Probing Transnational Networks in the History of Digital History:
Uppsala 1973 and the First Historical Computing Conference

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This paper is a work in progress and builds upon my recent article *Facing the History Machine: Toward Histories of Digital History* (History of Humanities 9/2, 2024) which proposes a framework to explore the history and genealogies of digital history. It locates the story of digital history within the broader context of the ways in which technology has shaped historical research practices and knowledge production since the late 19th century. This paper focuses on a key aspect of that inquiry: the circulation and diffusion of technological knowledge and expertise among transnational networks of computing historians in the 1960s-1970s; it asks how these networks were constituted and what influence on historical knowledge production they may have had. In doing so it seeks to chart processes of field formation before the advent of the history and computing movement of the 1980s.

The paper will discuss the pre-history of the field we now call 'digital history' by providing:
1) A brief overall framework for a history of digital history, to set the stage;
2) A concrete case study to illustrate this framework and the role of transnational networks: the very first international 'digital history' conference, History and the Computer, which was held in Uppsala in 1973.

1) Framework
If an imagined 'collective' memory about the history of digital history can be said to exist, it is a history that started in the 1960s in the US and Western Europe, involved mostly digital electronic computing employed in support of quantitative approaches, and took place within national silos. As I will argue, at least five dimensions need closer attention if we are to move towards more comprehensive and integrated histories of digital history: a shift in focus from technologies to practices, an expansion of the temporal as well as geographical scope of the inquiry, much more attention for the role of networks and transnational exchange and, finally, for its political dimensions. These dimensions can be productively integrated in a chronological exploration of digital history's genealogies which will also very briefly be outlined.

2) Case study: Uppsala 1973
The paper will subsequently zoom in on the role of networks and transnational exchange by taking the first international proto-Digital History conference in Uppsala (1973) as a case study and lens to further examine the development of a nascent field of historical computing in the 1960s and 1970s. To briefly sketch the background to this major event in the early development of historical computing: in the post-WWII period, historians began to use analogue and later digital computing in the United States, Western Europe and the Eastern bloc led by the Soviet Union against the backdrop of the Cold War and a general

surge in the use of computing in various humanities disciplines (enabled by the introduction of mainframe computing at universities from the 1950s onwards). By the late 1960s, we begin to see the establishment of networks and structures to support what could be called an emerging transnational field of computing historians: the International Congress of Historical Sciences in Moscow (1970) and the International History and the Computer Conference in Uppsala (1973) were key platforms for knowledge exchange. The 1973 Uppsala conference foreshadowed many later developments; it brought together historians from 'East' and 'West' who, ideological motivations and Cold War constraints notwithstanding, managed to find common methodological ground while eschewing politics. Outside of the scope of the present paper but important to mention here too; after the advent of micro- and personal computing in the early 1980s, new user generations of computing historians would form the International Association for History and Computing (AHC, 1987-2005), the direct precursor of what we now call 'digital history'. The question to be addressed in this paper is, *inter alia*, what came before the history and computing period as symbolized by the AHC.

As the first international proto-digital history conference, Uppsala 1973 is a perfect lense to examine the interaction and exchanges between computing historians from 'West' and 'East', and how their diverse political/ideological and disciplinary backgrounds as well as methodological commitments shaped their approach to historical computing and thus the development of a nascent transnational field. However, the conference also presented a moment in time. It was one of the tangible outcomes of a working group that was established during the 13th International Congress of the Historical Sciences in Moscow (1970) and the group intended to organize follow-up meetings during the International Economic History Congress in Copenhagen in 1974 and the CISH Congress in San Francisco in 1975. It is important to trace the personal and discursive (dis-)continuities between these conferences.

One of the problems in reconstructing the early history of historical computing is the highly scattered nature of relevant documentary materials. Accordingly, this case study draws upon a variety of sources that have been collected so far: journal articles and conference reviews, archival holdings from France and Germany, newsletters and a 500+ items bibliography of the state of the field compiled for the Uppsala conference. Based on these materials, it is not only possible to create lists of conference participants and trace (dis-)continuities, but also to trace their interactions and exchanges. To do so I am currently compiling a database of conferences and their participants which will serve as a basis for further network analysis. Several conference reports and other materials shed light on the nature of exchange and debate during the conference in terms of methodological approaches, while also highlighting political constraints. Finally, an analysis of the bibliography compiled for the Uppsala conference by one of the participants from the German Democratic Republic provides a unique window into both the state of the art at the time, and the hitherto overlooked work being done in the states of the communist bloc during the Cold War. In my paper I will discuss this ongoing work and place it within the much broader context of the project towards establishing histories of digital history, as outlined in the earlier mentioned article.

The aim of the second part of the paper is thus to ask how the transnational circulation and diffusion of knowledge within emerging transnational networks of computing historians can help us understand technology's impact on historical knowledge production in the 20th century and, ultimately, to understand the emergence of the field of digital history around the 2000s.