Intersecting Rhetorical Velocity & Antiracism as Strategies for the Creation of University Crime Notifications under the Clery Act

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This article intersects rhetorical velocity and antiracism as strategies in the crafting and dissemination of timely warnings under the Clery Act. Timely warnings often take the form of crime notifications and are disseminated through a variety of localized and third-party technology platforms. Campus communities continue to struggle over the equitable use of suspect race descriptions that may reinforce stereotypes of communities of color, and messages are often created by default police text-crafters driven by compliance and police discourse conventions, thus crossing aspects of police rhetorics and positionality. This article engages Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss' (2009) notion of rhetorical velocity as "a strategic approach to composing for rhetorical delivery" for the "strategic theorizing for how a text might be recomposed" (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009, n.p.) by an audience, as well as why, how, and to what helpful or harmful rhetorical ends. Key takeaways are considerations for an antiracist approach to crafting Clery Act notifications and anticipating the rhetorical velocity of crime notifications and their impacts on communities of color.

Since the 1990 passage of the Jeanne Clery Act, universities still struggle with compliance. Among other things, the Act requires universities to notify the community of potential safety threats, and requires institutions receiving federal funds to have a policy, practices, and mechanisms to distribute crime information to the campus community (Lee & Good, 2016; Hanson & Irwin, 2019; Lathom-Staton et al., 2020). These notifications are often pushed out as "timely warnings" required for certain crimes (Sweeney, n.d.). The matter of timely warnings is the focal point in this paper, and the term "crime notification" will be used as the context of the type of timely warning being discussed.

When an institution becomes aware of a crime covered under The Clery Act, it formulates a message to inform the community. This information generally includes the time, date, location, crime, and often a suspect description. In instances where race descriptions are noted, concerns are sometimes voiced by students of color about the vagueness of race descriptions, which

challenges their use as objective information. A description may only include race, gender, and perhaps generic clothing descriptors that may describe a population rather than a person, thus focusing negative perceptions on a group. For example, a crime notification description found within my university email stated: "*Victim's* [*sic*] *reported the suspect as being a black male, 5'10 and skinny armed with a gun*" (ECU Alert, 2020). While intentions were good, one can see how this is problematic. These concerns may be deepened by findings (Lee & Good, 2017; Latham-Staton et al., 2020) that students indeed heed Clery information and may adjust their perception of risk based on that information. Communities of color express concern that using race as an identifier, absent individualized characteristics, spotlights that community and perpetuates racial stereotypes.

Crime notifications reach tens of thousands of users. Once delivered, a university has no control over message appropriation, including that some appropriations may fortify negative, race-based perceptions. Rhetorical strategies that include social justice and antiracism are important to ensuring that members of the community are protected from social and systemic negative impacts of race characteristic association. Following Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss' (2009) articulation of rhetorical velocity as a strategy for rhetorical delivery, this project seeks to intersect rhetorical velocity with antiracism to locate guidance in creating compliant, socially-just crime notifications.

Campus Racial Experience

The complaint of disparate treatment on college campuses by people of color is not new. Julie Ancis, William Sedlacek, and Jonathan Mohr (2000) noted that people of color were more susceptible "than their White counterparts to experience pressure to conform to racial and ethnic stereotypes regarding their academic performance and behavior" (p. 182). This finding is still relevant and reflected by other research (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Walker, 2003; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Mwangi et al., 2018; Pelfrey, Jr., Keener, & Perkins, 2018). Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) also noted that "specifically, African American students experienced greater racial–ethnic hostility; greater pressure to conform to stereotypes; less equitable treatment by faculty, staff, and teaching assistants; and more faculty racism than did other groups" (p. 183). Landon D. Reid and Phanikiran Radhakrishnan (2003) offered that research demonstrates that students of color perceive campus climate more negatively than white students. Students of color perceive that they are treated differently both as "racial minorities but also as students" (p. 272), suggesting both social and institutional disparate treatment.

Public internet searches reveal university crime notification data nation-wide. They are often housed on university police webpages. One will find very vague suspect descriptions as well as more detailed descriptions. Vague race descriptors may cause feelings of marginalization that are now perpetuated via institutional texts disguised as compliance. Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) called attention to the fatigue that is accumulated by marginalization, noting that "continual exposure to a hostile educational climate, marked by racial tension and stereotyping, may adversely influence the academic achievement and psychological health of students of color" (p. 183). Structures that marginalize communities within society do not stop at universities. Campuses are connected to these systems and structures (Mwangi et al., 2018), especially institutional power. This is a power that Daniel Solorzano, Miguel Ceja, and Tarra Yosso (2000) noted communities of color don't benefit from, and instead are only subjected to. Communications that are institutionally created demonstrate institutional and rhetorical power. Chrystal A. Mwangi et al. (2018) aptly noted that while "White peers can ignore this connection or remain at arm's length from societal racial issues, for Black students the issues happening in society are a racial mirror of what is happening on their campuses" (p. 469).

Racist and prejudiced undertones on campus are historical, even in campus media platforms. In his book *Black Software* (2020), Charlton McIlwain recounted a story by Derrick Brown, who attended Clemson University in the late 1980s, noting that:

> Whenever something would happen on campus, they would always run the same composite sketch in the school newspaper. And that person was always obviously a person of color, obviously male, and obviously the same person. I'm not joking! It was always the same drawing. (p. 26)

This complaint persists, but with technology that sends texts instantaneously. Crime notifications often feel similar to Mr. Brown's story—a person of color with a generic clothing description. Unlike Mr. Brown and his friends, who were able to challenge these depictions by removing stacks of newspapers (McIlwain, 2020), students of color today cannot challenge stereotypes from instantaneously distributed texts.

The notion of associating race with crime is an extension of negative stereotyping based on what Ted Chiricos, Ranee McEntire, and Marc Gertz (2001) suggested is "modern racism" where one's race is used as a proxy for danger (p. 335), such as the stereotype of associative crime with the Black community. Similarly, Bela Walker (2003) noted:

> Nonwhite skin is seen as an indicator of criminality as well as justifiable cause for police persecution. Perception of crimi-

nality in minority populations then alters the general opinion of the public and affecting eyewitness testimony, already notoriously malleable and unreliable. (p. 679)

Mwangi et al. (2018) reiterated Walker's (2003) argument; their study participants "discussed their race being associated with fear" (p. 462), and that the racial climate on [PWI] campuses is often characterized by subdued racism such as microaggressions. More recent confirmations of campus climate perceptions (Mwangi et al., 2018; Pelfrey, Jr., Keener, and Perkins, 2018) demonstrated a continuance of Reid and Radhakrishnan's (2003) and Susan R. Rankin and Rankin Reason's (2005) findings that students of color voiced a more negative view of campus racial climate than white students. To combat this, institutions must challenge dominant narratives and "have social justice as a central core value, that inform the strategic approach that runs through the fabric of the institution" (Rankin & Reason, 2005, p. 59). Using race in crime notifications is challenging because, as Walker (2003) noted, "race becomes not one of many characteristics, but instead *the* [original emphasis] defining characteristic employed" (p. 664). Walker (2003) suggested that once a racial identifier has been attached, deviation from that characteristic is unlikely and other characteristics may be overlooked.

Rhetorical Velocity

Rhetorical velocity is "a strategic approach to composing for rhetorical delivery. It is both a way of considering delivery as a rhetorical mode, aligned with an understanding of how texts work as a component of a strategy" (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009, n.p.). Ridolfo and DeVoss (2009) elaborated that strategic approach should include the consideration of *how* a text "might be recomposed (and *why* it might be recomposed) by an audience, and how this recomposing may be useful or not to the short- or long-term rhetorical objectives of the rhetorician" (n.p.). Rhetorical velocity relates to our concept of velocity—the speed and distance of a text across an audience. Seth Long and Ken Fitch (2019) offered that rhetorical velocity is also "direction-aware" (p. 176), resulting in a rhetorical vector. If outside forces are able to memorialize a text, the author loses the original agency and text circulation "often lacks the logic of directionality" when recomposed (Long & Fitch, 2019, p. 176). At that point, the author has no control over circulatory direction. In the case of crime notifications, the speed is instantaneous and multi-directional in its original frame.

Crime notifications are designed for consumption and interaction. They ask the audience to engage in safety-related behaviors. One study (Lathom-Staton et al., 2020) found that up to 70% of students heeded timely warn-

ings, indicating crime information was taken seriously. Because of opportunities for textual interaction, rhetorical velocity and antiracism may ensure that information is less likely to be contextually appropriated. The desire is to engage helpful information, not information that places communities of color under additional surveillance. Thus, a major concern for communities of color is that vague suspect descriptions only add volume to negative stereotypes. Recomposition of texts may manifest in audience members who use descriptions to fortify their own stereotypes of communities of color.

Jonathan Bradshaw (2018) noted that "rhetoricians in the field of circulation studies have likewise been arguing that rhetors have to account for the delivery and circulation of their material" (p. 480). With Clery, rhetoricians are held accountable for compliance and little else. Institutions should be held accountable for rhetorical impacts created by their agents. In the circulation of texts, speed and reach are "core points of focus" (Bradshaw, 2018, p. 480). These points are useful for text circulation research, such as crime notifications; not just for compliance, but also for socially just messaging and audience.

A concern of rhetorical velocity is that recompositions of the message, like crime notifications, have the potential to be memetic. These messages originate from a place of power and are delivered en masse (Sparkes-Vian, 2019) and engage the audience. With text dissemination, a university should expect a certain amount of negative appropriation from the audience. A university should make it easy to recompose safety information but should want difficulty in recomposing something negative, such as racial stereotypes.

Police Rhetorics and Text Creators

The crafting of crime notifications often falls to police because of logistical convenience. Pelfrey, Jr., Keener, and Perkins (2018) suggested "law enforcement agencies must balance public safety and negative perceptions" (p. 245); however, this is an incomplete view of the responsibilities of maintaining that balance with Clery because compliance with Clery Act is a *university compliance* matter regardless of using police as the text-creators. Police text-crafters are entangled with *police rhetorics*, particularly language. I define police rhetorics as the systems of symbols, discourses, and practices, either actual, essentialized, or rhetorical, commonly associated with the policing profession and which locate meaning and understanding within policing contexts. Such systems include knowledge, language, symbols, practices, and other observable phenomena that convey contextual understanding, especially rhetorically. Such rhetorical positionality is particularly impactful on discourse practices because of institutionalized power that is projected within the policing field. In other words, police text-crafters prioritize their discourse over institutional or social.

Using police as text-crafters places rhetorical velocity and antiracism at a disadvantage because expedience and compliance are prioritized. Text-creators must craft crime notifications that include information about the crime, in a "timely" manner (Sweeney, n.d.). Because of Clery's vague requirement for "timeliness," decisions must be made quickly about information included in messages sent to tens of thousands of people. Pelfrey, Jr., Keener, and Perkins (2018) noted that institutions have significant "discretion in the timing and information included in crime alerts, including the perpetrator descriptors" (p. 244). Institutions feel pressure to rely on discretion to be "timely."

Police text-creators are more concerned about the pressures of compliance than matters of rhetoric and social justice. It is not because they don't care, they just aren't engaged in conversations on these topics as it relates to crime notifications. In the police mind, the message will only be recomposed as a benefit and other contexts—like race descriptions—will be ignored if the audience finds no value. This is a faulty view that diminishes rhetorical velocity and antiracism strategies. It connects to what Cauthen (2010) pointed out as a difference between "rules versus relationships" (p. 23) as representative of legal expectations versus moral ones. Those creating these texts often lean on industry or organizational language. Texts often align with what Cauthen (2010) associated as an "epistemological feature" (p. 33) of legal language—the "preference for the abstract over the specific, for the nuances of legal rules over those of human relationships" (Cauthen, 2010, p. 33). Crime notifications are often driven by epistemological features, not by human relations.

While many researchers have focused on racial climate and use of race in timely warnings (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Chiricos, McEntire & Gertz, 2001; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Walker, 2003; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Pelfrey, Jr., Keener, & Perkins, 2018), or on Clery compliance (Hanson & Irwin, 2019) and audience reception and behavior (Lee & Good, 2017; Hasinoff & Krueger, 2020; Latham-Staton at al., 2020), one area open for research is text-creators. Text-creators are institutionally empowered with text-creation decisions; humans who must ensure compliance. Text-creators have substantial discretion in Clery messaging (Pelfrey, Jr., Keener, & Perkins, 2018) and though text-creators have policies, they control text-creation. Researching audience responsiveness, best practices, and racial climate is an incomplete rhetorical framing. Text-creators are not conduits, but often have control over the only accessible information. Rhetorical velocity calls for strategy to consider how and why a text is recomposed, so text-creators should understand their rhetorical positionality. If text-creators are more concerned about the compliance functions of text-crafting, then this suggests there is little focus on rhetorical contexts.

This idea is further complicated when the text-creator is a police officer. Police officers, while they understand sensitivities of race and social justice

concepts, may default to using policies and practices. It is, as noted by Steven Katz (1992), Aristotle's deliberative rhetoric that is "concerned with decision and action" (p. 259). Clery is a matter of efficient compliance, not a matter of rhetoric or justice, because compliance is what officers are tasked with. Katz (1992) also noted that Aristotle "seems to collapse all ethical questions" in deference to expediency with deliberative rhetoric, but Clery doesn't have to be that way (p. 260). Expediency can be disrupted by creating room for conversations about ethical justice outside of strict compliance.

Antiracist Strategy: A Challenge for Institutions and Individuals

Ridolfo and DeVoss (2017) articulated pedagogical challenges and suggested a new challenge to "teach students not only the content of argumentation, but to provide them with the ability to trace how conversations emerge, traverse across media, and are amplified by state and non-state actors" (p. 66). This is also a challenge for institutions and their agents in text creation. Institutions need to engage, educate, and practice antiracist efforts when creating crime notifications. Ridolfo and DeVoss (2017) also asked what text-creators can "discern about the trajectory, velocity, origin, and distribution of messages" (p. 66). They argued that "one may understand and analyze the rhetorical velocity of a piece of digital rhetoric based on its short- and long-term positive, negative, and neutral rhetorical consequences in relationship to the originating author(s) and their intentions" (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2017, p. 66). Although "institutional support for diversity is conveyed in a number of ways, including organizational rhetoric like mission and diversity statements" (Rankin & Reason, 2005, p. 46), it must be supported by demonstrative activities. Creating a more positive racial climate would be aided by changing practices to establish equity in areas where equity either doesn't exist or is floundering (Mwangi et al., 2018). This includes adjusting policies that support Clery compliance and through policies and practices that are supported by antiracism.

Rankin and Reason (2005) noted that survey respondents favored educating perpetrators of [racial] harassment on their mistakes. What if the perpetrator is the institution? Can the same educational processes take place via the pedagogical challenges noted by Ridolfo and DeVoss (2009)? Fischer (2009) noted that students "do not need to believe in the veracity of these stereotypes in order to be affected by them. In fact, they need only to be aware of the stereotype and for that stereotype to be pertinent to a domain which they care about" (pp. 20-21). Even if they don't believe the stereotype, an audience's recomposition of an institutional text can still be impactful.

Bradshaw (2018) argued that both slow and viral circulations in strategizing text require attention to ethics, noting that "an ethical approach to speed and reach helps us understand these elements as composed of cultural and attitudinal elements that are not easily submitted to metrics" (p. 496). Cultural and attitudinal elements are not easily measured; however, they are detected when voices speak out. Bradshaw's (2018) call for an ethic using slow circulation challenges the ethic of expediency. The aim of slow circulation is "to transform long-standing institutions and material conditions but to do so through a theory of persuasion that foregrounds community, persistence, and continuance over the strength of individualized arguments or momentary persuasion" (Bradshaw, 2018, pp. 496–497).

Slow circulation focuses on *why* some messages linger, rhetorically speaking. In the case of crime notifications, slow circulation questions if the use of race in crime notifications causes racial stereotypes to linger. Therefore, timely warnings should not sacrifice an ethic of slow circulation for expediency. Institutions can reduce the threat of stereotyping which impacts communities of color "through their hyperawareness of their race/ethnicity when placed in a position in which their performance could be judged as confirming or disconfirming a negative stereotype" (Fischer, 2009, p. 20). Clery's "timely" standard should include minimizing harm to community members.

A Way Forward: Campus Conversations

In the spring of 2021, I was invited to a conversation about race descriptions centered on the question of better addressing race descriptions, the intent of which was moving forward with two goals: meeting Clery compliance and maintaining social justice. It was generally agreed upon that suspect descriptions should be included when possible. Pelfrey, Jr., Keener and Perkins (2018) stated what the concern was for us—the mixed value in using race descriptors because "inclusion of perpetrator/suspect descriptions in the crime alert is intended to maximize public safety. Race descriptors may have negative consequences through the repetition of minority suspect information" (p. 245). We agreed that specific, individualized descriptions must be included when race was used in order to push back against the harm done by vague descriptions.

There is no magic formula. Some universities require a minimum number of descriptors before they include race. Other universities refrain from using race at all. Based on our conversations, perhaps the way to query this is not whether or not race should be used, but if the description is *sufficiently individualized that it reasonably describes a person rather than a population*. If the answer is no, then race should probably not be used as an iden-

tifying factor—it contributes no value. This is more subjective than other metrics, however it can meet compliance and allow text-creators to engage in thoughtful rhetoric.

While institutional authority informs text creation, this conversation queries moral authority. Bjola (2018) contended that normative and strategic moral authority serve as power resources to challenge negative appropriations. Moral authority as a strategy addresses questions of harm and if the harmed party has standing to engage in counter-intervention (Bjola, 2018). Communities of color have the moral authority to challenge stereotypes. Text creators have the moral authority to aid those communities. They have institutional power to make textual decisions and improve rhetorical and practical results. My hope is that these conversations help surface more social justice-driven ideas in institutional messaging. Ciszek's (2016) postmodern perspective of public relations may be helpful. In this perspective, the goal may not be "finding agreement or 'reconciliation' between an organization and its publics" (Ciszek, 2016, p. 316), but rather finding that disagreement and tension can be embraced to allow changes in practices based on dissensus.

One take-away for universities is a practical one. Universities should regularly evaluate their crime notification processes when describing characteristics of populations, especially marginalized populations. Are those descriptions thoughtfully crafted, or are they vague and possibly contributing to stereotyping people of color? To echo Walker (2003), timely warnings should "construct such descriptions out of a more narrowly construed framework" (p. 679) to describe individuals, not populations. Inquiring with text-creators for their perceptions of their texts, how they believe the messages are received, and especially how they understand rhetoric and rhetorical impacts of crime notifications is important. This would provide insight into how those text-creators understand their role and the power of information and context that they have, both literally and figuratively, at their fingertips.

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