DHN2018 — an Analysis of a Digital Humanities Conference

Eetu Mäkelä[0000−0002−8366−8414] and Mikko Tolonen[0000−0003−2892−8911]

HELDIG – Helsinki Centre for Digital Humanities,
University of Helsinki, Finland
http://heldig.fi
firstname.lastname@helsinki.fi

Abstract. This article examines both the choices made, as well as the data gathered during the construction of the programme for the DHN2018 conference. Through this, we shed light on 1) the general directions of DH in the Nordic countries, 2) which DH traditions are particularly well represented here and 3) the pain points and surprising interactions identified during the programme-curation process. We base our recommendations to the organisers of future conferences on this analysis.

1 Introduction

There is no single digital humanities (DH). On the contrary, as a term its contents are under constant, fervent negotiation [2,7,3]. As a result, on the global level DH as a field is a complex landscape of partially overlapping domains [6], including humanities computing, multimodal cultural heritage and digital culture studies, for example. Not all of these fields are connected, but they rather form a landscape in which each camp has aspects in common with its neighbours, who have things in common with their neighbours, and so on.

The tensions in such a structure become manifest in the defining and aligning of an institution's digital humanities with those of others, and in conferences convened under the general heading of "digital humanities". The way such conferences (including DHN2018) tend to deal with the problem is to explicitly embrace the moniker of diversity, of "big-tent digital humanities" [7].

In the broader scheme of things, this is not an unproductive decision. Consider the landscape of the humanities in general, for example: it is full of research traditions and approaches that are mutually incompatible. In this sense, DH acts as a connector. Clearly, without DH, historical studies, linguistics and cultural and area studies (the most frequent humanities backgrounds in DHN2018) could not be part of the same conference in a sensible way.

At the same time, it is useful not only to acknowledge the diversity inside the big tent, but also to chart it, and to think critically about one's own position within it. In the Nordic context, with our own brand of digital humanities just emerging, this also opens up an active opportunity to affect how it will eventually solidify. It is an opportunity that extends beyond the DHN conference, as

attempts at Nordic collaboration in developing DH infrastructures and teaching, for example, go hand in hand with its development.

To this end, this article explores both the choices made in creating the programme for DHN2018, as well as the data gathered during its construction. We will shed light on 1) the general directions of DH in the Nordic countries, 2) which DH traditions are particularly well represented and 3) the pain points and surprising interactions among the traditions identified during the programme-curation process. We base our recommendations to the organisers of future conferences on this analysis.

2 Nordic Strands of DH

Given the role of a general DH conference as a big tent filled with overlapping camps, the themes for the call for papers were consciously chosen to serve as the support pillars. These themes included History, Cultural Heritage, Games and Future, selected to comply with local DH interests as well as current thinking about the DHN setting in an international context. To encourage mingling among the camps, the four keynote speakers for the conference were invited on the understanding that they would contribute to the interplay of these themes. Open Science was selected as the overall unifying and reflective theme: although distinct from DH, as an endeavour [1] it nonetheless resonates with many of its strands, and as an entity parallels the notion that DH could act as a transformative force across the whole of the humanities[1].

Reflecting the selection of these themes, Figures 1 and 2 show the disciplines and topics mentioned in the proposals received. Considered in light of the theme distribution of the major international DH conference[2], they also illustrate the specific composition of Nordic DH in contrast with the international average. The top five humanities disciplines to which the proposals pertain are the same for both conferences, but the order is different. The two most frequently used keywords in DHN2018 are history and linguistics, compared with literary studies, and library and information science in the international DH conference.

Among the topic keywords, on the other hand, cultural-heritage collections, and galleries, libraries, archives and museums appear much more frequently in the DHN2018 proposals. This highlights the interest and participation of cultural-heritage institutions in DH as a particular feature shared among all Nordic countries. Open data is also heavily represented, reflecting the overall theme. New media, games and digital art are still more frequent, but generally remain on the side-lines. This highlights the tension between DH as a historically technical discipline as opposed to newer attempts to include the study of digital culture within its remit.

Finally, data modelling and natural language processing both feature more often than in the international DH conference. This reflects the strong computer-

---

[1] See e.g. the Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0, `http://humanitiesblast.com/manifesto/Manifesto_V2.pdf`

[2] `http://scottbot.net/submissions-to-dh2017-pt-1/`
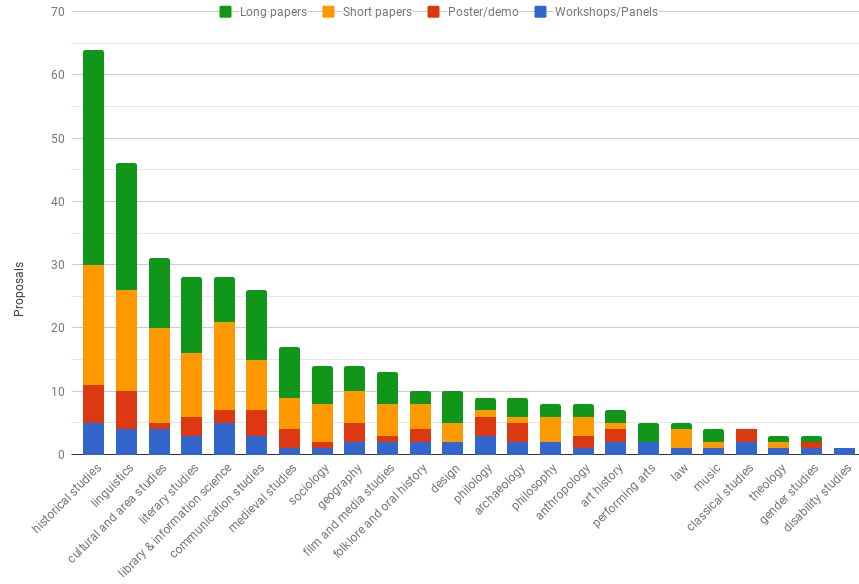
Fig. 1. Disciplines associated with proposals submitted to DHN 2018
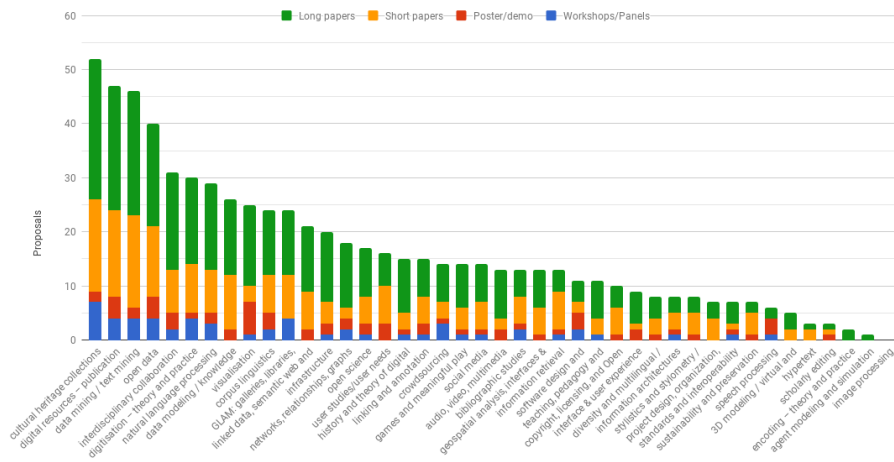

Fig. 2. Topics associated with proposals submitted to DHN 2018

science and language-technology tradition here, but it also concerns conference expectations in general.

3 A Clash of Traditions

As noted, people attending digital-humanities conferences come from differing scholarly backgrounds. This is certainly true in the case of a regional conference such as DHN, in which the barrier to entry has deliberately been kept low so that people may attend just to find out what DH is and to see if they would be interested in being part of it. These different scholarly traditions, it turns out, project very different conceptions of what a conference is, and how a conference programme ought to be curated.

These differences matter for two reasons. First, if the call for papers and the reviewer instructions are not fully explicit about what is sought, the common-ground fallacy / false-consensus effect [4] will ensure some level of confusion among all participants. Striving for clarity in these instructions is something we aimed at in DHN2018, but we ultimately failed. It is our hope that our explanations of what we discovered about these traditions during the submission and review process will help future organisers to be better prepared.

Even more importantly, however, these differences have practical implications that make a conference either attractive or unattractive to people from a particular background. In other words, the choice of conference format can be used actively to shape what DH in the Nordic countries ends up being.

Related to this, the biggest change in this year's conference was to allow the submission of a publication-ready text instead of an abstract, if so desired. This was done in part to encourage participation from the fields of language technology and computer science, where it is the norm. In these traditions, a quality conference is a publication venue on a par with journals — people send in publication-ready texts, which go through a thorough expert-led peer-review process, and the resulting conference proceedings are valued as much as if not more than journal publications.

This practice has practical consequences for DH conferences. For example, many people conducting research in the fields of data science, human-computer interaction and language technology do not consider the main international DH conference an attractive forum because it does not publish citable proceedings. Indeed, as previously mentioned, the proportion of language-technology proposals for DHN2018 exceeded that of the international DH conference. Interestingly, of the 26 proposals submitted under this heading, 18 (69%) were sent as publication-ready texts.

However, conference proceedings are not universally valued even within computer science. Conferences in some traditions take in what is known as an extended abstract: essentially, a fully-formed text is submitted but what comes out is not citable [5]. Indeed, the fact that the output is not formally published is the key. In such cases the conference functions as a sounding board for the authors, allowing them to improve the paper before journal submission.

The focus of conferences in many humanities disciplines is even more strongly on developing ongoing work. This work may well be nowhere near publication-ready, thus an abstract is a more fitting submission format. What is discussed at the conference is reworked into a special issue of a journal at a later point in some fields, whereas in others it may only appear in monograph form years later. Whatever the case, on the understanding that conferences deal with unfinished work, conference proceedings may be actively frowned upon. PhD students of history at the University of Cambridge in the early 2000s were specifically instructed never to publish work in such proceedings, for example, because it would undermine their reputation as prospective scholars.

What makes matters even more complex is that the amount of peer review for different types of submissions also varies by field and by conference. Some people who submitted proposals to DHN2018 were surprised that there was peer review at all. The shortest submitted abstract comprised two sentences, whereas some long ones resembled publication-ready texts in both length and form.

Analysis of the dataset of proposals and their reviews also gives statistical support to the argument that abstract-oriented traditions focus less on finished work. A two-sample t-test conducted between the review scores for the two proposal categories produced weak evidence of an association between publication-ready texts and better presentation and overall scores (p~0.1, meaning a ~10% likelihood of this happening merely due to random chance). However, with regard to a better quality-of-content score, the evidence was very strong (p~0.005).

What all this means is that organisers of DH conferences should carefully think through and balance these different traditions. At the same time, they should actively think where they wish to end up on the spectrum, taking small steps to move the coalescing tradition in the right direction.

With respect to DHN, we would like the tradition to move towards that of computer science in some respects, with submitted texts containing the finished work instead of an abstract. This is not incompatible with the notion of conferences as a platform for developing ongoing work. In fact, this is often explicitly encoded in the proposal types in computer-science conferences. Full papers are expected to be between eight and 16 pages in length, and to report on ready research. Short papers, on the other hand, are between four and eight pages long, and report on intermediate results from ongoing work. The final category of between two and four publication-ready pages for posters is something even those just starting projects should be able to write. This does shift the focus of conferences to the publication-ready side of the spectrum. To counteract this in the interests of the major group affected, some conferences also host a doctoral consortium in which doctoral students can practise presenting their work in a talk, and at the same time gain exposure to the wider conference as a whole.

Of necessity, any transition in this direction will need to be long, given that only 57 of the 160 proposals (36%) in 2018 were submitted as publication-ready texts. Moreover, it should not happen before the Nordic DH field has further coalesced. At present, it is much more important to be inclusive of the different tradi-

tions, which is easily facilitated by keeping the abstract and citable-proceedings tracks in parallel.

4 Regional Directions in DH

In terms of participation, DHN2018 represents a significant growth for the community, with a 90-per-cent increase in proposals as well as accepted presentations, and a 60-per-cent increase in participation (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of participants in the DHN conferences

Conference	Proposals	Presentations	Posters	% Returning	Participants
2016, Oslo	125	79	13		220
2017, Gothenburg	100	61	15	15%	191
2018, Helsinki	186	116	37	32%	310

However, more in-depth scrutiny of the statistics (Table 2 showing absolute numbers and Table 3 showing proportions) reveals differing patterns among the participating countries. Alarmingly, the relative proportions of both Norwegian and Danish participants have dwindled, in terms of both presentations and attendance. At the same time, the proportion of Swedish participants is holding fairly steady, balancing a moderate increase in the absolute number of proposal writers, with a moderate decrease in participation.

Table 2. Number of participants in the DHN conferences by country. DK=Danish, FI=Finnish, NO=Norwegian, and SE=Swedish. Pr=Proposal authors, Pa=Participants

Conference	DKPr	DKPa	FIPr	FIPa	NoPr	NOPa	SEPr	SEPa
2016, Oslo	14	34	21	41	35	73	30	52
2017, Gothenburg	21	30	47	30	12	21	40	59
2018, Helsinki	14	19	124	160	13	14	55	43

Table 3. Proportion of participants in the DHN conferences by country

Conference	DKPr	DKPa	FIPr	FIPa	NoPr	NOPa	SEPr	SEPa
2016, Oslo	11%	15%	16%	19%	28%	33%	25%	24%
2017, Gothenburg	13%	11%	28%	15%	7%	11%	24%	31%
2018, Helsinki	5%	6%	41%	50%	4%	5%	18%	14%

Making up most of the overall increase are thus the Finns. Much of this is, of course, natural in 2018 when the conference was hosted in Helsinki. However,

the trend appeared earlier. Upon further analysis, what seems to be happening here could be a direct effect of science policy: in March 2015 the Academy of Finland published a special call for funding digital humanities projects [3]. In addition, in November 2015 the University of Helsinki put in a 10-million-euro application to the Academy for profiling funding for digital humanities. This may have provided a significant incentive for Finnish organisations to send delegates to the 2016 Oslo inaugural DHN conference just to test the waters. For the Oslo conference, for example, the Finnish Association for Scholarly Publishing funded the participation of 10 applicants. Various memory organisations in Finland, including the National Library, the National Archives, SLS and SKS, have also been active in promoting the participation of their employees in the three DHN conferences thus far. All in all, 19 per cent of the participants in Oslo were Finnish, as opposed to only 16 per cent of the proposal authors. This further indicates that a significant proportion of people are travelling to and attending the conference without giving a presentation.

Even more interestingly, this dynamic was reversed in Gothenburg 2017, with a whopping 28 per cent of the papers involving a Finnish author, whereas the proportion of Finnish participants stayed at 15 per cent. This may indicate a phenomenon in which knowledge of the Academy programme and the 10 million euros of profiling funding granted in March 2016 had trickled down to Finnish researchers who, realising that what they had been doing already could be branded as digital humanities, used accepted proposals as leverage to obtain travel funding to attend the conference.

As mentioned above, it is natural that Finnish participation grew further in 2018 when the conference was in Finland. However, the fact that 41 per cent of the authors of papers and 50 per cent of the participants were Finnish is a worrisome statistic for anyone striving for a pan-Nordic balance. At the same time, there are encouraging signs. Apart from the relative stability of Swedish participation overall, a closer look at returning authors reveals a community coalescing with less skewed participation. Of a total of 54 authors returning from 2017, four are Norwegian, seven are Danish, 17 are Swedish and 19 are Finnish. This aligns with the statistics from the previous year, when of the 19 returning authors, eight were Finnish, six were Swedish and two were Norwegian. Still, the small proportion of Norwegian and Danish participants remains a worrisome puzzle for the future — although much more will be known about this after the conference in Copenhagen in 2019.

Going beyond the directions of the four biggest Nordic countries, organisers of the 2018 conference also tried to use the location to expand across the Baltic. To an extent, this was successful, with nine delegates arriving from Estonia and six from Latvia.

---

[3] `http://www.aka.fi/globalassets/32akatemiaohjelmat/digihum/ohjelmamuistio_digihum_en_final.pdf`

5 The Future

In our opinion, the annual DHN conference will fulfil several important roles in the future.

First, it will develop into the central platform to showcase what is being done, and to develop new ideas related to DH in the Nordic countries. Second, it will act as a catalyst for new kinds of collaboration between researchers and memory organisations on the one hand, and among language technology, computer science and the humanities on the other. If successful, both of these outcomes will also have an impact beyond the Nordic countries. At the same time, this kind of cross-fertilisation will continue to bring new research questions to the conference.

DHN can and should also develop into new areas, including summer schools and other activities to develop training and competences. This branching out will help solidify the particular Nordic brand of digital humanities, which rests on the core Nordic strengths and values of co-operation, planning and infrastructural support. The workshops dedicated to sharing resources and best practices on teaching, co-located with the DHN conferences, constitute a prime example of this. Another good example is the development of shared DH data-management and computational resources.

Infrastructural developments going hand in hand with DHN will play an important role in all of these developments. One important argument related to this is that it will probably be necessary in the future, even for individual applications (such as ERC grants), to position the project as benefiting from available research infrastructures, into which the EU has already poured significant funds. With CLARIN and DARIAH being the landmark ERICs in the humanities, it is imperative to ensure strong Nordic co-operation within these organisations. At present, most Nordic countries are connected to CLARIN, but only Denmark has also joined DARIAH. As the Nordic dimension of DARIAH is developing virtually alongside DHN (explorations for a Nordic Hub for DARIAH have been ongoing since 2015), it would seem natural for these approaches to continue to further evolve in unison.

References

1. Fecher, B., Friesike, S.: Open science: One term, five schools of thought. In: Bartling, S., Friesike, S. (eds.) Opening Science: The Evolving Guide on How the Internet is Changing Research, Collaboration and Scholarly Publishing, pp. 17–47. Springer International Publishing, Cham (2014). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-00026-8_2
2. Kirschenbaum, M.: Digital humanities as/is a tactical term. In: Debates in the Digital Humanities, pp. 415–428. University of Minnesota Press, NED - new edition edn. (2012), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv8hq.26

3. Liu, A.: Where is cultural criticism in the digital humanities? In: Debates in the Digital Humanities, pp. 490–510. University of Minnesota Press, NED - new edition edn. (2012), `http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv8hq.32`
4. Mustajoki, A.: Risks of miscommunication in various speech genres. In: Understanding by Communication, pp. 33–53. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge (2013)
5. Schultz, D.M.: The abstract and extended abstract. In: Eloquent Science: A Practical Guide to Becoming a Better Writer, Speaker, and Atmospheric Scientist, pp. 259–264. American Meteorological Society, Boston, MA (2009). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-935704-03-4_23
6. Svensson, P.: The landscape of digital humanities. Digital Humanities Quarterly **4** (2010), `http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/4/1/000080/000080.html`
7. Svensson, P.: Beyond the big tent. In: Debates in the Digital Humanities, pp. 36–72. University of Minnesota Press, NED - new edition edn. (2012), `http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv8hq.7`