Transcription: CoreDH - Podcast Episode 5

Host: Alexandra Núñez (Alex)
Guest: Dr. Nadezhda Povroznik (more information, see below)

Intro: Welcome to core DH A podcast that explores the stories and people behind the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations.

(Music)

Alex: Welcome to our fifth podcast episode. My name is Alexandra Núñez. I'm a communications fellow at ADHO and this is my first podcast episode. After COVID it's very nice and refreshing to get the opportunity to meet amazing DH researchers in person. That's why this episode is a little bit different. Well, because I'm doing the interview with my guest, Nadezhda Povroznik in person. I'm sitting right now in Nadezhda's beautiful office at the Technical University Darmstadt in Germany. Thank you very much, Nadezhda, for inviting me and it's a great pleasure for me to talk to you today.

Nadezhda: Thank you very much for the invitation, Alexandra and I hope that this talk will be interesting for our audience.

Alex: Before we start, just a quick note, the podcast is divided in three parts. And in the first one, I would like to give listeners the opportunity to get to know you as a DH researcher. In the second part, we'll talk about one of your amazing fields of research, namely virtual museums. And in the last part about one of DH's great constituent organizations namely CenterNet and your role as a co-chair of CenterNet. As I just revealed to the audience you are the co-chair but you are, of course much more.
You have an impressive academic CV. You are a historian and received your PhD in history from Perm State National Research University in Russia where you were most recently the Chair of Digital Humanities and Associate Dean for Research at the Faculty of History and Politics. In between you were a visiting scholar at the University of Luxembourg at the Center for Comparative and Digital History. And you are now a research associate at the Institute of History at the Technical University of Darmstadt in Germany. Your research interests are in the field of digital history, digital heritage, 3D, modeling, and printing. I could go on and there is so much more to talk about you, but let's start and dig a little bit deeper into your DH motivation and research to the listeners who want to know more about Nadezhda's awesome career, you will find a link to Nadezhda's awesome profile and to her project in the description.

Part I (3:00-8:03)

Let's start first, **what does Digital Humanity stand for and what characterizes the scientific DH community for you?**

Nadezhda: So, I won't think in terms of the definition, what is digital humanities. And I won't debate in this term. But for me, digital humanities is such a field which is a sort of a mediator which helps to unite the humanists, the people who work in the humanities. And at the same time, they have skills and interests in technology. So, this is the sort of combination that helps to identify and try to address some really difficult and complicated issues from their purer side of humanities. For example, I am a historian on my background and my heart fully is in history. But digital humanities helps me here to find the tools to identify them to address the issues that is strictly related to history as a field. That's why this interdisciplinary field, we can enrich each

other and this sort of enrichment and bringing the insights help us a lot to share the ideas to get inspired and maybe even advance our pure research field, which is history or linguistics.

Alex: The second question is directly connected to the first one but focuses more on your career path and motivation. **How did you get into digital humanities? Why do you do research in the field of digital humanities? And what drives you?**

Nadezhda: It's actually quite a long story and all the path from the very first trial to today took about 20 years. It's, so interesting how people can inspire and can lead to the new and open the new windows to the exciting things like the age is. And my personal story it's from Russia and I attended the course on historical information Science at Perm State University. And a fantastic, Professor Kornienko Sergey Ivanovich, he helped me to open this window in historical information science first and then in digital humanities. In 2005, I attended my first conference abroad. It was in Amsterdam. The conference was on, it was conducted by the Association for History and Computing, the International Association. And coincidentally it was the final conference for this Association because it so it stopped to function and then it was replaced with the activities in the field of digital humanities and the growth of digital humanities in that time after 2006, for me, it's very much correlates with joining and magnetic. This intersectional humanities like history of computing and computing history, this sphere to computing linguistics and others. So, emergence of this new field of digital humanities, it's very much about this magnetism between these disciplines. And for me, it was very important to stick, stick the idea of accepting the technologies and discover something new. For me, it was history again, and I had my PhD in this area. I worked a lot over the documents of the 19th century of self-government in Russia. And I created a database, a large database about the deputies of self-government. So, when I defended my PhD, it was still the field of historical information science or digital history, how it's called now I had a break. OK. So, I just went to maternity leave because I, so I got so tired after being writing all the time, the articles, papers and the defense was really exhausting. So I just wanted to relax and I relaxed during six years. And then, when I returned in 2015, it was already sort of a merged field of digital humanities and it was so like smooth transit to the new communities, which partly actually consisted of the specialists. I was very much known from my sort of previous time from pure historical information science.

Part II: 8:03-29:48

Alex: Now I'd like to talk briefly about one of your very exciting research area which is in the field of digital cultural heritage. But before we get to that, I brought a nice excerpt in Russian from the Perm television news.

Link to the Video in Russian: "Специалисты ПГНИУ создают виртуальный музей" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zfbu8cPF89c

Alex: The television news from 2017 is about you and an exciting research project of yours, namely the so-called Virtual Museums. When we look at the history of collecting and organizing from private curiosity collections to the founding of museums as national institutions in the 19th century, the following questions come to my mind, **what are virtual museums and what is their scientific function as components of digital cultural memory?**

Nadezhda: Thank you very much for mentioning my previous experience in Russia at the Perm State University. We had such a lovely team there. We worked together over this 3d modelling and with museum objects. But regarding virtual and the again, the definition is something difficult because different scholars and museum practitioners, they understand different things on the

virtual museum as a term. But so to say briefly, for me, it's the extension to the real Museum which helps to accomplish the and expand the museum functions and to reach wider audiences in online environment. So, this is the virtual museum which is inseparable part of the real museum. And so, we can debate about what is virtual museum and how to interpret. But for me, it's very important that the virtual museum helps the museum to expand the functions and deliver treasures to the public for their subsequent use. So, virtual museum is a very professional environment which helps to move to advance the research to support educational activities, enlightenment, also, it's very much a knowledge organization which is generally the museum is and the museum produces knowledge. And this transfer of knowledge. It's, it's a very important component in the museum activity. And that's why virtual museum is a very specific thing and it's very much needed today for research and education and different sorts of creative practices and entertainment.

Alex: Well, thanks. This was enlightening a follow up technical question. **So, what technologies and processes are necessary to create a virtual museum?**

Nadezhda: I would like to talk not about the technologies and processes, but for me, technologies, and processes, it's, it's a lot about the hype cycle when the technology just appears, and the museum grabs the technology and expose this. It's not necessarily mean that it will be like a long-term use of the technology with the value with the impact on the society, et cetera. For me, it's a lot about understanding the values of the museum treasuries and the stories and the context around the museum objects and museum collections around the different ideas in the museum. But also, it's about wrapping these ideas and narratives in the proper way. So, for example, it means that this or that content have to be precisely elaborated for different audiences. And if the museum has the very particular audiences in mind, they can produce the very fantastic content and this sort of virtual museums with very clearly identifying communities with different sorts of digital maybe innovations... I could, I could use these determined experiments can bring a lot more than the pure technology in general.

Alex: Now, I would like to compare a virtual museum with a traditional one. **What are the advantages of a virtual museum compared to a traditional one?**

Nadezhda: I would avoid to separate them because virtual museum and the real museum is the same organism. As I already said, it's an extension and when the museum leads any sort of digital practices, it helps a lot to expand the activities to expand access to the museum collections. And it's getting so helpful for remote use because it's bringing so much value to the museum activities, engaging different audience online. Also trying to bring this value, I don't know, to, to different audiences. And for example, being here in Darmstadt (Germany) we can experience a different sort of museum stories from whatever it is.
So, this is precious.

Alex: Are virtual museums an indicator of a paradigm shift in the history of collecting and exhibiting?

Nadezhda: This is a very difficult question. You can see here the, the book on "Cataloguing culture". And for me, digital means help to address the issues which are very complicated to resolve today. And so the museum, we know that the museum just inherited the patterns from the colonial past. And it's like the true story for many museums over the globe. And this the colonial practices can be successfully implemented in the digital environment. And they can be also just duplicate these patterns from real life. So that's why it's important to identify these patterns that can be like …misinterpreted or that can be a symbol of inequality. And we have to bring equity to the new world, to repair sort of broken tendencies and broken patterns, to repair

the new to, to build the new, I don't know, maybe it sounds a little bit naive to build a new world, better equity and better balance between races, race, gender and other issues.

Alex: Now, I have some more questions which may seem a bit critical but shouldn't be. During my studies of art history, we once dealt with Harald Szeemann in more detail. Szeeman was a controversial Swiss curator and exhibition organizer who has made it clear through his provocative and artistic exhibition concepts that an exhibition is usually more than just an arbitrary presentation of artworks in rooms. Transferred to virtual museums: **What is the role of curating in a virtual museum? And what is the role of presentation and arrangement of cultural objects and artworks in a virtual museum?**

Nadezhda: Curating today in the virtual museum is a lot about curating of data. And it's also about orienting in the world of inequalities because the ideal, if it's possible to say them like that a deal creator would know these issues and try to address them. For example, I conduct my research in history of virtual museums. And I'm writing the book on prehistory of virtual museums, how the concept emerged. And I trace history of virtual museums on the web as well in modern time. So on the web, we can trace this difference and also we can trace the role of curator. So, from the very first days on the web, the museums, they copied museums on the web copied the same patterns. And they suggested, for example, the highlights in the on the museum websites and also the these highlights they were selected by the curator. And this is a great responsibility from the curator to expose the preferences. What would be the in the priority of the curator to expose something? Is it a dominant white male position for example? Or it's um globally recognized women's art? Or it's something from the area of silent? And this is this is a huge question because there are so many digital activities today and we now know how the algorithm works. For example, if the museums conduct massive digitization and put everything online, how can we discover what we need? So, this is a lot about curating and offering the very particular features in the search engines: How to reveal what people need or on the, on the other hand, for example, we sometimes do not know exactly what we need. And in that situation, we have to be offered with something very specific and at the same time, very particular. So, this is the maybe the question to be addressed using the means of artificial intelligence to avoid human biases. And just to reveal not new patterns but new opportunity to explore the digital collections in the age of abundancy.

Alex: When I think about museums, I'm thinking about embodiment and walking through concrete art exhibition rooms and discovering different artworks**. So, what is the role of the visitor who visits a virtual museum with the traditional role of a wandering viewer who physically walks through concrete spaces change fundamentally.**

Nadezhda: Yeah, it's all the time difficult for the museum to identify not only the key audiences but also to broaden the perspectives. And for me, it's important for the museum to identify different. Not only the researchers, the educators, for example, or those who just arrive to entertain but also those who are interested in different things. And it's so difficult to articulate even who they are. But for me, it's important to maintain the curiosity of the visitors. Yeah, I believe in sort of click thinking age. And the museum has to um sometimes produced something very plain and entertaining in this term. But also, I would imagine the visitor as an explorer who wants to find something new, something interesting. And maybe get inspired with something. Another thing is the role of the visitor as a participant. So, the interactivity in the museums increased and it's just a multiplier as we can say in Germany. And it's, it's so great to participate and try and to see the effects of these trials. And so, for me all the time, it's also interesting to wonder and, of course, this, this is my personal sort of preference. Maybe it has the sort of ancient rules from the museums where they were the cabinets of curiosities. But today the museums, online museums on the web, they are a lot about wondering and about the same

curiosities, maybe in, in a slightly, in a slightly different way. But they tackle something very, you know, very basic from our soul, at least from mine.

Alex: Let's jump and try to another area that came to my mind when I read your amazing papers and that addresses the field of restoration. We all remember the burning of the Notre Dame in Paris in 2019 or the destruction of the ancient city of Palmyra in 2017. Based on these horrifying events: **Is the virtual museum a digital backup and good for restoration in case a cultural asset is destroyed** or to put it more positively: **Are virtual museums a new digital form of conveying and writing history?**

Nadezhda: For me, a virtual museum is a lot more about representation of what is already digitized and reading the concept, the context around it. But I like the examples you just provided here and actually the 3D model created by Andrew Tallon the Belgium historian. And he created this 3d model of Notre Dame, not for the virtual museum. He created it from the point of view of a historian. He was very curious on how the cathedral was built, what sort of constructions were used. What the technology was implemented there. So he had very particular questions to set up and he did a fantastic job with laser scanning, connecting the clouds with the photographs. And he didn't unfortunately see the result of his work, how, how it was implemented as a result. Unfortunately, he died in 2018, but still it was like a solid contribution. Another thing related to Notre Dame is the video game. And it's another approach to digital heritage because the company that conducted that wanted to create. So, which is created actually the game video game, Assassin Creed. So they draw all the cathedral and they attracted a lot of historical resources to this reconstruction. And visually, it looks so beautiful. However, being a historian means also that it shouldn't be also beautiful, but it, it has to correspond to the historical resources and to the reality. So, I don't know in the detail how much the this 3d model and Assassin Creed corresponds to the real Notre Dame but they are visually very much attractive and returning to the question about back up, I think that it's, it's be better to address the wider field of digital humanities and digital heritage as a discipline to have the optimal results which will be used by different, …I don't know stakeholders or, or different practitioners in various directions. Of course, it's sort of, it's so simple. No, it's not simple. What is the correct word for that? It's all natural for video games to create a beautiful picture and can imagine that yes, it can be Notre Dame or something similar. But being historians means that we have to think in terms of very critically, you have to be very critical and think about the real facts from the past, how they correspond to the reality.

Alex: The last question addresses the virtual museums and the concept of citizen science projects. **What functions do virtual museums have as an open citizen science projects and in terms of sustainable and intergenerational knowledge transfer**?

Nadezhda: I don't know much about open science projects online. Maybe it's something which is worse to be discovered. But I think that all the time the professionals have to accompany and support this way of research today. It's sort of in fashion to invite pupils from the school: Let's do science! Let's invite, invite mature people! Let's do the research! For me it doesn't work properly like that and I think that it has to be conducted by the professionals and the citizens, so so called citizen science. It can be connected and navigated by the professionals to have interesting outcomes. And um when we think about an open Citizen Science project, it's, it's very much important to stay connected to, to connect the professionals and the mature special specialists, not specialist, but people who are interested in some sort of topic. And they shouldn't dominant over the professional approach because it can lead to strange outcomes, misinterpretations and at least it won't be science as a result.

Part III: 29:48-37:14

Alex: Finally, I would like to draw the focus a bit and talk about your role and function as co-chair of CenterNet. **What is the story behind CenterNet? What is CenterNet and how does it differ from other ADHO constituent organizations?**

Nadezhda: Yes, CenterNet is a part of the Alliance for Digital Humanities Organizations and it's um a constituent organization within this structure. So, CenterNet is a, is a part of alliance but the difference is that it's the membership in CenterNet is the national one. So it's not about personal membership, it's about organizational networks and sent internet. It's about networking of centers, labs, divisions focused on digital humanities or which you are the intersection of humanities, information science, computer science. So, in this broad field and CenterNet is charged to support centers who are in this network in this organizational network, in their management organization cooperation and providing some sort of joint activities, for example for CenterNet, it's so important to support the newly opening centers. And it's so, so difficult to understand now how to build the lab or the center from the scratch. And CenterNet supports the newly created centers and organizations in running the centers how to establish the processes. Recently, we had the program of mentorship for the centers and this program helped to identify the key issues and other larger well-established centers could share their experiences with the newcomers. That was the, the point. And when I was the head of the Center for Digital Humanities in Perm State University, it was important for me personally to be connected with the global community because …so Russia is very far from other global community, I would say like that. And it was quite difficult to get into the international community. Now it's even harder in these days because of the international situation. So, it's painful. But I think that being involved in in the activities at the level of centers, it's quite a different perspective in comparison with being involved in the alliance in general, being a researcher. So, in CenterNet you can gain as a representative of the center, the new skills and be a part of a community which is focused on this organizational, institutional, and communicational level. I would say like that.

Alex: What drives you as co-chair of center net? And where do you see the future of center net in a few years?

Nadezhda: As a co-chair, I started almost three years ago. So, I started in the pandemic. And it was very important to maintain the activity online. It is all the time difficult to meet her online. We are so exhausted of being all the time online on zoom on some sort of digital environment. It's so great to meet in person. However, online activities helped to stay afloat. And also, they brought new vision of the activities. And from my perspective, CenterNet, the future of CenterNet is a lot about hybrid about blended activities. And yes, in person meeting is something pressure today. But these internet activities can be enriched and maintained and supported in a hybrid mode. We can meet, for example, online providing online lectures, online consultations, online gatherings. And we are going to have a social event organized by in Graz.
So, if you are in Graz at this DH 2023 very, very welcome to join us. And also, I think that we can enrich sort of regular activities which is the "Day of DH" and we will introduce different sorts of new activities soon. They are under discussion by the Executive Council of Center, but I can just uncover some of them. Last time, we talked about the plans to organize "Brown Hour" and share the experience by the sort of well-established centers in the field of DH and how to address the issue and I think it might be helpful for the growing organizational DH community. Also, I would like to mention that CenterNet itself. It's not only about two co-chairs, it's about a vibrant community of executive council and councils who just are so great in their contribution to this community. They have vibrant ideas and very insightful thoughts on the development of digital humanities in general and CenterNet in particular. So, I'm happy to be a part of CenterNet and work together with these fantastic people.

Alex: And the last question, well, **why should digital humanities scholars connect with the** [CenterNet](#) **as an organization?**

Nadezhda: For me, the values of this, it's a lot about networking of organizations. When we are managing, when we run the center, it's important to understand the mechanisms and how everything works. What is the hidden layer, how to overcome the difficulties, how to address them in a proper way and all the time, it's exchange of ideas and to see the insights on how to develop in a valuable way and how to, to say, sustain our future in digital humanities.

Alex: Well, now we are slow in coming to an end. It was a great pleasure to talk to you Nadezhda. And I'm very, very grateful for your time and insights into your d research, but also into the exciting organization sent it. Thank you very much.

Nadezhda: Thank you very much for the invitation and this fantastic opportunity to share my thoughts with you.

Alex to the audience: And also to the audience: Thank you very much for your time and your interest. See you soon.

Outro: This podcast is a production of the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations. ADHO promotes and supports digital research and teaching across all arts and humanities disciplines. We act as a community based advisory force and support excellence in research publication, collaboration and training, learn more by visiting adho.org.

More information:

[Nadezhda Povroznik](#):
- [Orcid Profile](#)
- **Papers on Virtual Museums (selection):**
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  - o Povroznik N. (2020) Building Museum Identity Online: Two Decades of Progress. In: Proceedings of DH Benelux Conference, 3-5 July 2020;
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[CenterNet](#)

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