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## **Introduction to Business and Technical Communication and COVID-19: Communicating in Times of Crisis**

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# Introduction to Business and Technical Communication and COVID-19: Communicating in Times of Crisis

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**Jordan Frith<sup>1</sup>**

Typically, the introduction to special issues of journals starts by explaining the topic being covered. One issue I contributed to included a 400-word description of Pokémon Go; another introduction had an extended definition of content strategy in technical communication. I sat down to write this introduction the same way, but doing so felt wrong. COVID-19 does not need a two-paragraph introduction. We are all aware of what it is and what it has done. As I write this in early June, the pandemic has killed over 400,000 people worldwide and rendered millions of people out of work. All of our lives have been affected in one way or another. The importance of COVID-19 needs no justification.

Academic work, like most other work, was quickly altered by the pandemic. Classes moved online; campuses closed. Research slowed in some cases as labs became inaccessible, and researchers—and many people (disproportionately women)—were left with additional responsibilities at home. Research also shifted in some cases as people across disciplines

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turned their expertise to COVID-19-related topics. By late March, calls for papers or special issues on COVID-19 appeared in most disciplines, such as psychology, biology, literature, religious studies, and media studies. Maybe some of these calls for papers are opportunistic, but just as likely they represent efforts to contribute expertise to one of the most all-consuming phenomena I can remember.

Most academic disciplines have something to contribute to our understanding of the impacts of COVID-19. But I argue that our discipline is uniquely suited to address the pandemic. The articles in this issue show just how relevant technical communication scholarship can be in times of crisis. After all, COVID-19 clearly maps on to many areas of important technical communication scholarship, including social justice and communication in marginalized communities (Agboka, 2013; Jones et al., 2016), data visualization (Wolfe, 2015), community-based science communication (Opel & Sackey, 2019), social media (Hurley & Hea, 2014), and content strategy (Batova & Andersen, 2016). Consequently, this issue brings together various wings of our discipline to focus on one of the most pressing problems we have faced, and it does so in a timely manner. I am proud of the work found in this collection, and I hope there is a future for shorter form, faster turnaround technical communication scholarship. But such rapid-response research also comes with some significant issues that I address later.

This issue features 22 articles, each less than 2,000 words, that were drafted within the first few months of the pandemic. They are all peer reviewed and engage with contemporary technical communication scholarship. But they are not like the typical articles found in our journals. They are a blurring of genres that bring together academic analysis and the public scholarship of shorter, more accessible pieces. And they all required the authors to adjust their writing styles. After all, as the axiom goes, it is often easier to write something long than it is to write something short. That might especially be true when academics who are used to having 8,000 words to work with need to condense their arguments to less than 2,000 words. Consequently, these articles feature fewer citations, abbreviated methods sections, and more limited literature reviews. No doubt these are drawbacks to shorter formats. But as these articles show, there is also potential for these shorter forms to disrupt—or at least stand alongside—our traditional academic genres, a disruption we have already seen in many journals outside our discipline that feature special sections of shorter form, rapid-response research (e.g., *Mobile Media & Communication* and *Social Media & Society*). The constraints require focused arguments and enable faster turnaround and more voices to contribute to a single issue. They

require an engagement with the present moment that is different from the more gradual process of typical scholarship. But this issue shows that our discipline has something to contribute to what is happening in our world now, and I hope this work can help us think through new forms of academic publishing that allow us to be nimble and responsive when a major situation arises.

One criticism of rapid-response research is that it requires scholars to make an argument about a still unfolding situation. This issue required authors to complete final articles by mid-June 2020, so they were writing them while the pandemic continued to spread. When this is published in January 2021, the pandemic will likely still be happening. Consequently, a few of these analyses might change, and some authors might have done the work differently if they would have had 6 months instead of 6 weeks. But our journals will still publish more traditional research on these issues. Our traditional scholarship has value and should likely continue to be our main goal, but I hope technical communication explores alternative venues with faster turnaround, which has been a major development in scientific publishing over the last decade. We severely limit our relevance if we set arbitrary norms for when enough time has passed for us to write about a topic. The sciences don't do that, and the humanities and social sciences shouldn't either. We have much to contribute to contemporary conversations.

Although I do not believe that fast scholarship equals bad scholarship (and I think at times fast scholarship is desirable), I do have another concern with special issues like this that holds more weight in my eyes: This issue is far too white. It does feature some authors of color, but it is still far too white. It might even be less white than many other issues in our disciplinary journals, but that is more an indictment of our publication practices (and our recruitment practices, hiring practices, and mentoring practices) than it is a defense of this issue. COVID-19 has been a health crisis that has disproportionately affected Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC). BIPOC and LatinX have died and lost their jobs at higher rates than have white people. People of Asian descent have faced virulent racism and been blamed unfairly for spreading the virus. We can see the results of many years of systemic racism playing out in the disparate impacts of the pandemic. And yet most scholars responding to the crisis in this issue are white. I could speculate on reasons for that. The most obvious is that our discipline is far too white and has not done enough to encourage more diverse voices in our scholarship (Wanzer-Serrano, 2019). But another likely reason is that authors of color were not in a place to contribute to a rapid-turnaround

collection like this one. Their communities, their families, and their friends were possibly hit harder during the pandemic, leaving them with emotional and physical labor that many of their white colleagues did not have to share. Multiple journal editors have tweeted about how submissions by women authors have decreased during the pandemic because of the extra unpaid labor they have taken on, and the same impacts are likely affecting many people of color.

Having a rapid-response issue during a pandemic obviously asks a lot from its authors. As editor, I should have been more cognizant of how some people from marginalized communities might not have felt comfortable submitting. I could have contacted them directly to solicit pieces that better balance the diversity of voices in this issue, especially because COVID-19 has disproportionately affected those communities. Looking back, I would have done it differently. I still would have done the rapid-response format. I believe having an open-access collection of our scholarship published quickly is a valuable move for our discipline. But I would have worked harder to ensure that the issue was not so white and did not replicate the existing knowledge structures within our journals that limit the voices that are heard. With Angela Haas's June 2, 2020, call for antiracist action on the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing's electronic mailing list and Jones and Williams's (2020) excellent *The Just Use of Imagination: A Call to Action*, it is clear we can do better; I should and could have done better. The issue—and most special issues—would have been stronger with more diverse voices and epistemics that are too often lacking in our journals.

Finally, this issue contains 22 articles, so I do not have the space to introduce each individually. Instead, I grouped the articles broadly by topic. The first section includes articles that examine science communication of various types. The articles range from engagement with rural communities to social media verification systems to the World Health Organization's attempts to communicate the pandemic across multiple languages in Africa. The second section focuses on articles primarily concerned with data analysis and visualization. These topics have become even more important as the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented public engagement with data. The articles in this section detail rhetorical analyses of public models, problems concerning the lack of racial classification in disease data, and critiques of the ubiquitous Flatten the Curve visualization, to name a few. The third section covers institutional and corporate communication in the context of the pandemic, featuring articles about content strategies and communication theories that could be adopted as universities and corporations address the pandemic. The final section covers pedagogy and

research, with articles discussing teaching during the pandemic and adjusting our research methods to account for remote work.

I want to conclude this introduction by thanking the authors. Writing during a pandemic is hard; reviewing during a pandemic is hard. Writing in a compressed timeframe makes it even harder, but the authors in this issue produced insightful, timely work that showcases the relevance of technical communication in moments of crisis. After all, COVID-19 has been such an all-consuming concern that companies and universities have adjusted entire content strategies to address it, the amount of science communication has exploded on social and traditional media, and the stark racial disparities of some of our data infrastructures have become more stark. These articles are a small first step in the much-needed exploration of how technical communication research can help us better understand the varied impacts of COVID-19.

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