

Digital Humanities Expanded & Explored in the Nordic Countries

Karolina Andersdotter

katja.andersdotter@kcl.ac.uk

Are there specific Nordic digital humanities? This was a central question during the Digital Humanities in the Nordic Countries' first conference in Oslo on the 15th-17th March 2016. The conference gathered both information professionals and academics from the humanities and contained many interesting presentations about digital humanities projects both within and outside of the Nordic countries.

“What are digital humanities?” A question many have asked themselves, only to find that there are so many definitions that it's hardly possible to cover it all in one sentence. After graduating from Uppsala University, Sweden (M.A. Library and Information Science), I moved to London to study digital humanities at King's College London.

I attended the first conference of [Digital Humanities in the Nordic Countries](#) in Oslo, Norway to explore the status quo of the field in the Nordic countries. As far as I know, digital humanities (DH) from a librarian's perspective have been absent from Swedish academia. There are, however, many joint digitisation projects between libraries, as well as discipline-specific initiatives, for example, the mapping of Icelandic sagas or corpus linguistics.

This Nordic conference about DH is an indication that things are about to change. While DH initiatives such as [interdisciplinary centres](#) and [new MA courses](#) pop up in the Nordic countries, the bringing together of students and researchers is vital to the development of the field in the Nordic context. The digital environment has (in theory) no geographical restrictions, and there are research benefits from its practitioners achieving similar cross-border perspectives.

The stated purpose of the conference was “to strengthen research, education and communication in the field of Digital Humanities and make Nordic Digital Humanities more visible internationally.” Judging by the [programme of the conference](#) the “field of Digital Humanities” is not a scholarly field per se, but an application of existing humanities techniques to new fields. There is an identity crisis for scholars who currently occupy themselves with digital humanities as an individual subject, but as concluded in the finishing panel of the conference - *Paradigm Shift? How are digital humanities changing the humanities?* - DH is perhaps just a transitory term, and all digital aspects will be integrated in the *humanities* before long, rendering the specification *digital* useless.

The twitter feed, [#dhn2016](#), featured a lively discussion amongst the participants. The discussion on defining DH was continued here. While I proposed to approach it as an [information scientific research method](#), another proposed [humanities research based on born-digital material](#). Between these definitions, there is a broad spectrum of ideas and

thoughts on the nature of DH. A presenter used this meme, which captures the terminological debate, while also being an example of the object of study in DH:



The programme was a mix of discipline-specific sessions (for example, *Literary Studies*, *Digital Classics + Musicology*, *Corpus linguistics*), digital methodology sessions (for example, *Map Visualisation*, *Text Digitisation Tools/Paleography*, *Text Mining*), and technical sessions (for example, *Teaching*, *Infrastructure*, *Digital Archives of Cultural History - why and how?*). Broadly speaking, the first category taught us about the discipline itself, the second how digital methods could be applied by researchers to these disciplines, and the third how digital methods are created and maintained for researchers. The development of DH clearly has many contributors.

The social and physical geography of the Nordic countries

The use of digital methods in linguistics was a central part of many presentations. I suspect this is partly due to computational linguistics having been a prominent field in Nordic universities, and also because Nordic researchers tend to collaborate a lot in linguistics as data sources of Nordic languages are of common interest.

Map visualisation was another common component in the presentations at the conference, perhaps again because the conference was set in a Nordic context. The sense of geographical belonging with each other is a motivation to work together, and it helps bridge the linguistic gap that happens when English becomes the main language of the conference, rather than a hybrid Scandinavian lingua franca.

One example of spatial humanities in action was Trausti Dagsson's presentation of [Sagnagrunnur](#), a database where metadata have been excerpted from Icelandic folk legends and fairytales collected in the 19th and early 20th century. When visualised in a

map, this data helps us connect legends, persons, places and keywords, which can be helpful in genealogical, ethnographical, linguistic and historical (etc.) research. The same goes for the [Icelandic Saga Map Project](#), which has mapped Icelandic saga texts. These also relate to the Norse activity on the British Isles, which would make the material relevant for research on early British history and linguistics as well.

[Mikael Nørtoft](#) went even further back in history, and used linguistic and archaeological spatial data to discover more about pre-historic times. This was in my opinion one of the most intriguing presentations at the conference since it shed new light on the Migration Period (or the Barbarian Invasions, if you prefer the Roman perspective). The increased amount of data that can be handled when you move from manual to digital analysis allows for quicker results and new conclusions and hypotheses.

Besides allowing us to conduct research in a different way, spatial humanities are also of interest for the education of the public. One example is [Archives+](#) at Manchester Central Library, which allows for locals and visitors to explore the history of Manchester, its organisations, buildings and people. The map interface is the first thing you encounter on the screen and from there you can explore texts and audiovisual material. I recommend the short introduction film on the page linked above!

The e-librarian's digest

In the *Sagnagrunnur* interactive map, the map data comes from Google Maps. In relation to the open access (OA) and open science debate, please refer to the [AHRC OA policy and a recent Guardian article on OA in Europe](#) which open up an interesting discussion of sources and resources in DH projects. This question was briefly discussed during Kessels and van Bree's presentation of their tool [Nodegoat](#), which researchers without advanced IT skills can use to design a custom data model for analysing, visualising and exporting their data. When using Nodegoat to create map visualisations, the geographical data is taken from Google Maps, rather than the open data from [OpenStreetMap](#). The reason for this is that the latter does not allow for the user to have his or her own tiles and style sheets (which can be used, for example, to take away country borders) unless you run it on your own server. Since Google Maps does, it is a more flexible choice for Nodegoat. (An alternative set-up for universities who want to use open data could be to set up the aforementioned server for flexible use of OpenStreetMap data.)

Related to the openness discussion are the current legal obstacles for conducting DH cross-border research. Christopher Natzén, National Library of Sweden (KB), held a presentation on a pilot project between Finnish and Swedish institutions that use ECL (extended collective licenses) to enable cross-border access. While the intention is ["to create a global cross border service of making available source material to the collections of an archive or a library over the Internet with streaming method by ECL"](#), Natzén didn't mention the implications of the wide variety of copyright legislation in the world, and that in a European context, ECL is a method of mitigating copyright-related obstacles to research employed mainly in the Nordic countries. For a more thorough discussion of cross-border access problems for European libraries, please see my [M.A. dissertation on libraries and copyright](#).

In a discussion out of a session, someone presented the view that digitisation schemes

should not be seen as an “extra effort” in a library budget, but as a part of a library's normal e-media budget. The arguments for this are, for example, that material libraries possess are equally important for research as the material provided by publishers through subscriptions. This would also give a better picture of the actual cost of e-media. The [ever-increasing prices of subscriptions](#) are probably not related to the de facto costs of digitising, storing, and providing access to e-media.

Concluding remarks

A more abstract discussion, drifting away from practical projects and solutions, concerns the transition to a digital research environment. [Bente Maegaard](#), University of Copenhagen, said in the closing session that the most important change is that we can share information more easily, which gives better results faster. She stated that digital resources can be shared across institutions and borders, and also generously shared since the original documents are not damaged. The easy access promotes collaboration and research results will in general be more reliable since larger quantities of data can be analysed.

However, to achieve this vision we must overcome several obstacles, mainly of the financial and legal kind. There is also need for a generation change in attitudes towards the methods of humanities. These obstacles are linked. Digital is expensive, and we still lack clear quality standards. A potential solution could be peer-review of digital resources to facilitate the quotability of such resources.

The lack of infrastructure and of recognition of DH achievements also connect to the earlier points. Using DH methods and DH as a designation at the moment makes you a digital champion, and this role might be less comfortable for some than others. Answering questions about legal issues and digital infrastructure might not be appealing for researchers who just want to map regional phonological discrepancies. Information professionals must take a more prominent role in answering and voicing legal and infrastructure-related concerns instead. For this reason, the attendance of librarians at similar events in the future is very important. The questions about copyright and digital durability will always be there, even if not in the form of a main question. To empower the emerging DH communities, we need to be there to respond.