, and the complicated realities of students do not appear to be fully considered, there’s...
a prescription for how this message will be read. Specifically, institutional communicators have designed this text in a way that seems to imply that every student has the same ability to sit and read through this relatively obtuse and lengthy email. This assumption, specifically, does not account for a range of students, faculty, or staff who may have a visual impairment and may require the use of a screen reader to make sense of this dense information. Further, these messages do not accommodate community members with chronic illness or in a high-risk demographic for coronavirus risk, nor those actively suffering from the symptoms of COVID-19, for whom navigating this obtuse text would be extremely difficult. As such, there’s an erasure of the complexities of bodies, abilities, and lives because there’s one way of consuming this information.

In adjusting to a mostly online semester amid a rampant pandemic on campus, with shifting policies and expectations, few students, faculty, and staff would be able to keep track and make sense of all the policies noted in this Coronavirus Update. Although this message was sent specifically for members of the campus community, it does not consider the embodied realities of students, faculty, and staff, and how their positionalities may lead to complications, misunderstandings, and erasures by some of the technical-rhetorical choices of their Coronavirus Updates. Even when embodied considerations are not recognized, they are inherent in the production of crisis communication because these messages anticipate and accommodate some bodies while putting others at risk (Frost, 2018, p. 24). For example, faculty and staff experienced an ironic prioritization of students that erased them from most safety discussions, deliberations, and decisions. Without the acknowledgement of the embodied realities of members of the campus community—and how these realities complicate and present deviations in how messages can be received—recipients will not be able to fully understand and utilize crisis messages.

DISCUSSION: CONCRETE TAKEAWAYS FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATION PRAXIS

As we write this conclusion in early August 2021, we have only just last week received a Coronavirus Update that clearly explains the protocols for the mostly in-person university experience that will begin shortly. This email comes nearly six months after the former president promised in February that ISU is “planning for a more traditional campus experience and will offer as many face-to-face courses as possible,” including more students living on campus and more in-person university events for the Fall 2021 semester. In February 2021, higher education had not yet been included in any of the phased approaches to vaccine distribution in Illinois; instead, the president—who had already announced his plan to retire, signaling a new level of embodied privilege in that he could make a decision about who would be on campus while himself being safely removed from the immediate risk that being on campus carries—was merely “planning with optimism based on news of the Biden-Harris administration’s commitment to significantly increase access to the coronavirus vaccine prior to the fall term” and strong belief that our campus community will have access to the vaccine before the term begins. In August 2021, the Delta variant—which is more transmissible and is resulting in breakthrough infections in those who have been vaccinated—is on the rise and ISU continues to plan for in-person classes. In this most recent email, administrators have re-implemented a face covering requirement after dropping it in June, but the vaccine requirement, which mandates that those who choose not to vaccinate will be subject to required weekly testing (without specifying the consequences for noncompliance), leaves many of us skeptical of the new president’s concern for our health and safety. In short, we are seventeen months into this pandemic, and ISU still is not communicating risk and crisis with our bodies at the forefront. We are still receiving broad emails with vague notions of health and safety that do very little to recognize our diverse material realities. As such, we have suggestions for how university crisis communication needs to improve to be able to meet the embodied needs of campus communities.

Universities that are fortunate to have experts in technical communication, and especially crisis communication, need to work with their faculty and graduate students to learn how to communicate risk and crisis effectively; this should be compensated labor, of course. Cox is a PhD student specializing in technical communication and writing a dissertation that, in part, analyzes university crisis messaging. Sparby is a professor with expertise in digital rhetorics and technical communication and has taught courses on crisis communication. Our department also has six other tenure-track, tenured, and non-tenure track faculty members, in addition to a handful of other graduate students, with some level of experience researching technical and crisis communication. However, we have not once been contacted for consultation on university crisis communication during the pandemic. For faculty, access to our research is available in several university systems that are used to evaluate our yearly productivity, and our course titles are visible in any university catalogue, so the university cannot claim ignorance of our relevant and needed experience.

If our university had approached us for how to design effective crisis communication, we would have had five key suggestions that require a shift in perspectives from the university, as well as several others related to specific communication practices. These messages would be improved through more fully considering the audience’s perspective and then optimizing crisis communication messages through more responsive design reflective of the embodied realities of the campus community. First, the perspective shifts:

1. Don’t act like a corporation. Don’t rely on rhetorics of “optimism” and “confidence”—what we’ve come to call health and safety theatre—and instead remember that higher education also has roots in educating the public.

2. Make risk assessment practices and mitigation efforts transparent. We are often not told about these efforts until policy has been created enforcing them, and we have been given little insight into what goes on behind the scenes of enacting them.

3. Offer more than platitudes. Nearly every COVID email has had some line expressing thanks to the students, faculty, and staff for our hard work moving to mostly online instruction, or gratitude to us for our patience and flexibility, as well as pleas and directives to follow health and safety guidelines and take care of ourselves. But these expressions of appreciation and sentiments of care are hollow without real effective communication that values us as a diverse array of bodies with differing needs.

4. Normalize and provide mental health support. As a global health crisis that has caused a huge rise in mental health issues, the COVID-19 pandemic has also brought economic implications related to housing and food insecurity that have increased depression and anxiety. University crisis
communication needs to recognize that this is part of the embodied realities of our students, and providing resources is imperative.

5. Recognize that universities are colonial institutions of power and privilege. Racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism are alive and well at universities, especially PWIs, and they shape the embodied realities of our students. BIPOC, queer, and disabled community members often have deep distrust of medical institutions because medical discrimination has disenfranchised them repeatedly, so emails that treat every recipient’s experience of a global pandemic as uniform are not only insensitive but downright insulting as they reestablish harmful power dynamics.

As long as universities put their own interests first and occlude important health and safety details while offering vague banalities, they will not be able to communicate risk and crisis effectively to the campus community. Nebulous assurances of optimism and confidence that are not backed by concrete information do little to instill either; in fact, they often result in distrust, frustration, and anger, among other negative responses. Speak to us as individual humans, not as a disembodied monolith.

Once universities shift their perspectives and recognize our need for concrete and transparent communication, we also have several suggestions for those communication practices. A difficulty of addressing the entire campus community in one email is that broad assumptions about the audience result in presumptions about recipients’ embodies and also their antecedent knowledge. As exemplified in our analysis above, one of the major barriers to responsive and effective crisis communication is overgeneralizations of audience embodiment. Rather than address faculty, staff, and students in a single message, we recommend campus communicators consider sending unique messages to each of these groups, referencing the key information that the other groups are told, when relevant. For instance, a faculty email may include specific information about managing courses and student conduct, while also referring to specific information that students have been provided. Although there is some value in sending out the same information to all members of the campus community, it can also result in an influx of irrelevant information, such as the email we analyzed above which contained information about cancellation policies for housing and dining contracts. Faculty and staff likely do not need this information, and students likely need more than what was provided.

Second, although the email used certain textual indicators of emphasis—namely, bolded subheadings and shorter paragraphs within each subsection—further optimization would help make this information more usable, such as

1. Indicate central takeaways at the outset of the email. This would have made the email easier to scan quickly and enabled the user to find relevant information more quickly.
2. Direct email recipients to other relevant campus resources. The email messages are currently doing all of the work of crisis communication, but the resources can help to fill in gaps of presumed antecedent knowledge.
3. Present a static set of links in every email. These links could be an effective method to help users parse the presumed context necessary to make sense of the updates to policy detailed in these weekly Coronavirus Updates.

Specifically, the lack of direct communication information for follow-up also contributes to the disembodied nature of these messages. We recommend that university crisis communications provide contact information where recipients can ask questions and provide clarification, thus working against the unidirectional impulse of this information. Through this approach, the current communications and resources can not only address future concerns more seamlessly, but resources such as the Redbirds Return Plan (which is a separate policy document from the Redbirds Keep Learning Plan mentioned earlier) could be better optimized. Beyond direct communications, utilizing a linked FAQ section that is responsive to common questions and concerns may also be one way to extend the communication between the institution and the campus community related to these messages.

Finally, the suggestions we offer here are contextualized within our embodied realities as two white, able-bodied campus community members with certain degrees of privilege granted to us in these spaces. While we have identified several takeaways that we think could apply to most universities (particularly PWIs), there are undoubtedly more necessary changes that could be informed by the embodied realities of other members of the campus community, as well as institution-specific changes that would differ across universities. As such, we suggest that university crisis communicators actively seek feedback and perform usability testing on messages to better understand audience needs and optimize messages accordingly. Although this may not be possible for time-sensitive risk communication, such as with weekly crisis communication like we examine here, universities could develop concrete communication strategies and seek input on those documents. This can be through formal focus groups, or through more informal usability testing with a range of recipients, including, potentially, students, student workers, staff colleagues in different areas of the university, as well as a range of faculty across disciplines.

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ENDNOTES
1. ISU is a public university in the U.S. Midwest.
2. Including a visit from YouTube personalities the NELK Boys, whose presence led to huge maskless gatherings that had to be broken up by police (Swiech & Petty, 2020).
3. IWU is a private liberal arts university in the neighboring city of Bloomington, IL. Heartland Community College is also in Normal, IL, but their courses were mostly online for the Fall 2020 semester, and the majority of their students already live in the Bloomington/Normal area.
4. A nearby small liberal arts college, MacMurray College announced it would close permanently after the spring 2020 semester when most U.S. colleges and universities shifted to online instruction because they were unable to withstand the financial strain (Hobson & Hagan, 2020). Other institutions,
such as Illinois Wesleyan University began cutting humanities departments and programs in desperate and misguided attempts to save money and keep the university open (Cherney, 2020).

5. ISU runs a Facebook page for students’ families, and for most of 2020 it was full of angry parents complaining about online instruction. These parents were vocal about wanting the university to move back to 100% in-person instruction, even if it meant increasing risk to students, faculty, staff, and community members.

6. As Sellnow et al. (2009) explain, though risk and crisis communication are often used interchangeably, they refer to distinct types of messaging. Risk communication, broadly, is intended to avoid crises, and thus are forward-looking messages preceding a crisis event. Crises are, as Heath and O’Hair define, “risks that are manifested” (2010, p. 1). If the risk is unavoidable and comes to affect stakeholders, crisis communications mitigate and advise recovery following a crisis.

7. Although this certainly would not be true of all faculty and staff, some of whom may have been hired and started their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

8. These numbers do not include students who identify as bi- or multi-racial because they are counted together under “two or more selections” (3.2%), although that category does not include Hispanic; 6% gave no response (Planning, Research, and Policy Analysis, 2019a).

9. Because students have only been able to identify outside of the male/female binary for a short time, we expect this number to rise in the coming years.

10. .8% identify as “two or more selections,” which does not include Hispanic; 9.6% gave no response (Planning, Research, and Policy Analysis, 2019b).

11. Further, there is also no data on other employees, such as janitorial and maintenance crews, who continued to work in person throughout the pandemic, nor do we know what kinds of crisis messaging these parties received.

12. Sparby’s colleague’s attempts in Fall 2020 to work (uncompensated) with some administrators to suggest ways to smooth over the parent-faculty divide that online teaching caused were all but ignored, so we are also not confident that approaching them to offer compensated assistance would have been welcome.

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