

# Facilitating Digital History in Finland

What can we learn from the past?

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## Abstract

The paper discusses the findings of “From Roadmap to Roadshow: A collective demonstration & information project to strengthen Finnish digital history” project. This collaborative research and dissemination project received funding from the Kone Foundation and aims to develop digital history within different history disciplines in Finland. This project and our findings takes as its starting point a survey in 2017 among Finnish historians that identified several critical issues that required further development: better information channels of digital history resources and events, providing relevant education, skills, and teaching by historians, and aiding historians and information technology specialists to meet and collaborate better and more systematically. Many historians also had issues with the concept of digital history and difficulties embracing such an identity.

In order to situate Finnish digital history in the domestic and international contexts, we have studied the 1960s roots of the computational history research in Finland, the current best practice of how to institutionalise and organize digital history internationally. We have visited selected digital humanities centers in Europe and the US identified as having “done something right”. Based on these studies, visits and interviews we will propose steps to be taken for further strengthen the digital history research community in Finland some we already started implementing through creating common meeting places for CS and humanities researchers such as weekly DH lunch meetings. In January-February 2018 we organised a two-week roadshow to six Finnish universities to give workshops teaching practical DH tools and methodologies geared towards historical research as well as to discuss and enquire about the state of the art and future needs of historical researchers.

The presentation discuss what we have learned about the present day conditions of digital history in Finland, how digital humanities is facilitated today in Finland and abroad, and what suggestions we could give for strengthening the conditions for doing digital history research in Finland. We will focus on the critical issues we have identified in surveys and discussions with historians in the Finnish universities, and discuss the possible solutions to these questions found while visiting DH centers. The paper will discuss the following preliminary findings:

- The set-up of different labs in Europe and the US suggests that a laboratory or center supporting an inclusive network are the organizational structures that both supports

stability, provides a space for variation in research, and attracts a critical mass of scholars interested in digital research methods.

- We suggest that there is an importance to informal and low-pressure events and meetings that enable historians to meet computer scientists on a regular and informal basis, such as the weekly “DH pizza” event at the Aalto University.
- As one example of new commonplace practices that maintain interdisciplinary DH network is to develop an “interdisciplinary collaboration pipeline” for joint humanist-computer scientist project collaborations. The importance of this is to make the theory and the essential parts of a collaborative projects visible which appears to be especially valuable for historians who are often trained to work individually, and thus should ease future collaborations.
- Teaching DH methods nationwide with an emphasis of temporary non-regular forms of teaching such as teaching ‘roadshows’ to various universities vs. teaching conducted by staff at a fixed and stable lab.
- We found the roadshow to offer one possible although temporary organisation to be helpful in introducing the digital research methods to all the major Finnish universities, and perhaps as a start toward creating a community of digital historians nationwide. Especially its importance appears to lie in providing an opportunity of a knowledgeable introduction and possibility to informally discuss and pose questions to other historians regarding the promises and pitfalls of digital history.
- We notice that there could be more done to make digital tools for keeping the community together. Historians too could benefit from more robust digital research infrastructures, or from a more organised way of utilizing existing solutions and structures.

These solutions should facilitate digital history research at different levels of abstraction. The provisional conclusion is that digital history in Finland is in a very good state compared to other Scandinavian countries as well as internationally. The presentation will in more detail present and discuss these and other findings from the roadshow concerning previous and present digital history research and organisation of Finnish digital history and digital humanities.



