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DH Dev. Report #1

Northwestern University (NU) has barraged students with information on the digital platform adjusting expectations and defining behaviors in the weeks leading up to the return to campus. This reflection stakes two claims regarding NU’s digital campaign, understood here as a deviant digital humanities project: first, a lack of streamlined information delivery overwhelms university communities and makes personal the responsibility of understanding and adhering to a scattershot of information. Second, an emphasis on individual behavior as well as responsibility for health of community as a whole shifts liability from the university to individuals.

NU, throughout the pandemic, has lacked a streamlined system for information delivery. COVID-19 information comes in waves of emails from a dozen different offices. There is a website that is a central location where the most up-to-date information regarding NU’s COVID-19 response is kept.[[1]](#footnote-1) In a way, Northwestern has undertaken its own digital humanities project in which it takes advantage of big data and the resources available to a corporate university. The insight laid out by Risam and Edwards leads us to question then, who is this digital project serving? If “micro DH” projects aim to serve those who “work outside of macro structures,” then a massive project such as the confusing and dense 6-step “phased return to campus” generated by NU seeks to benefit those already embedded in this macro structure.[[2]](#footnote-2)

“[P]lease know that your health and well-being are our highest priority,” reads the first sentence of an article informing grad students about testing. “Each and every one of us play a role, through our daily actions and behaviors, in making our campus a healthy environment.”[[3]](#footnote-3) NU posits individual behavior as the key to a healthy environment. Ignoring that the safest option is to go completely remote, NU fronts that their policies are aligned with the best interest of students. But the high expectation for behavior is striking. Students are expected to wear masks whenever not in their room, no guests are allowed in students’ rooms, common spaces are stripped of furniture, and students identified through contact tracing are quarantined. The barren and isolating campus, intersecting with contact tracing and high standards for adherence to strict behavioral rules, sets a militant tone. Are students expected to police other students? If “the success of ‘making’ depends on not only physical space but also the intersections between disciplines that encourage critical humanistic discourse,” what kind of space are students walking into?[[4]](#footnote-4)

If the digital humanities maker is “uniquely positioned to subvert paradigms of class, race, gender, and ableist privilege,” NU, as a maker, is reifying the status-quo of big DH.[[5]](#footnote-5) Northwestern’s digital response to prepare the campus and students for COVID-19 in the fall does not provide enough emphasis on the “humanities” part of digital humanities. To what end do the application of digital tools benefit us if they do not center humanity?

A sign on the side of a building

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Image 1. This large graphic greets you on the landing page of NU’s COVID-19 updates and resources central information bank website. Not only does this graphic play on a sense of belonging to the institution (that your loyalty should be to your corporate university), but it also conveys personal responsibility. That your decisions will impact not only yourself but those of your “N” community. (<https://www.northwestern.edu/coronavirus-covid-19-updates/index.html>)

[474 words]

1. See: Northwestern COVDI-19 and Campus Updates, <https://www.northwestern.edu/coronavirus-covid-19-updates/index.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Roopika Risam and Susan Edwards. “Micro DH: Digital Humanities at the Small Scale.” *DH* (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See: “COVID-19 Testing Information for Northwestern Graduate Students” <https://www.northwestern.edu/coronavirus-covid-19-updates/developments/covid-19-testing-information-for-northwestern-graduate-students.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Hunter, Katherine Faull, and Diane Jakacki, “Reifying the Maker as Humanist,” *in Making Things and Drawing Boundaries: Experiments in the Digital Humanities*, Jentery Sayers, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. David Staley, “On the ‘Maker Turn’ in the Humanities,” in *Making Things and Drawing Boundaries: Experiments in the Digital Humanities,* Jentery Sayers, ed.(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)