Swedish Digital Humanities
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The label 'digital humanities' (DH) has been around for almost 20 years.[1] During the years since, three events have been pivotal for establishing the label:

1. John Unsworth's 2000 initiative for a Master's programme at the University of Virginia,
2. the publication in 2004 of Blackwell's *A Companion to Digital Humanities* (Schreibman, Siemens & Unsworth 2004), and
3. the renaming of the major conference in the field in 2006 in Paris from ALLC/ACH to *Digital Humanities*.[2]

During these two decades, the field has undergone virtually all phases that signify the establishment of an academic discipline, such as educational programmes at all academic levels, well-established scholarly peer reviewed journals, large international conferences, community networks, institutionalisation in the form of scholarly and professional organisations

at global, cross-national, national and regional level, and a canonical library of monographs, anthologies and text books. The early 2010s for instance witnessed a whole series of books aiming to map and define DH: *Debates in the Digital Humanities* in 2012 and 2016, *Digital_Humanities* in 2012, *Understanding Digital Humanities* in 2012, *Defining Digital Humanities* in 2013, and *Between the Humanities and the Digital* in 2015. Yet many, both within and outside of DH, remain quite uneasy with the label and even unsure of what it actually means. And while DH continues to conquer territories and funding, a sceptical criticism of the field and its legitimacy has gradually emerged.[3]

This disciplinary formation takes place at regional and national level as well: Australia, Benelux, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, Russia, and many other regions and countries. The Nordic countries are no exception: the organisation Digital Humanities in the Nordic countries (DHN) was established in 2015 as part of the European Association for Digital Humanities (formerly ALLC) and offers yearly conferences, each attracting some 200 delegates from fields across the humanities and the social sciences. Each of these Nordic countries of course also has a DH history and infrastructure of its own, adding their dialects to the collective DH thesaurus. The history of Swedish DH is currently being written, and we are likely to see overview articles, reports and books in the upcoming years. An already published example in English is the 2014 overview by Nygren, Foka and Buckland.

Actually several attempts were made already *avant la lettre* to find a joint national platform for digital humanities, such as the launch of *Human IT* in 1997, of HumLab in Umeå in 1999, and two early and important national conferences in the 2000s (*Digital Dimensions* in Uppsala in 2003 and its follow-up *The Technological Texture* in Umeå in 2005). Nevertheless, it is only within the last few years that Swedish DH has gained considerable momentum, both by coming closer to an infrastructural community and by attracting visibility in media, politics and in the board room of the universities and funding bodies. DH centres,

programmes and labs are quickly being established throughout the country, such as the universities of Linköping, Lund, Stockholm, Uppsala and Växjö. Two nodes are however *primi motores* in this development: the universities of Gothenburg and Umeå.

In Gothenburg an intense activity has whirled up around the two expertise centres *The Language Bank (Språkbanken)* and *The Literature Bank (Litteraturbanken)*; the *Centre for Digital Humanities* (*Centrum för digital humaniora)* started its series of regular seminars in 2014, and the first full-fledged DH Master's programme in the country was launched at the University of Gothenburg in 2017. Gothenburg was also the first Swedish venue in 2017 for DHN's conference series.

For almost 20 years Humlab at Umeå University has indefatigably presented and critically developed the DH field in Sweden (and beyond) through conferences, workshops and courses, doctoral and postdoc positions, cooperative support to the many faculties and departments at the university, and of course through its physical lab presence on campus. Humlab takes a broad view on digital humanities: although the field traces its roots back to humanities computing based on textual scholarship and linguistics, Humlab was already from the start eager to combine these interests with areas such as visualisation, virtual representations of culture and history, and studies of how digital media open up for new forms of narrative and artistic expression.

When the Swedish anthology *Digital humaniora – humaniora i en digital tid* (*Digital Humanities – Humanities in a Digital Age)* was published in the fall of 2017, it is therefore not surprising that nine out of the thirteen chapter authors are affiliated (more or less) to Umeå University. Comprising ten chapters, the book is published by the renowned house Daidalos (with a profile in philosophy, politics, debates and scholarly essays).

In the introductory chapter Stefan Gelfgren and Julia Pennlert provide a fine overview of methods, approaches and concepts in digital media studies. Humlab's broad view on DH really comes to the fore (in fact, the

chapter ends with a call for funding of humanities labs), and the authors have a firm grip on current media theory. The chapter also recapitulates several attempts over the last decade to define digital humanities as a field. The authors remind us of how the attempts to turn DH into a discipline could work counter to the cross-disciplinary approach that many would be prepared to call its trademark, and further that some of the DH definitions seem to imply a simplistic view on 'traditional' humanities, which risks turning into a straw man argument.

This last point is the main tenet of book historian Kristina Lundblad's subsequent chapter. It is an elegantly written, thought-through and provocative critique of digital humanities, firmly based on Lundblad's profound familiarity with media history. She criticises both the label itself and the claims many of its proponents make. I guess quite a few DH'ers would admit to feeling slightly uneasy with the DH name, while also acknowledging its pragmatic benefits, not least when it comes to attracting funding. Lundblad explores this uneasiness and turns it into sharp criticism, reminding us that the discourse not only risks devaluating other fields of humanities research but could even lead to unjust redistribution of funding for the humanities.

Applying the digital attribute to the humanities, Lundblad says, makes no sense. It is perfectly justifiable to talk about 'digital culture' as opposed to print culture or manuscript culture, but the research exploring these fields is the humanities, nothing more and nothing less. We gain nothing by opposing digital humanities to 'manuscript humanities' or 'print humanities', labels hardly used by anyone. Nor should we contrast digital humanities with 'analogue' or 'traditional' humanities (which we must admit happens regularly in DH discourse): "Not a single one of the texts I have read about DH describes research that we should not simply refer to as 'humanities'" (41).[4] To single out one kind of humanities research as digital and other kinds as non-digital and traditional, is a dangerous path to follow, Lundblad cautions. It risks "undermining our faith to the kinds of questions and inquiries *all* humanists engage with, including

those calling themselves digital humanists" (42). The success that DH has been enjoying for the last ten years or so can be attributed, she says, to the unjust claims made by the field that it presents innovative methods and new research questions and by presenting a caricature of humanities researchers who cannot or will not succumb to being referred to as digital. Tongue-in-cheek, Lundblad says: "[The digital humanists] present themselves as modern compared to those who are merely humanists. Simultaneously digital humanists want to distinguish themselves from techies since they are, after all, humanists – although not in the traditional sense" (46).

Lundblad joins an emerging critical discourse against DH, e.g., Allington, Brouillette and Golumbia 2016 or Brennan 2017 (cf. also Bond, Long & Underwood 2017). Unlike some proponents for this critical stance, Lundblad formulates her criticism from the vantage point of actually having performed humanities research on different forms of media, including digital media, for several years. I sympathise with much of Lundblad's criticism, DH is indeed a cumbersome and basically illogical label. At the same time, the attention DH has received from funders and HE management has been beneficial to research in the humanities on a broad scale. It is an attention humanities research has not been witness to for a very long time. That this has been achieved by playing a joker card instead of a 'traditional' one is perhaps just part of the game. Further, having attended a number of DH conferences and project workshops in Sweden over the last decade, I would defend the claim that DH (stretching back to humanities computing) has indeed contributed significantly to an increase in communication and project cooperation across disciplines within the humanities in Sweden. At DHN and similar conferences, historians, literary scholars, linguists, scholarly editors and philosophers simply seem to talk to each other much more than was the case, say, a decade ago.

Based on a study of museums with media machines and equipment, Jesper Olsson contributes with a fine essay on media archaeology and

so-called media labs. The study of historical artefacts such as computers, printers, projectors and phonographs and the *Verfremdung* it might bring can be a path to new insights into media materiality as well as an aesthetically oriented knowledge (*aesthesis*) rooted in embodiment and spatiality. Olsson's inquiry into the concrete materiality of media reminds the reader of the work done by, e.g., Friedrich Kittler or Matthew Kirschenbaum. As a researcher of cultural heritage digitisation, my attention is drawn to a comment by Olsson: "While certain forms of knowledge can be digitised, other forms are more intimately intertwined with the way they are embodied and materialised. The knowledge produced by media labs is of the latter kind" (71). Producing a digital reproduction of a printed book, a manuscript or any analogue artefact results in a change of materiality and of our understanding of materiality. We replace a spatial analogue object with a digital interpretation. Our knowledge of just how much *aesthesis* is thereby lost when digitising various kinds of artefacts and at different levels is still quite limited.

In the next chapter Jenny Bergenmar performs an informed reading of critical perspectives on and within DH, with a focus on issues of diversity, gender, race, centre and periphery. It is largely based on the *Debates in the Digital Humanities* books (Gold 2012; Gold & Klein 2016), which included titles such as "Why Are the Digital Humanities So White?" or "What Do Girls Dig?". Bergenmar adds to an increasingly present 'otherness' discourse in DH. She draws our attention to how DH practices, methods and technologies tend to reproduce hegemonic norms. Again, I can confirm by referring to the field of cultural heritage digitisation, where a large majority of digital scholarly editions and archives are devoted to male canonised authors. There has been a tendency within DH to talk about, e.g., programming and markup as objective technologies where intersectional perspectives have no relevance. This can partly be explained by understanding the history of the field – humanities computing appeared for a long time to be a sanctuary free from problematic issues of gender, class, race and sexuality. Leaning on Koh, Bergenmar pleads for a

different kind of genealogy, namely "to trace the roots of digital humanities in other fields than humanities computing: media studies, feminist philosophies of technology, internet studies and last but not least research taking place outside of the US and the UK" (86).

Coppélie Cocq and Anna Johansson present studies on blogs and Twitter, and their piece highlights the possibilities of ethnographic perspectives to enrich DH. In some opposition to the quantitative – and promoted – big data approach, an ethnographic research emphasises a more reflexive approach (not least in response to the ethical challenges presenting themselves when researching social media communities while being a community member yourself), and applies qualitative analyses on much smaller sets of rich data: *small* or *thick* data.

Pelle Snickars picks up on the collaborative element of DH in his essay on the history and affordances of Google Docs and similar software as writing tools. Snickars persuasively describes how Google Docs opens up for a transparency of not just collaboration but also the production history of documents – not surprising since Snickars' specialty is media history. His piece marks a contribution to the growing DH subfield of critical software analysis in the company of, e.g., Erica Robles-Anderson and Patrik Svensson (see their acclaimed 2016 article on Powerpoint) or Matthew Kirschenbaum (e.g., 2016). Snickars is not just a skilled DH scholar (see, e.g., his recent piece with Johan Jarlbrink on newspaper mass digitisation, Jarlbrink & Snickars 2017), but an accomplished and often entertaining writer, at times intentionally provocative. The style has its risks. Thus an emphasis on collaboration as a defining feature of DH research along with cross-disciplinarity and a project-based mode of work, could go so far as to depict 'traditional' humanities research as a solitary ivory tower endeavour, blind to the collective and social dimensions of research. This is, I think, an unfair generalisation of humanities. Those of us who are familiar with Snickars' research know for a fact he does not really subscribe to that caricature, but the rhetoric in this chapter prevents him from really marking a sufficient distance to it. It is instructive

to compare this characterisation of so-called traditional humanities to Lundblad's analysis earlier in the volume.

Anna Foka and Stefan Gelfgren devote their chapter to the visualisation of cultural artefacts and sites, seen as a DH research method. The method aims to make use of a richer sensory palette than what is usually applied in projects where cultural heritage material is being digitised. Or rather than visualisation one could talk about simulation – this becomes apparent when the authors discuss archaeoacoustics, i.e., attempts to recreate the acoustics of ancient sites and buildings such as Roman amphitheatres. So what do these technologies open up for in terms of methods and work practices? The authors point to collaboration, cross-disciplinarity, multimodality, open-endedness, spatiality and a richer sensory interaction with the artefacts (or at least virtual representations of them).

The three remaining articles focus on reading technologies and screen literacy. They largely echo earlier generations of DH research (or rather pre-DH) by invoking, e.g., Hayles, Bolter/Grusin, Landow, Murray, Aarseth and Ryan.

In the first of these three, Anders Öhman explores reading, hypertextuality and narrativity, coming to the conclusion that since digital and traditional reading imply two distinct and different forms of literacy with different features, digital reading cannot replace traditional reading. This is partly based on the suggestion that George Landow in his book on hypertext (the 1997 edition) claims hypertext will replace older forms of the novel and emerge as *the* new narrative form. Whichever way one reads Landow's book on hypertext however (the first as well as the second edition), I cannot really find that Landow makes such a claim. Similarly I am a bit surprised by Öhman's attribution to Katherine Hayles of the claim that hyperreading is a 'superior form of reading' in our information society. If one looks closely at what Hayles writes on the topic (2012), the impression is rather the reverse. Overall however Öhman's piece is elegantly written and its arguments clear and persuasive. In particular I am intrigued by his analysis of hypertextuality from the viewpoint of

Bakhtin's dialogism. Where meaning only emerges when the talking subject has a purpose and is allowed to finish what she has to say, the reader of hypertextually structured non-linear fragments of text is less likely to feel addressed and be prompted to provide a dialogical reply.

In the second, Per-Olof Erixon presents findings from a 2010–2011 study on the attitudes of 15-year old pupils and their teachers towards reading texts on computer screens. The article explores how these readers navigate texts on the screen as well as the screen as text. In the third, and in a somewhat similar vein to Erixon's, Anna Lindhé and Carina Hermansson present an ethnographically inspired study of six-year-old children jointly reading ebooks from tablets. In particular, the authors are interested in the kind of interaction taking place between the kids during the reading acts. Materiality, embodiment and empathy (not so much between readers and content as between readers, text and material artefacts) are explored as paths to meaning-making. This could be said to take place in traditional book circles and reading clubs as well, but unlike those communities, the children in the study actually perform and share a live and joint reading (or listen to the recording) and interact with the tablet and each other to navigate and make meaning during the very reading act itself. In these last chapters, the digital qualifier in DH can be discussed. It is certainly humanities research where the subjects being studied happen to interact with digital artefacts, but does that make it DH?

So to sum up, does the book provide a representative view on current DH research in Sweden? I would not say so. First, although the chapters point to several subfields and historical periods of DH, the book as a whole has a distinct emphasis on small-scale, qualitative and critical analyses within the humanities. This is likely to be intentional, and I find the aim to be successful, the chapters work quite well together and share a mutual body of research as references. Swedish DH however also takes the form of large-scale quantitative approaches to explore 'big data', not just historically (with a strong tradition in computational linguistics) but with a current buzz around methods such as topic modelling. The book

devotes very little attention to discuss the rationale and progress of those methods. It rather seems to work as a *corrective* for that hyped-up big data discourse (and as such, it accomplishes its task). Second, the book primarily presents research questions explored at Umeå University, with a slight emphasis on reading and literacy studies. And in some chapters, Swedish DH is hardly discussed or referred to at all.

As for the book's formal qualities: although the book design is functional and aesthetically pleasing both to eye and hand, a publishing house such as Daidalos could certainly have been expected to put down more effort to enhance the book's usability (no fault on behalf of the editors): there are no indices, nor a collective bibliography, nor any additional material online or a parallel digital publication. I should also point out that some of the chapters are poorly copy-edited with quite a number of typos and errors.

I would still recommend the book as an introduction to DH perspectives. The academic level is more than satisfactory and the authors are recognised authorities in their respective fields of expertise. The frequent reader of *Human IT* is likely to recognise many themes in the book. While some chapters offer gentler (and perhaps a bit predictable) introductions to DH perspectives, the editors have also made room for a couple of pieces (Lundblad and Bergenmar) discharging substantial criticism against the field. Contributions such as those beg the question of where DH and humanities research at large is going.

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Notes

1. Attempts to track down the birth of the label can be found at: http://lists. digitalhumanities.org/pipermail/humanist/2015-March/012778.html
2. Cf. Dahlström 2006
3. A much quoted example being the critical as well as criticised article in 2016 by Allington, Brouillette and Golumbia
4. All the quotes from the book are translated by the author of this article

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