Digital Humanities in Action: the Sixth Digital Humanities in the Nordic and Baltic Countries conference

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Abstract

The *6th Digital Humanities in the Baltic and Nordic Countries Conference* was organised as a hybrid conference in Uppsala on March 15-18, 2022. This introduction presents the scientific programme, conference participation, and the experience of organising an hybrid DHNB conference. The conference theme "Digital humanities in action" was selected to highlight the effects of digital humanities outside the confines of academia, and to encourage the participants to rethink how the scholarly practices in digital humanities interact with society at large. These proceedings cover the key thematic areas discussed at the conference, and include the paper presentations that were submitted as full versions to the conference proceedings.

Keywords

digital humanities, DHNB, conferences

1. Introduction

Planning and arranging an international conference is a challenge. Planning and arranging an international and cross-disciplinary conference within the notoriously hard-to-define area of digital humanities is a bigger challenge. And doing this as a hybrid event in the midst of an ongoing pandemic is bordering the stupid. Still, this is what *The 6th Digital Humanities in the Nordic and Baltic Countries Conference (DHNB 2022)* was all about. The conference was held at Uppsala University on 15–18 March 2022, organised jointly by the Centre for Digital Humanities Uppsala (CDHU), the Department of ALM, Uppsala University, and the Uppsala University Library. The conference was the sixth in the series of DHNB conferences since Oslo 2016, and the first with the B officially included in the name of the conference.

The academic program of the conference is represented in these proceedings and the previously published book of abstracts [1]. The proceedings are rich of interesting papers that will keep the vivid field of digital humanities in the Nordic and Baltic countries going, if not forever at least up until the next DHNB conference takes place. In this short introduction, we

will describe the conference and its following proceedings in numbers and in words, as all good digital humanities work. The ambition is to make an overarching account of what the conference was about, how it relates to the previous DHNB conferences, and what this can tell us about the development of digital humanities in the Nordic and Baltic Countries in a larger perspective. Finally, we try to draw some conclusions that we send along to future conference organisers.

All DHNB conferences focus on research, education and communication in the interdisciplinary field of digital humanities in the Nordic and Baltic regions and beyond. DHNB 2022 explicitly highlighted the two-way relationship between digital humanities theory and praxis and society. Much digital humanities research brings together technical implementation with critical discourse to correspond to broader cultural and institutional settings. In this light, DHNB 2022 chose the conference theme "Digital Humanities in Action", where we specifically welcomed presentations on how digital humanities can make a difference to society outside the confines of academia, for example concerning stakeholders of memory and culture (e.g., media, institutions of memory and heritage), and the societal and political spheres more generally. In the slogan-like phrasing, the DHNB 2022 conference had the ambition to put digital humanities in action.

Not only did the call for submissions reflect this emphasis. We invited three keynote speakers who exemplify this border crossing in distinct ways. *Koraljka Golub*, Professor in Library and Information Science at the Department of Cultural Sciences, Linnaeus University, talked about "The conjunction of knowledge organization and digital humanities". She shed light on the role and challenges of metadata practices and standards in a digital world, where knowledge organisation tools need to service an ever expanding and more diverse array of end-users, advance interoperability over larger and more numerous collections across various platforms, and support the sustainability of a variety of resources.

In the second keynote, *Wolfram Horstmann*, Director of the Göttingen State and University Library and University Librarian of Georg August Universität Göttingen, used the title "Humanities and Libraries – The Return of a Dream Team?" to discuss the simultaneous and often parallel transformations of (digital) humanities and research libraries in the digital realm. He somewhat provocatively questioned the future relevance of the "digital" in the digital humanities, and instead emphasised the long line of collaboration and mutual understanding between humanities scholarship and research libraries. *Roopika Risam*, finally, reflected perhaps most explicitly on the conference theme. In her keynote, labelled "Digital Humanities as Activism", she discussed how digital humanities knowledge and expertise can be mobilized to respond to the more pressing crises of our time. Drawing on her extensive experiences and collaborative projects, such as Torn Apart/Separados and the Digital Ethnic Futures Consortium, Risam articulated a vision for how, at small and large scales, we as digital humanities scholars can use our powers for good.

2. The DHNB 2022 conference in numbers (and words)

The call for submissions attracted a total number of 135 paper and workshop proposals. In contrast to some of the previous DHN conferences, the submission of papers and their review

was a two step process. In the main call in September 2021, the programme selection and the peer review regarded the abstracts of the papers, which were then presented at the DHNB 2022 conference in March. Furthermore, in the second call, the accepted presenters had the possibility to submit their full papers to the conference proceedings by February 15. These full papers were peer reviewed and are included in these conference proceedings. The two step process was followed to ensure that the current Nordic and Baltic digital humanities research could be presented as widely as possible in the post-pandemic situation. Also, the solution enabled to combine elements from the conference traditions familiar to the humanities and computer science scholars that has been a matter to facilitate in the calls at previous DHN conferences.[1]

The main call for submission[2] attracted a total number of 130 paper proposals. After the peer review round of the abstracts, 114 of these (88 %) were accepted to be presented at the conference, divided in the following categories: 24 long papers, 69 short papers, and 21 posters. The acceptance rate is higher than at the previous DHNB conferences[3], which differs partly due to the two step review process in place at DHNB 2022. Moreover, 22% of the submissions for DHNB 2022 were accepted to be presented in a shorter paper category, with which the Programme Committee aimed at inclusiveness and broader representation at the conference.

To this list of paper proposals, 5 workshop proposals should be added, of which 4 were finally organised on the first day of the conference, 15 March. Respectively, the workshops covered the topics "Digital Humanities Support Units in the Nordic and Baltic Countries", "Digital Parliamentary Data in Action (DiPaDA 2022)" [4], "Higher Education Programs in Digital Humanities and Social Sciences: Challenges and Perspectives", and "Introduction to Text and Image Analysis Using Python". Of these, the first three workshops had their own separate call for contributions and attracted an additional group of participants interested in the conference themes.

In total, 239 people registered for and participated in the conference, 146 attending in person in Uppsala (61%), and 94 attending virtually (39%). The hybrid method of conferencing required specific preparations and operation during the conference. To streamline this as best as possible we decided to work with AppinConf and their conference platform Invajo. From our own experience this was a successful solution which significantly supported the organisation of the conference. The conference platform was accessible for all participants. It was the way through which online participants could present and attend sessions, but also where the schedule, abstracts and posters were available and participants' networking could take place.

As with any Digital Humanities conference, the diversity of research topics, methods and disciplines represented is both its strength and a challenge. This diversity can be seen when considering the papers presented at the conference. All abstracts of the presented papers are available in the conference Book of Abstracts [1], but we briefly ponder over the distribution here. The most associated disciplines among the accepted proposals to the DHNB 2022 conference were historical studies, linguistics, literary studies, library and information science, and computational studies (the latter including both computational linguistics and computer science). These

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[1]See for example [2]

[2]Besides the call for proposals in September 2021, the call included a late-call for posters in January 2022.

[3]In both Helsinki in 2018 and in Copenhagen in 2019 the submissions acceptance rate was around 75 % ([3]; [2]).
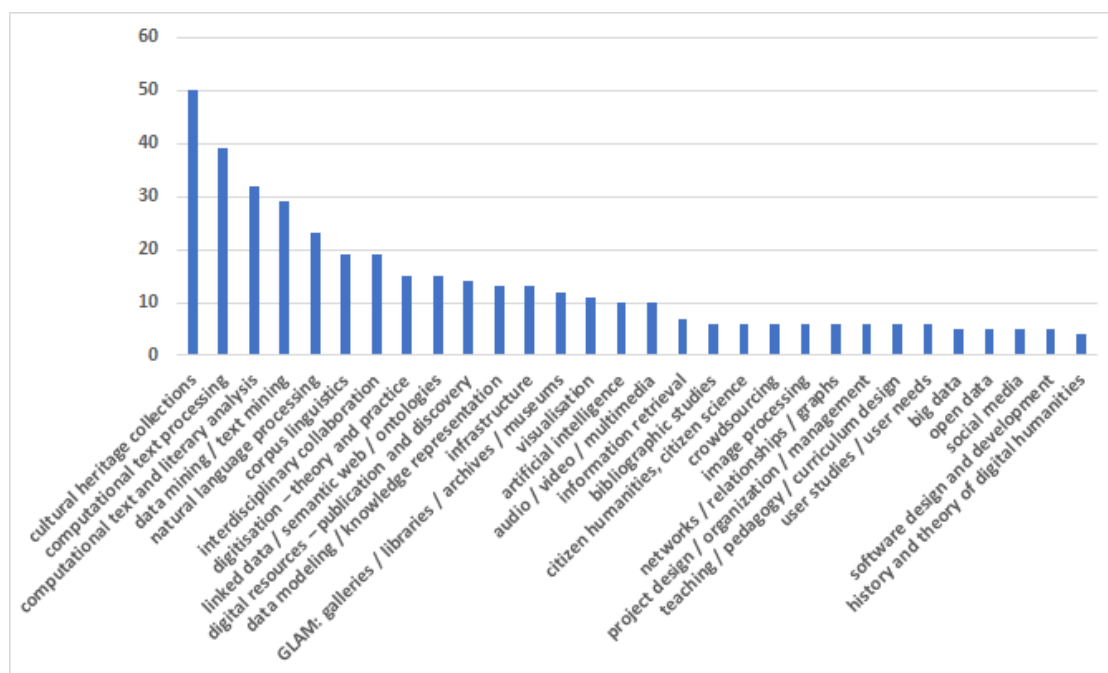
Figure 1: Distribution of 30 most common topics associated with the accepted proposals at DHNB 2022.

disciplinary divisions can be discerned when considering the topics of each submission. All authors tagged their submissions using a provided - relatively elaborate and overlapping - topic list, which allowed for multiple topics to be chosen per submission.

Figure 1 presents the 30 most common topics (selected by the authors) associated with the accepted proposals. The available topic list of the DHNB 2022 was broader than at previous DHNB conferences, but a distribution similar to the earlier DHNB conferences emerges [5]. The topic of "cultural heritage collections" is the main topic (as in Copenhagen 2019), and the themes of "data mining / text mining", "natural language processing" and "corpus linguistics" were also leading themes at the previous conferences. The topics of "computational text processing", and "text and literary analysis" were new for the DHNB 2022. The emphasis of the topics is on traditional areas in digital humanities with centrality on text, however, it is possible to speculate on trends based on the topics and their distributions at previous DHNB conferences. For example, the relevance of "digital resources - publication and discovery" continued to diminish since DHNB 2018, which can suggest a shift towards a more empirical focus in the research community.

Another perspective on the topics of the proposals can be taken by looking at the actual conference session titles which were formed by studying the paper topics and the abstracts of the proposals. The accepted proposals were grouped into three sessions about "Computational literary analysis" (3) and "Digital history" (3), and two sessions each about "Linguistics and corpus linguistics" (2), "User interfaces, tools, and research process" (2), and "Visuals, audio, and

	2022	..	2018 (*)	2019 (*)	2020 (*)
Finland	29.4		45.8	23.0	23.5
Sweden	27.8		15.3	26.0	14.8
Norway	10.0		5.6	9.0	4.8
Denmark	8.5		5.4	15.0	7.5
Iceland	0.8		1.8	5.0	1.9
Estonia	3.7		2.3	4.0	7.1
Latvia	6.7		2.9	0.0	11.0
Lithuania	0.0		0.1	0.0	3.3
Others	12.9		(*)	(*)	(*)

Figure 2: Weighted distribution of countries (affiliation) for all authors in the proposals accepted for DHNB 2022. Source: 2018-2020 from [5]. Note: The weight of each country is calculated similarly to [5]: each proposal counts as 1 and is divided accordingly among the proposal authors. Country is based on affiliation. (*) The shares provided in [5] do not sum to 100%. It is not explicit whether the rest is other countries.

audiovisuals" (2). To these topic areas we can include also the session on "Curating historical data" and "Creating corpora and digital resources", and also "Crowdsourcing, transcribing, and resource building". Besides these, there were sessions with a focus on data journalism and media analysis, and digital ethnography.

When DHN expanded into DHNB to explicitly include also the Baltic region, the numbers of participants from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania rose significantly – from around 5 % in Helsinki 2018 and Copenhagen 2019 to over 20 % in Riga 2020 [5]. This was partly due to the fact that the conference took place in Riga, but also in Uppsala the number of delegates from the Baltic region was noteworthy (10% of the authors (weighted) and 8 % of the conference participants, see Figures 2–3). This indicates that name change has had a more long-term effect, however, we see that the participation from Baltic countries regards mainly Latvia and to a smaller degree Estonia.

Regarding the Nordic countries, similar tendencies as in previous conferences can be noted. The host country (Sweden) has a high rate of authorship (weighted, 28%) and participants (37%), but Finland especially seems to be strong within the DHNB community (29% of the paper authors, (weighted) and 21% of the participants) (see figures 2–3). We see also from Figure 3, that online participation was more preferred, as expected, by non-Swedish participants, with the exception of participants from Norway who attended physically to a high extent. For countries beyond the DHNB, the conference was attended from larger countries of the region, Germany and Russia, but also from the US, UK, and other mainly European countries. Their total share was 13% of the paper authors (weighted) and 15% of all participants. We are glad with these numbers as they represent how, despite an ongoing pandemic, the international profile and the reach of the DHNB conferences persisted in 2022.
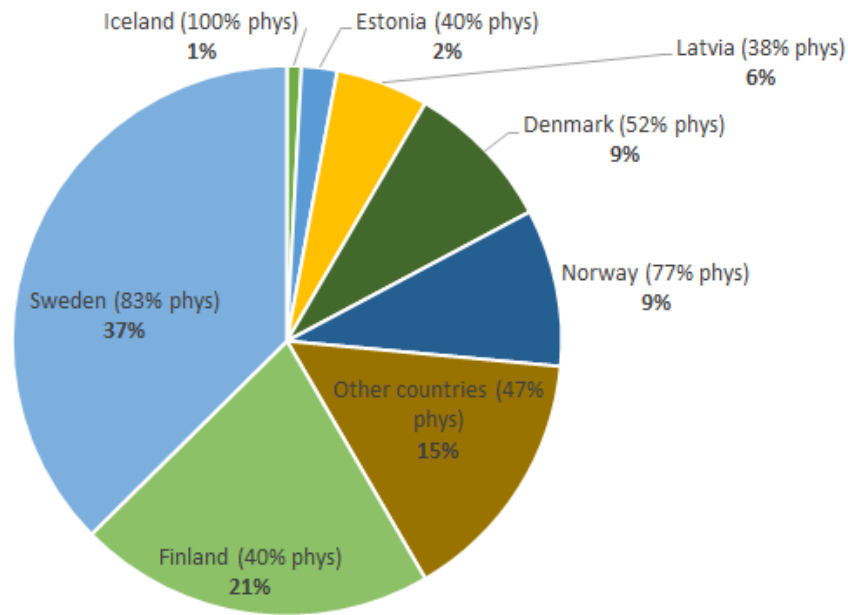
Figure 3: Distribution of countries for all participants in DHNB 2022. Note: "phys" for share of physical participants in Uppsala.

3. Proceeding with the proceedings

The authors whose long paper, short paper or poster submission was accepted and presented at the DHNB 2022 conference were given the opportunity to send in their paper for these conference proceedings.[4] In the proceedings, we follow the same categories as during the conference: long papers, with 20 minutes presentations, take up 10–15 pages; short papers were presented in 10 minutes and are published with 5–9 pages (main text); and poster papers 3–4 pages (main text). Of the 106 papers presented at the conference, 58 (55%) were also submitted as a paper for the conference proceedings. The papers in the proceedings underwent a second peer review process, where 45 of the papers were accepted, which means an acceptance rate of 78 %. The reviewers in both rounds of reviews included the Programme Committee, and invited scholars who have been active in the DHNB conferences and community.

The DHNB 2022 conference proceedings thus include 45 papers in total, including 11 long papers, 31 short papers, and 3 poster papers. Additionally, the proceedings of the "Digital Parliamentary Data in Action (DiPaDA 2022)" workshop, organised as a part of DHNB 2022, published their own proceedings, comprising 10 long and 2 short papers [4].

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[4]One group did not receive this opportunity: those who submitted in response to the second (late) call for posters.

4. Conclusion: DHNB in the future

The sixth DHNB conference in Uppsala built continuity in the meetings of the Nordic and Baltic DH community after the pandemic, and offered valuable experiences in organising a hybrid DHNB conference. Participation was strong in geographic terms in the whole region, but it appears important to continue encouraging the participation from the Baltic countries. The main topics presented at the conference followed mainly the traditional tracks of DH research, but strong subareas were present, e.g. papers on research with and about audio-visual and multimodal data. We also noted several more technically oriented papers, which suggests that any borders or definitions of digital humanities are as hard to accomplish as ever before. Is there any difference between "digital humanities", on the one side, and "computer science applied to the humanities", on the other? We do not have the answer, but as these proceedings show people are interpreting what DH is in a range of ways, and this is likely to be a good thing.

The conference theme of "Digital Humanities in Action" was highlighted especially in the keynote presentations, but also through the workshops and some sessions which examined the effects and interaction of digital humanities research in a larger societal setting. The perspectives regarded for example digital activism, interaction with the GLAM institutions and beyond, citizen science and user interfaces for broader public, and data journalism or media analysis.

In order to understand the experience of the conference participants, a questionnaire was send out to all registered participants directly after the conference.[5] We were glad to hear from participants that their experience with the conference platform was mostly positive: all but one of the respondents expressed that their conference experience was either good or very good. Some technical hiccups were experienced, probably more than what can be expected from an in-person only conference. As organisers we would add that hybrid events require significant resources both in terms of digital platform solutions and technical staff to be present on site. Several people noted that the hybrid solution for the poster session did not meet their expectations.[6] Further critique regarded a few concerns related to the in-person facilities and program: overlapping or missing elements in the social program or some sessions which lacked coherence. However, we highly recommend the next organisers to double check that there is plenty of coffee available at all times.

Overall, the responding participants appear to share our view that a hybrid conference comes with its problems (technical, economic, social), but also with its strengths (flexibility, possible to choose level of conference engagement). Due to the pandemic situation, hybridity was the only option available for DHNB 2022. For future DHNB conferences, however, other solutions might be preferred. What for sure will remain important is that the digital humanities community in the Nordic and Baltic countries continues to meet and discuss, no matter if it is physically, digitally, or hybrid. And we are confident in saying that the DHNB conference series plays a key role in achieving this.

These proceedings conclude the DHNB 2022, and we are ready to pass on the DHNB triangle

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[5]The questionnaire included ten questions, with a particular focus on the hybrid method. In total, 40 people responded, which comes down to a 17% response rate.

[6]Attempting to create a way to engage with posters in similar ways online and in-person, we organised a poster slam style session and used the conference platform to primarily exhibit all posters. As a result, participants expressed they missed a poster exhibition session integrated in the program.

to new organisers: The next DHNB conference is scheduled to take place online in 8-10 March 2023 and will be organised by the University of Oslo Library, the University of Bergen Library, and the University of Stavanger, The Greenhouse. The DHNB 2024 conference is planned to take place in Reykjavik. We really look forward to these conferences and wish the organisers all the best. Hopefully, what we have learned from organising this conference can make them into even better conference experiences.

Acknowledgments

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[7]Apart from the chair Isto Huvila, the Programme Committe consisted of: Mikael Alm, Maria Berggren, Karl Berglund, Jan von Bonsdorff, Anna Foka, Olga Holownia, Andres Karjus, Veronika Laippala, Matti La Mela, Daniel Löwenborg, Costanza Navaretta, Annika Rockenberger, Olle Sköld, and Mikko Tolonen.