

Digital Humanities in the Nordic Countries, 3rd Conference, 7–9 March 2018, Helsinki

Matti La Mela (History of Industrialization & Innovation group, Aalto University,
matti.lamela@aalto.fi)

Paper proposal, short presentation (10 + 5)

Digitised newspapers and the geography of the nineteenth-century "lingonberry rush" in Finland

This paper uses digitized newspaper data for analysing practices of nature use. In the late nineteenth century, a "lingonberry rush" developed in Sweden and Finland due to the growing foreign demand and exports of lingonberries. The Finnish newspapers followed carefully the events in the neighbouring Sweden, and reported on their pages about the export tons and the economic potential this red gold could have for Finland. The paper is interested in the geography of this "lingonberry rush" and explores how the imprecise geographic information about berry picking can be gathered and structured from the digitized newspapers.

The paper proceeds in two steps. First, it discusses the range of geographic/spatial information included in newspaper data and its potential for historical research. The data used is the historical digitised Finnish newspapers collection of the National Library of Finland (openly accessible until 1929). The spatial information opens different perspectives on the "pieces of news" and derives from both the newspaper metadata and the textual content (where the spatial information is of locational and relational kind). Second, the paper extracts the above-presented geographic information from a semi-automatically generated corpus about lingonberries. Semi-automatic work enables to study closely the qualities and suitability of the data, and, thus, to discuss and exemplify the challenges (OCR quality and its improvement) and possibilities related to named-entity recognition and text reuse detection (the geography of originality and longer chains of news).

This geospatial analysis adds to the reinterpretation of the history of the Nordic allemansrätten, a tradition of public access to nature, which allows everyone to pick wild berries today. In contrast to earlier scholarship that has highlighted the Nordic cultural context, this geospatial analysis draws attention to economic impulses and commercial imagination. The circulation of commercial news on lingonberries (especially about Sweden and Germany) enforced the idea of wild berries as a commodity, and ultimately facilitated to portray the common wild berries as an openly accessible resource.