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"Digital Humanism" and Its Implementation as an Ethical Guideline in the Digitalisation Practices of the City of Vienna

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Abstract (Deutschsprachig)

Die digitale Transformation ist zu einer prägenden Kraft des 21. Jahrhunderts geworden und beeinflusst moderne Gesellschaften in nahezu allen Lebensbereichen. Während sich analoge und digitale Sphären zunehmend durchdringen und neue Realitäten schaffen, stellen sich die Frage nach der ethischen Ausrichtung dieses Wandels und der Rolle öffentlicher Governance in diesem Diskurs. Das aus dem akademischen Diskurs hervorgegangene Konzept des digitalen Humanismus bietet einen normativen Rahmen, der darauf abzielt, die technologische Entwicklung mit menschlichen Werten in Einklang zu bringen. Diese Arbeit untersucht die Umsetzbarkeit des Konzepts in einem realpolitischen Kontext, basierend dem Fall der Stadt Wien und die Integration von digitalem Humanismus in ihre digitale Governance-Strategie. Die Studie stützt sich auf Stakeholder-Interviews und politische Dokumente, die anhand der Methode der Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) analysiert werden. Die Studie führt das Konzept der *distributed inattentivenes* als zentrale Herausforderung ein. Dabei handelt es sich um eine strukturell bedingte Streuung des politischen Fokus, die die konsequente Umsetzung von digitalem Humanismus behindert. Die Ergebnisse der Studie zeigen, dass digitaler Humanismus zwar symbolisch beschworen wird, seine praktische Institutionalisierung jedoch begrenzt bleibt. Die Studie schließt mit politischen Empfehlungen zur Bewältigung dieser Herausforderung. Diese Forschungsarbeit leistet einen Beitrag zum Forschungsfeld der digitalen Governance, indem sie neue Einblicke in das Zusammenspiel zwischen digitaler Ethik, symbolischer Politikgestaltung und politischer Kapazität auf lokaler Ebene liefert.

Abstract (English)

Digital transformation has become a defining force of the 21st century, shaping modern societies in nearly every aspect of life. As online and offline worlds become increasingly intertwined, creating new realities for many, questions arise about the ethical direction of this change and the role of public governance in guiding it. Emerging from academic discourse, the concept of Digital Humanism offers a normative framework that aims to align technological development with human values. This thesis examines the practicality of the concept within a political context by exploring how the City of Vienna has integrated Digital Humanism into its digital governance strategy. The study applies Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) as a method for analysing stakeholder interviews and policy documents. It introduces the concept of *distributed inattentiveness* as a key challenge, indicating a structural dispersion of focus that hampers the consistent implementation of Digital Humanism. The findings reveal that while Digital Humanism is invoked in symbolic terms, its practical institutionalisation remains limited. It concludes with policy recommendations to address this challenge. This study contributes to the field of digital governance by offering new insights into the interplay between digital ethics, symbolic policymaking, and political capacity at a local level.

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1 Introduction

The idea for this thesis came to life through following the discourse on Digital Humanism closely, as it emerged only recently and contributed to the field of digital ethics. To live and work in the city where the concept partially originated[1] (cf. Nida-Rümelin, 2018; Werthner, 2020) and was supposed to be integrated into the city's policymaking, sparked my academic curiosity. The difficulty of assessing how the concept had been translated into political practice and what measures had been implemented so far led to the initiation of this study. From simply wondering about something that is happening to being able to scientifically address this question is truly a privilege and should not be taken for granted. Accordingly, this thesis seeks to examine the translation of the concept of Digital Humanism into concrete political practice, using the City of Vienna as a case study.

1.1. Background and Context

With the emergence of new technologies and the fast-paced development of the digital sphere, society is confronted with new challenges and opportunities (Büchner et al., 2022; Kaivo-Oja et al., 2017; Santos et al., 2022). Scholars in the fields of Science and Technology Studies (STS), Social Sciences, Computer Sciences, and Institutional Studies, to name just a few, contribute to a broad interdisciplinary field of research concerned with the impacts of digitalisation and technologization. In the light of this "digital transformation" of society (Schrape, 2021), governments at all levels face the challenge of regulating digital innovation in a way that upholds democratic values, protects citizen rights, and fosters inclusive progress. To meet these challenges and at the same time enable digital innovation, the City of Vienna has committed itself to the concept of Digital Humanism (City of Vienna, 2022). By integrating the principles of Digital Humanism into digital policymaking, the city aims to actively shape the digital transformation, rather than merely being a passenger on a rapidly moving train (ibid.).

Historically originating in the humanist tradition, Digital Humanism first emerged in the late 2010s, offering a new perspective on digital ethics (Werthner et al., 2022). Based on the

[1] The term Digital Humanism was first used in 2018 by Nida-Rümelin (add source). In 2019/2020, the „Vienna Manifesto on Digital Humanism" then developed the concept further, before being adopted by the City of Vienna.

aim of placing the human and human well-being at the centre of digital developments, the concept proposes a variety of measures to achieve this goal. From this, recommendations can be derived for policymaking, companies and sciences in dealing with the digital developments of the past and, above all, those yet to come. The main focus lies on a critical examination of digital technologies and the self-empowerment of their users. It is challenging to determine exactly how Digital Humanism can be translated into political practice, as case-based research in this area is still in its early stages, with little to no case studies available. In an effort to scientifically explore Digital Humanism in its practice, this master's thesis examines the implementation of the concept of Digital Humanism in the City of Vienna's policymaking.

1.2. Relevance of the Topic

As digital developments progress, with digital technologies becoming a substantial part of many citizens' everyday lives (cf. Prainsack, 2017), governments play a crucial role in shaping this transformation for the good of society (cf. Maulana & Decman, 2023). There is no shortage of scientific proposals for political measures, often combined with urging politicians to actively shape the digital transformation in the interests of people. Nevertheless, politicians often do not seem to act quickly enough. With its principles, Digital Humanism offers policymakers a holistic approach to what is needed in order to steer the digital transformation. On closer examination, it becomes evident that these principles, as originally proposed in the Vienna Manifesto on Digital Humanism (Werthner, 2020), serve more as guidelines that allow policymakers to adapt them based on their structural circumstances, which can vary from city to city, country to country and political system to political system.

With little case-based research on the political implementation of Digital Humanism conducted so far, this study contributes to research in the field of digital governance in public policy and administration. Through this contribution, the practicability of Digital Humanism can be scientifically assessed and thus provide policymakers with information on what should be considered when applying the concept, what challenges have emerged in Vienna and what opportunities the concept offers.

1.3. Research Problem and Problem Statement

Given the rapid advancement of digital tools and the emergence of new technologies, policymakers are under increasing pressure to govern this transformation. Cities must actively engage with digital developments to promote innovation and stay ahead of the curve. At the same time, they must protect their citizens from potential dangers that may arise from this. By turning to normative frameworks such as Digital Humanism, policymakers seek guidance on navigating the rapid developments in the digital sphere. However, apart from scientific considerations, little is known about the implementation of the Digital Humanism concept.

1.4. Research Aim and Research Question

At the core of this research lies the exploration of the extent to which the City of Vienna has integrated the concept of Digital Humanism into its policymaking, and what challenges and opportunities regional policymaking faces when following Digital Humanism as an ideological guideline in digitalisation policymaking. Through this, it aims to provide a scientific perspective on the process of translating a theoretical concept into practical political application and the necessary steps required to integrate it into digital governance strategies. Furthermore, recommendations are provided to policymakers on integrating Digital Humanism into their digital governance strategies.

1.5. Methodological Approach

“The fundamental grounded theory question opening a study is: "What is happening here"?" (Glaser, 1978). Located in the field of qualitative research, this thesis employs the principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) as outlined by Charmaz (2014). The exploratory nature of the research question necessitates a method that allows for the generation of findings from empirical data. Instead of contextualising the phenomenon of Digital Humanism within an existing theoretical framework, CGT enables data interpretation based on active engagement with the data through cyclical coding processes. Its reflexive nature emphasises the co-construction of meaning through the interaction between study participants and the researcher. In CGT, the researcher plays an active role throughout the whole process, with their perceptions and experiences becoming a central component of the research, actively contributing to the study outcome. It focuses on understanding

processes, rather than on themes or outcomes emerging through an engagement with the data. Instead of objective assumptions, CGT focuses on subjective perceptions and an understanding of the realities of life, from which statements about a phenomenon can be derived.

The empirical core of this study is built around seven semi-structured interviews conducted with stakeholders directly or indirectly participating in shaping the discourse of Digital Humanism in Vienna. Throughout the interview analysis process, different stages of coding guided the analysis. The analysis process was accompanied by memo-writing practices to refine emerging concepts and establish connections between codes. This ultimately led to the conceptualisation of distributed inattentiveness, resulting from abstracting data through active engagement and interpretation over the course of multiple coding rounds. A document analysis of selected policy materials complements the analysis of interview data. The textual data analysed is derived from documents such as the coalition agreement released in 2020 by the two governing parties, municipal council inquiries, press statements and the brochure on Digital Humanism, written and published by the City of Vienna.

Using Constructivist Grounded Theory as a method facilitated a deeper understanding of the institutional and political dimensions of Digital Humanism, resulting in a successful answer to the research question.

1.6. Scope and Limitations

The content and results of this work relate specifically to the case of Vienna and should be considered within this local context. The concept of distributed inattentiveness developed here should therefore also be understood as arising from the circumstances of the case, affected by the different perceptions of the interview participants, as well as the researcher's perception. Due to a limited number of interviews, theoretical saturation may not have been reached. It cannot, therefore, be ruled out that additional perspectives could have expanded the findings. A critical examination of the concept of distributed inattentiveness requires recognising this as a limitation. It should thus be regarded as an initial step towards understanding how Digital Humanism translates into political practice, while requiring further testing and refinement through future research.

1.7. Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured into seven chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 provides the theoretical and conceptual background, tracing the evolution of Digital Humanism and situating it within the discourse of digital transformation. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological framework, justifying the use of Constructivist Grounded Theory and describing the data collection process. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings from policy documents, complemented by the interview analysis in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 offers an in-depth discussion of these findings, connecting them to existing literature and introducing the concept of distributed inattentiveness. Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by summarising the key insights, addressing the research question, and outlining implications for future research.

2 Background

This chapter aims to introduce the reader to the concept of Digital Humanism and its integration into the discourse on the digital transformation of society. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of Digital Humanism itself (Wyatt, 2022), and the historical context it is rooted in (cf. Copson et al., 2023; Muhlack, 2016; Vernon, 2010), scientific literature from different fields and times will be examined. To understand the circumstances that gave rise to Digital Humanism, the chapter starts by discussing current societal dynamics related to digitalisation. The exploration of Digital Humanism is then situated within the broader philosophical framework of humanism. The aim is to selectively address aspects of humanism directly or indirectly related to Digital Humanism, outlining a clear conceptual framework for the discipline to answer the research question posed within this work. Additionally, the chapter highlights inherent ambiguities and unanswered questions, offering potential directions for future research.

Before diving into the substance of this chapter, it is important to clarify the perspective from which this study is conducted. This study approaches humanism and Digital Humanism from a Western intellectual tradition perspective, which necessarily foregrounds philosophical developments rooted in European history and thought (cf. Lamont, 1993). While other humanist and posthumanist traditions exist globally (Kato, 2016; Samier & Hammad, 2021), these are not examined in the course of this study, as the focus lies specifically on the Western-originated concept of Digital Humanism.

2.1. How the Digital Transforms Society

This section aims to highlight how the digital transformation has shaped societies in various ways and how these diverse experiences have contributed to the emergence of normative frameworks, such as Digital Humanism (Werthner et al., 2022). To understand how digitalisation and technologization have shaped modern societies since their emergence and global proliferation, this section first outlines theoretical approaches to digital transformation. It then explores how these developments have influenced everyday life, particularly from a Western perspective. This is followed by a critical reflection on the different impact of digital transformation on non-Western regions, such as the Global South.

The digital transformation of society (Schrape, 2021) constitutes a global shift with far-reaching and uneven effects, fundamentally altering how people communicate, work, govern, and interact with one another (George & Paul, 2020; Hilbert, 2020; Kaivo-Oja et al., 2017; Mager & Katzenbach, 2021). While digital technologies have enabled connectivity, innovation, and efficiency, they have also introduced new forms of inequality, surveillance, and algorithmic control (Kolade & Owoseni, 2022; Reich et al., 2019; Zuboff, 2023). A range of theoretical approaches provides diverse perspectives on digital transformation. In the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), theories such as Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Bueger & Stockbruegger, 2017; Sawyer & Jarrahi, 2014) emphasise the agency of technologies and artefacts in shaping organisational and societal change. ANT dissolves the traditional boundary between society and technology, arguing that all elements in a network interact and influence each other, forming dynamic, constantly evolving systems (Somerville, 1997). Sociotechnical Systems Theory (Sony & Naik, 2020) follows a different line of argumentation, stressing that social and technical elements are interdependent and within organisations or systems, therefore it is necessary to jointly optimise both human (social) and technological (technical) elements to foster high performance and well-being within different organisational systems. Both theories are dedicated to better understanding complex technological change and the interplay between people and technologies, contributing to the literature of digital transformation (Kaghan & Bowker, 2001). In his historical analysis of digital technology and social change, Hilbert (2020) highlights a merger between biological and artificial intelligence “beyond any point of return” (ibid., p.192). He draws on Schumpeter’s innovation theory, arguing that with the development and deployment of technologies, society has entered a new era of transformation, transforming *information* (ibid., p. 190), and resulting in societal disruption due to the different speeds of adaptation in the techno-economic and socio-institutional spheres (ibid.). From a political science point of view, philosophical theories such as Critical Theory (CT), among others, have been used to question technology and its impact on a more abstract level (Delanty & Harris, 2021). Other theoretical approaches, focusing on the individual and organisational behaviours of adopting (new) technologies, are the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Task Technology Fit (TTF) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), as previously presented by Ismail et al. (2024) to underline the importance of theory in understanding how the digital transformation affects organisations. These theoretical approaches are just a few examples in a vast, interdisciplinary field that explores the phenomenon of digital transformation (Plekhanov et al., 2023; Roth, 2019). In

the light of the framework of Digital Humanism, Hilbert's (2020) findings on the merger between biological and artificial intelligence, along with the theoretical approaches of Sociotechnical Systems Theory and Actor Network Theory (Kaghan & Bowker, 2001), underscore the understanding of digital transformation in a digital-humanist sense. They speak of a “co-evolution” (Werthner et al., 2022, p. v)of humans and technology. This implies that human and technological development can no longer be considered separately. Instead, the question arises as to how this co-evolution can be shaped to avoid negative consequences for humankind. The shared vision, stating the “need to analyse and reflect on the relationship between human and machine, and, […] to influence its development for better living and society” (ibid., p. vi) aligns closely with Sociotechnical Systems Theory’s (Sony & Naik, 2020) idea of organisational success based on a joint optimisation of human and technological elements, instead of understanding them as separate.

In their work *"Digitized and Datafied Embodiment: A More-than-Human Approach*," Lupton et al. (2022) analyse how human interaction with digital technologies changes the notion of being human, approaching the discourse of digital transformation from an individual perspective. To better understand their line of argumentation, it can be helpful to briefly analyse the terms that partially title their work. *Digitized* refers to the technical process of converting analogue information, such as paper documents, photographs, or audio recordings, into a digital format that computers can store, process, and transmit (Gradillas & Thomas, 2023) and is often contrasted with *digitalized*, which describes the broader transformation that occurs when organisations or societies use digital technologies to change processes, ways of working or business models. While digitisation is about making information digital, digitalisation is about leveraging that digital information and technology to innovate, automate, or enhance operations and services. For example, handwritten reports of a city council meeting are digitised by transcribing them into a digital document. When these documents are then published on a city’s website to improve political transparency, this act constitutes digitalisation. In the Encyclopaedia of Big Data, Southerton (2020) defines *datafication* as the process of transforming subjects, objects, and practices into quantified, digital data. Unlike simply making information digital, datafication involves systematically capturing and analysing activities, preferences, even emotions, turning them into data points that can be processed, monetised, or used for decision-making (Mejias & Couldry, 2019; Sadowski, 2020). For example, GPS tracking citizen mobility for urban planning and storing their data to analyse their behaviour

describes the process of datafication. As human bodies are increasingly rendered into digital and datafied forms through apps, wearable devices, sensors, and online interactions, Lupton et al. (2022) propose a new concept to redefine what it means to be human through a more-than-human approach. They understand digital embodiment as a relational, dynamic and multisensory process involving humans, technologies, and data as co-constitutive agents entangled with one another (Lupton et al., 2022). This process of datafication through digital technologies is reflected by Prainsack (2017), who, in the third chapter of her book *Personalized Medicine*, writes about a young student whose daily life was to a certain extent determined by his fitness watch (ibid., pp. 55-58). It became an integral part of his life, shaping his daily priorities and actions, such as how much he had to walk to reach his daily step goal. In light of Lupton et al.'s (2022) pledge for a more-than-human approach, the student can be viewed as deeply entangled with the device, being constantly datafied through the tracking process of his watch. Throughout the course of this chapter, Prainsack (ibid.) addresses the issue of how these elements of datafication in the health sector often go unnoticed by patients, which leads to an unequal distribution of power, with those tracking and storing data holding the most power. Although the issue was analysed from a healthcare sector perspective, data protection is a topic that has been widely discussed in the academic field (Bygrave, 2010; Leese, 2022) and thematised as part of Digital Humanism principles (Werthner, 2020). While academic discussions about data protection have been ongoing for a long time, recent studies highlight a shift from algorithm-centric approaches to more data-oriented and context-aware privacy solutions, as artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) become integral to data processing (Yu et al., 2024). An in-depth contextualization of the discourse on data protection would exceed the scope of this paper; however, given the digital transformation discussed here, the topic remains highly relevant.

The framing of digitalisation as a neutral or universally beneficial force obscures how global digital infrastructures reproduce existing inequalities and introduce new forms of dependency, surveillance, and exclusion (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Across different regions, the speed, scope, and impact of this transformation vary significantly, shaped by existing political systems, economic structures, and levels of infrastructural development (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Scholars have argued that dominant narratives of digital progress often reflect Western-centric assumptions, ignoring the uneven geography of technical development and marginalising local knowledge systems in the Global South (Oyedemi, 2024), while

profiting from knowledge contributions made by people from the Global South. Van Stam (2021) addresses these inequalities in his research. He calls for a decolonisation of technologies based on the case of Africa through rejecting externally imposed systems in favour of indigenous, communal paradigms of knowledge that prioritise shared values such as care, respect and collective experience. This is but one case that underpins the need to critically assess the discourse of digital transformation through a cross-cultural lens (Büchner et al., 2022), promoting critical engagement with how digitalisation reconfigures power, access, and participation across diverse sociopolitical contexts (Selaković et al., 2023; Wakunuma, 2019).

In the intricate landscape of the ongoing digital transformation, policymakers are confronted with the challenge of shaping the trajectory in a way that prioritises human well-being (Brunetti et al., 2020; Maulana & Decman, 2023; Sattlegger, 2024). Digital Humanism is intended to offer a solution (Werthner et al., 2022; Wyatt, 2022). The following section, therefore, examines the definitions and history of humanism philosophy to provide contextual knowledge that can then be used to examine the concept of Digital Humanism.

2.2. The Principles of Humanism

This section examines various approaches to defining humanism. A selection of contemporary philosophical works will provide a framework that enables a critical comparison, leaving the reader with a sufficient understanding of humanism to comprehend the concept of Digital Humanism and understand its basic principles. The aim of this section is to provide an overview of already existing theories to better understand the characteristics of Digital Humanism and put them into context. This contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the concept and underscores the complexity of philosophical discourses, such as the pursuit of a definition of humanism.

According to Cary Nederman in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Nederman, 2024), civic humanism was originally defined by Hans Baron (1900-1988) as a “conception of politics in which government is in principle the common business of the citizens. The “city” provides the environment—a public space—for human fulfilment” (ibid.). Nederman's encyclopaedia entry shows that the history of humanism is quite complex. A number of philosophical works that analysed the concept in the 1990s, dedicated to the question of

what it means to be human, emphasise this. For example, Davies (1997) describes the issue with defining humanism as follows

> "It is one of those words, like 'realism' or 'socialism', whose range of possible uses runs from the pedantically exact to the cosmically vague. Like them, too, it carries, even in the most neutrally descriptive contexts, powerful connotations, positive or negative, of ideological allegiance, its very imprecision making it all the more serviceable as a shibboleth of approval or deprecation." (ibid., p. 3).

A range of definitions of humanism are presented in the following subsection. They serve as a basis for classifying the concept of digital humanism in a later part of this chapter.

2.2.1. Towards a Definition of Humanism

Humanism is a philosophy (Lamont, 1993, p. 3). It is devoted to the question of what it means to be human and what conditions arise from that. Among the multitude of philosophies that have explored this question, humanism has consistently taken a stance that is in competition with other philosophies. In Lamont's early definition of Humanism, he declares that the primary purpose of human existence is to strive for the well-being and happiness of people on this planet, all within the boundaries of the natural world. This philosophy involves appreciating, advancing, and making the ample material, cultural, and spiritual riches of our natural world accessible to all, holds profound implications. Nonetheless, it remains straightforward to grasp and aligns with common sense. Continuing the path of Lamont (1993) to define "twentieth-century humanism" (ibid., p. 12), he breaks the concept down to "[…] a credo for average men and women seeking to lead happy and useful lives." (ibid., p. 13). It is guided by reason, it recognises humans as emotional beings. It therefore calls for a form of reason that takes these emotions into consideration, as they are understood as part of human nature.

Lamont (1993) distinguishes ten propositions central to the philosophy of humanism. Based on the author's classification, I have summarised the ten propositions according to their content to allow for a clear distinction and a possible comparison with other theories and the characteristics of humanism proposed there. This also allows the identification of several characteristics in the philosophy of Digital Humanism.

Humanism follows a naturalistic worldview. The concept rejects the supernatural and views nature as an ever-changing system that is independent of consciousness. It recognises humans as products of evolution, with the mind closely linked to the brain, denying conscious survival after death. By coining this a central aspect of humanism, Lamont (ibid.) positions the philosophy outside the realm of religious beliefs – an aspect emphasised by philosophers throughout the literature on humanism (Davies, 1997; Nederman, 2024; Rüsen, 2021). Humanism puts faith in human potential, believing that people can solve their own problems through reason and science. It rejects determinism, asserting that humans have genuine freedom and shape their destiny within objective limits. The concept grounds ethics in earthly experiences, aiming for worldly happiness, freedom, and progress for all regardless of nationality, race, or religion. Humanism promotes a good life achieved through a balance of personal satisfaction, self-development, and contributions to the community. Here, the human experience becomes the centre of attention, away from obligations such as working for a living. Rather, humanism emphasises people as subjective, sentient beings. Humanism values the development of art and the appreciation of beauty, making aesthetic experiences an integral part of everyone's lives. From a political stance, it advocates for global democracy, peace, and a high standard of living through a prosperous economic order. Humanism advocates for the application of reason and the scientific method across society to ensure democratic processes and civil liberties in all aspects of life. Humanism encourages open-mindedness, subjecting its own beliefs to scrutiny and being receptive to new facts and rigorous reasoning (ibid., p. 12-14).

Lamont (2023) purposely refrains from specifying different forms of humanism. Instead, he states that humanism, in its essence,

> „[…] is the viewpoint that people have but one life to lead and should make the most of it in terms of creative work and happiness; that human happiness is its own justification and requires no sanction or support from supernatural sources; that in any case the supernatural, usually conceived of in the form of heavenly gods or immortal heavens, does not exist; and that human beings, using their own intelligence and cooperating liberally with one another, can build an enduring citadel of peace and beauty upon this earth.“ (ibid., p. 15).

Secularity is considered a central characteristic of humanism. In their theory of humanism, Copson et al. (2023) go even further and mark secularity not as one of many central characteristics of humanism, but define humanism inherently as a “non-religious worldview” (ibid, p. 1), whereas worldview is defined as “a framework of beliefs and values, which structures how people live and think, and gives meaning and purpose to their lives.“ (ibid.). By defining humanism in this manner, they claim that secularity is *the* central characteristic of humanism. Humanism, in this sense, follows four principles: *human reason*, which defines the human capacity to understand the world through evidence and rational thinking, notably seen in scientific inquiry and its role in explaining the natural world and guiding our choices in life. *Human imagination* is the ability to envision alternative possibilities, create new ideas, explore emotions, and empathise with others, fostering creativity and understanding. *Human responsibility* involves recognising the freedom to make choices, taking accountability for one’s own decisions, and using reason and imagination to make thoughtful choices. *Human values*, stemming from our shared human condition and needs, guide our moral decisions and prevent us from being overwhelmed by conflicting views or competing interests (ibid., pp. 33-34). Copson et al. determine these principles as inherent to being human and the foundation of a humanist philosophy. The principle of human reason is underlined by Lamont (1993), who refers to human reason, in combination with human effort, as “[…] our best and, indeed, only hope.” (ibid, p. 15).

Davies (1997) chose a different approach to defining humanism. By moving onto the semantical level of analysis, he refers to the work of various thinkers such as Heidegger, Guignan and Sartre (ibid., p. 126-134). His conclusion on a definition of humanism differs significantly from Copson et al. (2023) or Lamont (1993). He suggests that a definition of humanism is directly connected to its lineage, influenced by thinkers from different time periods. The various forms of humanism, such as the civic humanism in Italian city-states during the quattrocento, the protestant humanism in sixteenth-century northern Europe, the rationalistic humanism of the Enlightenment, the romantic and positivistic humanisms during the rise of European bourgeoisies, the revolutionary humanism that brought change, and the liberal humanism that aimed to regulate it, as well as the humanism adopted by the Nazis and their victims and opponents, and the contrasting anti-humanist views of Heidegger, Foucault, and Althusser, cannot be simplified into a single category or a uniform pattern. Each of these forms follows its own unique historical trajectory, adopts distinct discourse styles, and presents its own interpretation of what it means to be human. Each,

like all discourses, attempts to assert its own solution to the question of who should be in control (ibid., p. 130-131).

The Contemporary Humanism Research Network (2023) defines humanism as a “polysemic category, being at once historical, cultural and axiological.” (ibid). These authors treat humanism as a multifaceted concept, encompassing these three central dimensions. Historically, it pertains to a specific period of intellectual history, namely Italian Humanism and its immediate successors. Culturally, it serves as a foundational concept for an entire civilisation, originating in Europe but carrying universal significance, as evident in various declarations of human rights over the centuries. From an axiological standpoint, it signifies a framework of meaning and a set of values rooted in the idea of humanity as a purposeful endeavour, not merely a factual existence, and in the acknowledgement of humaneness as an inherent and defining quality of all individuals, regardless of their era or cultural background.

2.2.2. Critique of Humanist Philosophy

Critics have contended that humanism is inherently exclusive, as the term 'human' has historically been defined in ways that centre white, male, Western subjects, implicitly marginalising or excluding those who do not fit this norm, such as women, people of colour and non-Western cultures (Copson et al., 2023; Manne, 2016; Ng, 2021). These conceptual frameworks trace their roots back to the Renaissance humanism era and later found expression in 19th-century German "*Humanismus*," which pertains to the educational curriculum emphasising the humanities, particularly classical literature. This manifestation of humanism encapsulates a conviction in the distinctive value of studying the humanities, particularly literature, as a means of gaining insights into human nature. Critics argue that these notions of 'the human' are enshrined in a literary canon that privileges the works of a white male elite, as extensively detailed by certain strands of post-modernist and post-colonial theory (Copson et al., 2023, p. 35-36). However, this critique can be countered by Lamont (2023), who asserts that humanism, at its core, is an inclusive philosophy that regards all humans as having equal value. Lamont (ibid.) rejects the characterisation of humans as inherently self-centred and posits humanists as individuals motivated by the pursuit of ensuring a positive earthly experience for every human being. In this perspective, societal well-being plays a pivotal role, with the welfare of the majority taking precedence

over individual interests. Simultaneously, Lamont emphasises that the collective well-being of all contributes to defining the good life for everyone (Lamont, 2023, p. 16).

The literature exploring the nature of humanism reveals a complex philosophical discourse that can be illuminated from many perspectives. While traditionally associated with values such as rationality, autonomy and universal dignity, critics have pointed out that these ideals are rooted in exclusionary practices that centre Western, male, and colonial perspectives (Copson et al., 2023; Manne, 2016; Ng, 2021). Drawing on Davies' (1997) understanding of humanism, the concept is deeply embedded in its history and cannot be seen in isolation from it. To gain a better understanding of the origins of humanism, the following section traces its historical roots.

2.3. The Historical Roots of (Digital) Humanism

In examining the historical foundations of Digital Humanism, Werthner et al. (2022) have identified two pivotal historical periods integral to Digital Humanism. First, the emergence of Renaissance humanism in the sixteenth century, followed by the subsequent flourishing of humanism during the Enlightenment era. These historical epochs contributed to shaping the core principles of Digital Humanism (ibid.). The overarching objective of the historical inquiry of this section is to construct a concise and comprehensive depiction, tracing the lineage of Digital Humanism to its historical roots and elucidating the intricate web of ideas and philosophies that continue to influence its contemporary manifestations.

2.3.1. Humanist Thinking in Ancient Greece

The classical antecedents of humanism itself can be traced back to philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome (Vernon, 2010). From Thales, oftentimes referred to as the father of philosophy, to pre-Socratic philosophers whose work contributed to various schools of thought, their ways of thinking and explaining the world have fundamentally impacted humanism. A notable figure of this period is Protagoras. As the first openly agnostic philosopher of his time, he publicly confessed to not knowing about the existence of gods or godlike beings, as he could neither see nor feel them. To him, gods were not scientifically assessable. Without any verification of their existence, Protagoras excluded them from his way of explaining the world around him. With his statement "Man is the measure of things", he paved the way to a human-centred explanation of the world. The following theoretical

work of Aristotle reflected the worldview that Protagoras had already hinted at in his doubts about the gods. Specifically, his philosophical work, which does not rely on religious beliefs but instead rests on his understanding of human nature, holds value. According to Aristotle, humans possess rational faculties alongside natural emotional inclinations. He posited that a fulfilling life involves the proper alignment of our emotions and, consequently, our actions with reason (ibid.). However, it is worth noting that Aristotle, despite characterising humans as "rational animals," used this classification to assign a lesser status to both women and non-Greeks. The resurgence of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy during the Renaissance and its influence on humanist thinking of that time, up until today, led to criticism from different scholars and posthumanist thinkers, as discussed earlier (cf. Copson et al., 2023, pp. 35-36; Davies, 1997, p. 5). In conclusion, the overall question posed by those who came before and after Protagoras and Aristotle asked about what it means to be human. Renaissance Humanism undertook the complex task of answering this question.

2.3.2. Renaissance Humanism

After the Antiquity, the Middle Ages, also known as the Dark Ages, as referred to by Vernon (2010, p. 24), supplanted the first rudiments of humanistic thought in Europe and instead led to a period characterised by religion, clergy and wars. With the Renaissance era, extending from the 14th to the 16th century (ibid.), the rebirth of Antiquity took place. Different schools of thought from past times became popular not only among the philosophers of that time, but also among the public. This is one of the key elements of the Renaissance after Burckhardt (1860), whose work “The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy” is nowadays viewed as one of the most important works in Humanist studies (cf. Muhlack, 2016; Vernon, 2010).

Following the definition of Burckhardt (1860), the Renaissance era and the philosophy of humanism emerging during that time were further characterised by a profound emphasis on human potential, the individual's role in society, and the value of secular knowledge. In addition, Burckhardt introduced the concept of "civic humanism," signifying the active involvement of humanist scholars in the political and administrative spheres of their respective city-states. According to this perspective, the humanists perceived their classical education as instrumental in effecting positive societal transformation, thereby establishing a connection between intellectual pursuits and civic engagement. Its principles significantly

influenced various domains, including art, literature, education, and philosophy, and had a profound and enduring impact on the development of modern Western civilisation. Many aspects of Renaissance Humanism are prevalent in contemporary humanist thinking (Copson et al., 2023).

2.3.3. Enlightenment Humanism

Enlightenment humanism emerged in Europe during the late 17th and 18th centuries. During that time, the term “Enlightenment humanism” had not come into place yet, and those living by the principles of Enlightenment humanism did not identify themselves as humanists (Vernon, 2010, p. 24). Nevertheless, this movement was characterised by a profound emphasis on reason, individualism, secularism, and a strong belief in the capacity of human beings to advance society through rational thought and critical inquiry. A central tenet of Enlightenment humanism is the promotion of reason and rationalism as the primary tools for comprehending the world and resolving societal issues. It places a high value on empirical evidence and critical analysis, seeking to replace dogma and tradition with a rational approach to knowledge (Beiser, 2014). Another key characteristic of Enlightenment humanism is its emphasis on individualism. This aspect underscores the worth and autonomy of the individual, advocating for independent thought, the questioning of traditional authorities, and exercising personal rights and freedoms. This elevation of the individual as a thinking and autonomous agent is foundational to the movement's ideals (Lukes, 1971). Enlightenment humanism also engendered a keen interest in the natural sciences and empirical observation. The works of scientists like Isaac Newton, who formulated the laws of motion and universal gravitation, exemplify the application of reason and empirical methods to understand the physical world. This scientific mindset permeated the broader intellectual landscape of the Enlightenment. Additionally, Enlightenment Humanism was fundamentally optimistic about the potential for human progress and societal improvement. It is believed that through education, reason, and the application of knowledge, humanity can overcome ignorance, superstition, and oppressive systems to create a more just and enlightened society (Robertson, 2015).

Enlightenment Humanism profoundly influenced Western political philosophy. Thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau made significant contributions to the development of ideas about individual rights, the social contract, and the principles of liberal democracy

(Rousseau, 2011; Wokler, 2012). These philosophical foundations continue to shape modern political thought and governance in the Western world. The movement championed freedom of expression, advocating for vital liberties such as freedom of the press and freedom of speech as essential for the dissemination of knowledge and ideas. The exchange of ideas and unfettered discourse were seen as integral to societal progress and enlightenment. Prominent Enlightenment figures, including Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and John Locke, made substantial contributions to the intellectual and philosophical discourse of their time. Their works laid the foundation for many of the principles and values that underpin modern Western democracies and the pursuit of knowledge (Berlin, 1961; Robertson, 2015; Vernon, 2010).

How do Enlightenment humanism and Renaissance humanism differ, and where do their ideas overlap? Enlightenment prioritises reason and secularism over classical revival, championing empirical evidence and individualism. It advocates for a clear separation of church and state, embracing religious tolerance. Enlightenment emphasises individuals' societal impact and potential for political change, fostering an optimistic view of human progress through education and reason, distinguishing it from Renaissance Humanism's focus on classical revival and a more intertwined relationship between humanism and religion. However, as outlined here, both epochs contributed to modern humanism and its various contemporary currents, including Digital Humanism.

2.3.4. Modern Humanism

The “Declaration of Modern Humanism”, also known as the “Amsterdam Declaration” declared by the 2022 General Assembly of Humanists International (2022), views modern humanism less as a fully developed philosophy, but more as a form of behavioural codex. Modern humanists strive to be ethical and rational, while aiming for personal fulfilment. Modern humanism “meets the widespread demand for a source of meaning and purpose to stand as an alternative to dogmatic religion, authoritarian nationalism, tribal sectarianism, and selfish nihilism” (ibid). It is important to note that the global variety of humanist associations often commits to different definitions of (modern) humanism (cf. American Humanist Association, 2023). This reflects on the general perception of humanism as a set of principles with room for interpretation. Or as Bushnell (1996) wrote in her book on Early Modern Humanism, analysing the public debate on humanism in America in the mid-

twentieth century: “How you define humanism as a value system depended on whether you thought it was a good thing.” (ibid., p. 2).

From a historical perspective, Jörn Rüsen (2021) traces modern humanism back to the question “What is man? [*sic*]” (ibid., p. 13), central to modern humanist thinking emerging at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century (ibid., p. 31). The status of being human obtains an absolute standard in guiding all human activities and behaviours, implying that the human is emancipated from everything that is not human. Modern Humanism integrates the aspects of human experience into a set of guiding principles (ibid.). The process leading to this new understanding of what it means to be human can be analysed through a historical process touching upon principles such as secularisation, universalisation, naturalisation, idealisation, historization and individualisation (ibid. p. 18). Civil rights or human rights can be viewed as the ultimate form of modern humanist thought, coming to life through being incorporated in constitutions, followed by institutions operating by those rules. Rüsen does not distinguish between organisations actively following humanist approaches and institutions following human or civil rights. He marks the latter as the most powerful institutions of modern humanism (ibid., p. 14).

2.3.5. Post-Humanism and Transhumanism

Over the past decades, posthumanism and transhumanism emerged as contemporary philosophical traditions. Both philosophies transcend the idea of a human-centric worldview (Cordeiro, 2014; Ferrando, 2013; Sorgner, 2010) and weigh in on the complex discourse of what it means to be human. Both traditions challenge traditional humanism, but they do so in distinct ways.

Posthumanism critically examines the status of humans, emphasising the interconnectedness and equal significance of humans, non-humans, technologies, and the environment, thus rejecting anthropocentrism and questioning the boundaries between human and non-human entities (Bagdasaryan & Kravchenko, 2022; Martin, 2024). This examination of the question of human and non-human identity and the equal attribution of significance follows on from the critique of humanism explained in an earlier part of the chapter, criticising the excluding nature of the humanist philosophy (cf. Copson et al., 2023). In her book “*How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and*

Informatics", Katherine Hayles (1999) defines posthumanism as a viewpoint originating from Cold War-era efforts to formulate a comprehensive theory of communication and control transcending human, animal, and machine distinctions. In this framework, posthumanism prioritises information over material substance. Hayles claims that: "Information can circulate unchanged among different material substrates […]" (ibid., p. 1) as emblematic of this perspective. The central implication of posthumanism, as posited by Hayles, lies in the reimagining of humans as entities capable of seamless interaction and communication with intelligent machines. Through understanding the human as a historic social construct rather than the centre of modern reality, she leaves material boundaries behind and claims a worldview based on information as its core feature (ibid.). Neil Badmington puts the issue of transcending the human, or "man" (Badmington, 2004, p. 109), into perspective based on real-world experiences. In 1982, a computer was nominated as "Man of the Year" by the *Times*-Magazine. Badmington (ibid.) describes that on this day, he felt as if the human itself had been overcome by something non-human. At the same time, the human itself was neither erased nor forgotten through this event, but rather co-existed with this new non-human entity, claiming the same hierarchical position in the societal order as humans. In his theory of posthumanism, posthumanism reproduces itself within humanism, and vice versa. Instead of leaving the human behind, Badmington (ibid.) argues that posthumanism requires patience and to some degree acceptance, that it will inevitably carry and reproduce humanism within itself – "it is the very 'Thing' that makes 'us' 'us', in fact" (ibid., p. 120). To Badmington, posthumanism means questioning humanism. It can therefore be seen as a critique of the human, but it should not reject its existence (ibid.). Among its critics, the concept of posthumanism is "often misunderstood as a more or less unreflected desire to transcend the human condition through new technologies usually associated with fantasies of disembodiment." (Herbrechter, 2016, p. 9).

Transhumanism is more focused on the active enhancement of human capacities through technology, such as artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and robotics, with the goal of transcending biological limitations and ultimately achieving a "posthuman" state (Martin, 2024; Tirosh-Samuelson, 2012). Donna Haraway's (1991) conceptual framework "A Cyborg Manifesto" explores the theme of transhumanism through cyborgs as emblematic of a hybrid existence, challenging established boundaries. Haraway (ibid.) critiques fixed categories, advocating for a perspective that transcends distinctions between human and

machine, nature and culture, and gender binaries. In Haraway's view, the cyborg serves as a metaphorical entity representing the intricate interplay between technology and humanity. Nick Bostrom (2005) characterises transhumanism as a synthesis of Renaissance humanism with the influences of key thinkers such as Isaac Newton, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and the Marquis de Condorcet. This fusion forms the foundation for rational humanism, prioritising empirical science and critical reason over revelation and religious authority for understanding the natural world and shaping moral principles. Bostrom (ibid.) emphasises the roots of transhumanism in rational humanism and draws a parallel to Kant's notion of enlightenment, where individuals are urged to use their own intelligence and break free from self-imposed immaturity. According to Iuga (2016), being a transhumanist means being able to use technology to enhance one’s capabilities and transcend certain biological limitations, leading to a post-biological and posthuman future. Similar concepts have been developed by thinkers like Kurzweil (2005).

While both concepts envision a future where the human condition is fundamentally transformed, post-humanism is more critical and reflective, often concerned with ethical, ecological, and ontological questions. In contrast, transhumanism promotes a sense of optimism towards technological progress and human involvement (cf. Martin, 2024). Inherent to both concepts is the anticipation of a posthuman future, but they differ in their attitudes toward technology, the role of humanity and the values they prioritise.

2.3.6. Digital Humanism

The evolution of Digital Humanism is a call to action for policymakers, academics and companies deeply involved in creating and distributing information and communication technologies (ICT), accelerating the speed at which the digital transformation is progressing (Werthner, 2020). In the Vienna Manifesto on Digital Humanism (ibid.), the contributors define eleven core principles of Digital Humanism, which are outlined and explained in the following paragraphs.

Designing digital technologies should be oriented toward fostering democracy and promoting inclusivity. Addressing existing inequalities is crucial, and leveraging the emancipatory potential of digital technologies is essential for making societies more inclusive. Privacy and freedom of speech must be prioritised as fundamental values for

democracy. All activities in the digital realm should revolve around safeguarding those core rights, ensuring that digital transformation does not come at the cost of individual liberties. It is vital to maintain human-centred decision-making in the digital age. When decisions carry consequences for human rights, they must be made by humans, not machines. Decision-makers must be accountable for their actions, and automated systems should support, not replace, human judgment (ibid., p. 2). Effective regulations and accountability mechanisms are essential. Laws and rules, based on broad public discourse, must ensure prediction accuracy, fairness, equality, and transparency of software programs and algorithms. Accountability must be upheld throughout the design and application of digital systems. Governments must also intervene in cases of tech monopolies, where regulatory action is necessary to restore market competitiveness. Tech monopolies tend to concentrate power and stifle innovation, which undermines democratic control. Decision-making should not be left solely to market forces (ibid.).

A strong emphasis must be placed on interdisciplinary collaboration. Technological disciplines, such as computer science and informatics, must collaborate with social sciences, humanities, and other academic fields to develop holistic solutions to societal challenges, thereby breaking down disciplinary silos. Academic responsibility plays a key role in shaping ethical digital transformation. Universities, as spaces for knowledge production and critical thinking, must recognise and embrace their responsibility to contribute actively to the development of ethically sound digital technologies. Open engagement by researchers is another crucial principle. Both academic and industrial researchers should engage with broader society and reflect critically on their own work. This openness must be grounded in a commitment to freedom of thought and science, while remaining responsive to societal concerns. Recognising the shared responsibility for the impact of information technologies, practitioners must be aware that no technology is neutral. They should be sensitised to both the positive and negative consequences of the systems they help create (ibid.).

Finally, a clear vision for educational curricula is needed. Curricula should combine knowledge from the humanities, social sciences, and engineering studies, particularly in an age shaped by AI and automated decision-making. Educational programs must foster creativity and a deep understanding of the human dimensions of technology. This also includes the early education on societal impact. Computer science education should begin

as early as possible, teaching students not only technical skills but also to consider the ethical and societal implications of digital technologies. In doing so, digital literacy becomes a cornerstone of responsible, inclusive innovation (ibid.).

These core principles result in a call for a humanist perspective on technological developments and the digital transformation. Only through adopting a critical view on how technology transcends human capabilities in different fields can humans be placed at the centre of new developments, instead of following principles solely focused on economic growth. The book “Perspectives of Digital Humanism” (Werthner et al., 2022) promotes a similar definition, stating that Digital Humanism seeks to reconsider existing digital approaches, encompassing activities such as research, development, and innovation within the digital realm. It advocates for a constructive objective in technology, emphasising its role in fostering societal advancement rather than merely pursuing innovation for the sole purpose of economic growth. At this point, the authors make a clear distinction between Digital Humanism and the Digital Humanities, defined as “[…] the study of human society and culture pursued by digital means.” (ibid., p. vi).

Digital Humanism functions as a normative concept that is based on the principles and values outlined above. It shapes actions and judgements according to these shared standards (Boella et al., 2009) and defines what is required, or ideal, to shape digital developments in favour of human well-being. At the beginning of this chapter, I examined ten propositions after Lamonte (1993) to identify similar characteristics in the philosophy of Digital Humanism and find overlapping ideas. I would like to briefly revisit this and engage in a dialogue on identified overlaps in content between four of Lamont's (ibid.) prepositions and the eleven principles of Digital Humanism, according to the Vienna Manifesto on Digital Humanism (Werthner, 2020).

Lamont's Propositions on the Concept of Humanism (Lamont, 1993)	Eleven Principles of Digital Humanism (Werthner, 2020)
Global Democracy and Prosperity	Promotion of Democracy and Inclusion, Privacy and Freedom of Speech, Regulations and Accountability, Tech Monopoly Intervention
Application of Reason & Science	Human-Centered Decision Making, Interdisciplinary Collaboration, Academic Responsibility
Open-Minded Philosophy	Open Engagement by Researchers, Interdisciplinary Collaboration
Faith in Human Potential	Shared Responsibility, Vision for Educational Curricula, Early Education on Societal Impact

Table 1 shows a comparison of the characteristics of humanism and Digital Humanism, which overlap in the concepts of Lamont (1993) and the Manifesto for Digital Humanism (Werthner, 2020).

Digital Humanism shares some elements with other types of humanism. Generally, the humanist idea of placing the human at the centre of considerations applies when it comes to shaping digital development. However, Digital Humanism acknowledges animals and the environment as central to human well-being, including them in its considerations (Werthner et al., 2022, p. vii). This results in addressing, e.g., environmental issues arising from the use of technologies. In the case of modern humanism, both concepts place human rights at the centre of their beliefs (cf. Rüsen, 2021). Its strong emphasis on science and the scientific responsibility can be traced back to Enlightenment Humanism, where science and the distribution of knowledge played a crucial role. (Robertson, 2015). Although secularism is not addressed in the literature on Digital Humanism, not dealing with the topic and the role of science and not indicate that secularism is embedded in the concept. By stating that "We must shape technologies in accordance with human values and needs, instead of allowing technologies to shape humans." (Werthner, 2020, p. 1). Although identifying an ongoing co-evolution of humans and technology (ibid.), Digital Humanism distances itself from the ideas of transhumanism and posthumanism, implying that humans should always have power over technologies and their future developments. Through this, Digital

Humanism aims to ensure that the notion of what it means to be human is not fundamentally changed through them. It is important to note that the definition of humanism and its different types depends strongly on who you ask. While there are similarities, especially when it comes to defining the core elements, interpretations can still vary from one another.

When translating the concept of Digital Humanism into political practice, a process central to this thesis's research aim, the questions of digital governance and policymaking play a crucial role. This needs to be explained by analysing the concept of digital governance first. The concept of governance refers to "[…] systems of authoritative norms, rules, institutions, and practices by means of which any collectively, from the local to the global, manages its common affairs." (Ruggie, 2014, p. 5). In this context, *digital* governance concerns itself with the impact of ICTs on these practices, values and systems of rules (Luna-Reyes, 2017).

Digital governance of the public sector, concerned with, e.g., the implementation of regulations regarding the development of digital technologies (cf. Floridi, 2018), relies heavily on institutions (Kitsing, 2019). Within these institutions responsible for digital governance, laws and regulations as formal rules play a crucial role, along with informal rules based on values and norms. Those informal rules can vary among different cultures. For example, digital governance in contemporary China differs from digital governance in modern Western countries (cf. Gao, 2020). If digital governance aims at "the definition of digitization framework conditions and standards, the definition and assignment of responsibilities and roles within a system or organization in the context of digitalisation, aligning digital projects with the government strategy and involving the relevant stakeholders" (Fischer, 2019, p. 235), then the core principles of Digital Humanism, as outlined before, align with these aims. Depending on how the concept is interpreted, it could function as part of a digital governance strategy to foster an ethical approach to digitalisation and the development of new technologies by proposing basic rules that could further be translated and anchored in regulations. A state-led adaptation of Digital Humanism as part of a digital governance strategy must take into account several agents collaborating through public-private networks within public administration, emphasising shared responsibilities between academia, firms and the political sphere (cf. Fukuyama, 2016; cf. Osborne, 2006).

Recent literature covered the application of Digital Humanism principles in an organisational context. Although this will not be treated in depth within this work, it is worth noting in the

context of applied Digital Humanism. Scuotto et al.(2023) lay out the adoption of Digital Humanism principles as a possible strategy to give workers within knowledge-intensive business services a sense of protection. This is based on a reported feeling of threat by technologies and fast-paced technological developments in their field of work. At the same time, technology is attributed with the ability to enhance human skills, such as creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit. By addressing existential fears through ethical guidelines and simultaneously enhancing human labour through technology, businesses can improve their performance, the authors argue (ibid.). Digital Humanism, in this case, is applied as a form of Corporate Digital Responsibility (cf. Lobschat et al., 2021), with Corporate Digital Responsibility being defined as a "[…] set of shared values and norms guiding an organisation's operations with respect to four main processes related to digital technology and data. These processes are the creation of technology and data capture, operation and decision making, inspection and impact assessment, and refinement of technology and data." (ibid., p. 877). This aligns with the principles of Digital Humanism, providing companies with guidelines on how this set of shared values and norms can be translated into real-world scenarios.

2.4. The Smart City Model and Digital Humanism

With its clear guidelines and requirements, the concept of Digital Humanism provides the opportunity for integration into digital governance strategies. Another, more established concept is the Smart City Model, whose ideas and implementation, especially in the context of digital humanism in Vienna, require closer examination.

Finding a universal definition of a smart city has so far been difficult to accomplish (Albino et al., 2015; Hollands, 2015). The current scientific literature presents a set of common characteristics that provide a framework for the concept. Smart cities can be understood as an urban environment using information and communication technologies (ICT) (Tang et al., 2019) such as the internet of things (IoT), Big Data and networked technologies (Kitchin, 2014; Zanella et al., 2014) to improve the quality of life for their citizens and strengthen the local economy through innovation (Anthopoulos & Anthopoulos, 2017). The smart city concept translates to various fields, such as environmental and climate-friendly city development (Toli & Murtagh, 2020), the digitalisation of public services and de-bureaucratisation (Pérez González & Díaz Díaz, 2015; Serrano, 2018), increasing

competitiveness and lowering bureaucratic hurdles for companies (Kumar & Dahiya, 2017), citizen participation through digitalisation(Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019; Przeybilovicz et al., 2022), and others. The primary stakeholders are local government bodies, technology companies, and research institutions collaborating to bring about customised innovations and transformative changes in urban environments (Caprotti et al., 2022). In their research on *Smart cities: ranking of European medium-sized cities,* Giffinger et al. (2007) defined six characteristics of a Smart City, claiming “A Smart City is a city well performing in a forward-looking way in these six characteristics, built on the ‘smart’ combination of endowments and activities of self-decisive, independent and aware citizens.” (ibid. p. 11). The six characteristics, which can also be understood as different focus areas, include smart economy, smart people, smart governance, smart mobility, smart environment and smart living (ibid). In Vienna, the “Smart City” concept guides the city’s innovation, research and development strategies across various fields (City of Vienna, 2020, p. 136). “Preparing Vienna for the challenges of the future - in such a way that no one is left behind.” (ibid.) is stated as the main goal of the city’s smart city strategy adoption. As attempts were made to translate the concept into its practical application, issues arose. Urban planners and policymakers are equipped with theoretical knowledge and information, often difficult to utilise in real-world scenarios (Tang et al., 2019). Although some scholars deem a universal definition of a smart city, and what constitutes it, a desirable outcome (Albino et al., 2015; Kozłowski & Suwar, 2021; Law & Lynch, 2019), a shared understanding of the concept with some open ends holds the advantage for cities to adapt the smart city concept based on their needs. Here, the City of Vienna can serve as an example, adapting its smart city strategy in line with its policy goals. For instance, throughout the coalition program’s chapter on smart cities, the city emphasises inclusivity, shared responsibilities, and the centrality of humans in the government’s smart-city-oriented policymaking. This aligns with the “Smart People” aspect (Giffinger et al., 2007), centring around a city’s citizens and their on levels of qualification, affinity for lifelong learning, social and ethnic plurality, flexibility, creativity, cosmopolitanism/open-mindedness, and participation in public life. It also integrates values associated with the SPÖ Vienna, the Social Democratic Party of Austria in Vienna, which is the bigger party in the city’s governing coalition (SPÖ, 2025).

How does the concept of the Smart City relate to Digital Humanism? Similar to the smart city concept, Digital Humanism can provide guidelines for the responsible handling of technologies and digitalisation (Werthner et al., 2022). In its application, partially

overlapping with the smart city concept, its focus is on providing ethical considerations, followed by generalised recommended actions that require further adaptation to fit a city's digital governance strategy, as needs can vary from city to city. If both concepts were to be used as guidelines for innovation and development, it is essential to note where they might contradict each other and how these contradictions are mitigated. For example, Digital Humanism principles could function as ethical guidelines integrated in the development of smart city projects.

2.5. Platform Urbanism in the Context of Digital Transformation

In 2023, the IMD Smart City Index looked into city living in 141 cities, classified as "Smart Cities" (Lanvin, 2023). This number indicates the widespread use of the Smart City model in local policymaking around the world. Literature shows almost no currently used alternative concepts to the smart city. One possible alternative, also known as an evolution of the smart city (Caprotti et al., 2022), is the concept of platform urbanism. While smart city focuses on the city itself, platform urbanism centres around digital platforms as a "socio-technical assemblage" (ibid., p. 3). It refers to the growing influence of digital platforms, such as ride-sharing, delivery services, social media, and e-government tools, on the organisation, governance, and everyday life of cities (Hanakata & Bignami, 2021; Sadowski, 2020). Similar to the smart city concept, platform urbanism is a future-oriented concept that aims to guide policymakers and other agents involved in reshaping the digital urban landscape towards a more conscious handling and integration of digital platforms. Although not geographically bound, platform urbanism requires dense infrastructures and various networks of actors that utilise platforms (Hodson et al., 2024). Central stakeholders, therefore, are technology firms, providers of goods and services, and the resulting intermediations centred upon bespoke transactions (Van der Graaf & Ballon, 2019). Policymakers provide the legal framework in which these platforms operate and utilise platforms (Barns, 2019; Caprotti & Liu, 2020). In his paper *A new institution on the block: On platform urbanism and Airbnb citizenship*, Van Doorn (2020) outlines the establishment of Airbnb in the context of platform urbanism and addresses the complexity of the urban landscape, illustrating how multiple actors from the private and public sectors interact on this matter. Through their presence and expansion in urban areas, platforms can grow to a level where they shape policies and expand their influence from the private sector to the public sector. They can develop substantial opinion power, able to amplify or suppress

information and sway public opinion on a massive scale (Helberger, 2020). Platforms benefit from the loyalty of vast user bases, which can mobilise against regulations that threaten their interest, as was shown in the case of Airbnb, making policymakers more deferential to their needs (Culpepper & Thelen, 2019; Stemler, 2019). The need to govern this platformisation of cities has been acknowledged and attempted by many local policymakers (Anttiroiko, 2016; Gorwa, 2019; Teh, 2022; Walravens, 2011). The rise of platform urbanism has resulted in initiatives such as “City as a Platform” (Viable Cities 2023), where 18 Swedish municipalities explore, test, implement, and collaborate on shared Internet of Things (IoT) platforms, aiming to enhance urban advantages. The concept of city as a platform can improve citizen participation through digital platforms provided by the public sector, precisely “[…] citizen involvement in publicly-supported participatory innovation platforms that facilitate urban economic development.” (Anttiroiko, 2016, p. 1), as explored in a case study conducted in Helsinki, Tampere and Oulu.

This chapter provides the conceptual groundwork for the empirical part of this thesis. It began by outlining how the emergence of digital technologies has shaped modern societies and continues to influence economic, political, and cultural structures globally. By contrasting theoretical approaches to digitalisation and examining the transformation of the individual through engagement with digital technologies, key terms such as digitisation, digitalisation, and datafication were clarified. A brief reflection on the digital transformation from a global perspective, particularly in the Global South, highlighted the importance of pluralist perspectives in the study of digital transformation. Following this, the concept of humanism and its historical roots were revisited to build a foundation for understanding Digital Humanism, subsequently exploring its characteristics and how it aims to respond to the ethical, political, and social challenges posed by digital transformation. The chapter concluded by contextualising Digital Humanism within the contemporary frameworks, such as the smart city model and the platform urbanism concept. With this background in place, the following chapter outlines the methodological approach taken to investigate how Digital Humanism has been integrated into the City of Vienna’s policymaking. It explains the rationale for choosing Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) as a method and details the data collection and analysis process that informed the empirical insights of this study.

3 Methods

This chapter outlines the research process underlying the empirical part of the study, including its methodological principles and practical steps. Drawing on the constructivist approach to Grounded Theory as developed by Kathy Charmaz (Charmaz, 2014), this section explains the method itself and how it was employed.

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT), as outlined by Charmaz (2014) , to examine the extent to which the City of Vienna has integrated the concept of "Digital Humanism" into its policymaking, as well as the opportunities and challenges faced by regional policymakers in applying this ideological framework to digitalisation policy. Constructivist Grounded Theory emphasises the co-construction of meaning between researchers and participants, recognising that both contribute to the creation of knowledge throughout the research process (ibid.). This makes it particularly suitable for investigating newly emerged, socially constructed phenomena like Digital Humanism, where interpretations may vary depending on the stakeholder's background and field of practice. The research relies on semi-structured interviews with seven experts selected for their professional engagement with digitalisation and their familiarity with the concept of Digital Humanism in the Viennese context. This allows for a rich analysis of how the concept is operationalised. The Constructivist Grounded Theory method enables an iterative process of data collection and analysis, facilitating the emergence of grounded insights based on the lived experiences of participants (ibid.).

The next section provides a detailed outline of the method, followed by the reasoning behind choosing this method for this master’s thesis and a step-by-step outline of how it was employed.

3.1.1. Constructivist Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a systematic methodology used in qualitative research. It aims at constructing a theory, or theoretical conception, grounded in data. Developed in the 1960s, grounded theory arose from the need for a method that would allow to generate theories directly from empirical data, rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses or theories. In their

work, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Glaser & Strauss, 1968), Glaser and Strauss laid the foundation for this approach, emphasising the importance of generating theories that are closely connected to the empirical data.

CGT (Charmaz, 2014) is an approach developed from classic grounded theory tradition after Glaser and Strauss (1968). It differs from earlier versions of grounded theory by explicitly acknowledging the subjective and interpretive nature of research. This paradigm shift emphasises that both the data and the analysis are co-constructed by the researcher and participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. At the heart of this approach is a constructivist epistemology. Unlike the objectivist stance of traditional grounded theory, which posits that reality exists independently of human perceptions, constructivism asserts that reality is constructed through social processes and interactions. In this view, knowledge is shaped by the interactions between the researcher and study participants. Charmaz (ibid.) argues that this interactional process influences both the data collected and the interpretations made. The method thus recognises the researcher's active role in co-constructing knowledge.

The research process in Constructivist Grounded Theory is iterative (Charmaz, 2014, p. 35). Researchers do not follow a linear path but rather engage in a cyclical process of data collection, coding, and analysis. The process involves constant comparison, where new data are continuously compared with existing data and codes, facilitating the refinement and integration of categories. This constant comparison method is critical for ensuring that the emerging theory remains grounded in the data and accurately reflects the studied phenomenon. During the research process, flexibility is a key aspect of CGT (ibid.). It enables researchers to respond dynamically to the data by adapting the research process as it progresses. This flexibility is crucial for studying complex social phenomena, as it facilitates the exploration of emerging themes and the adaptation of research questions and strategies as needed. This adaptability ensures that the research remains grounded in the experiences and meanings expressed by participants throughout the course of a study.

Constructivist Grounded Theory places a strong emphasis on understanding processes, rather than focusing solely on themes or outcomes (Charmaz, 2014, p. 59). Through that, CGT aims to uncover how participants construct meanings and navigate their social worlds. Charmaz (ibid.) encourages researchers to explore the conditions, contexts, and

consequences of these processes to provide a deeper understanding of the social dynamics at play through their research. This emphasis on process over themes and outcomes allows for a rich analysis. CGT relies heavily on the researcher's intensive engagement with their data, aiming at developing theoretical sensitivity (ibid., 303). It refers to the sensitivity a researcher develops through engaging with their data throughout the research process. In CGT, the identification of significant patterns and relationships within the data is closely linked to theoretical sensitivity. The research process continues until theoretical saturation is reached, which occurs when additional data no longer contributes new insights to the developing categories (ibid., p. 307).

Based on the idea of CGT that the researcher plays an active part in constructing meaning through engaging with their data, reflexivity is a cornerstone of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014, p. 294). Charmaz (ibid.) advocates for researchers to be critically aware of their positionality, biases, and assumptions throughout the research process. This involves reflecting on how these factors influence data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Reflexivity enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the research and fosters a more ethical and respectful engagement with participants (ibid.). By acknowledging how researchers shape their research, CGT produces more transparent and accountable scholarship.

The application of the method can be divided into different phases (see Figure 1). The initial coding phase begins with an analysis of the data, either word-by-word or line-by-line, generating descriptive codes that encapsulate the essence of the participants' words and meanings (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 221-225). Which type of coding is conducted depends on the type of collected data, their level of abstraction, the stage of the research process and the purpose for collecting these data (ibid.). A close linkage between the codes and the data ensures that the insights drawn from them are closely linked to the perceptions and ideas of the study participants. The initial coding phase is critical for developing an analytical framework and identifying central patterns and themes that drive the research forward (ibid.) The second phase, theoretical coding (ibid., pp. 283-284), integrates the codes that emerged during the initial coding phase in a coherent conceptualisation concerned with how these codes relate to one another. Throughout this process, the researcher’s theoretical sensitivity grows through intensive engagement with the data and the research (ibid., p. 303). The final phase of grounded theory involves writing up and presenting the

developed theory or concept. This can, e.g., take the form a narrative or a set of propositions that explain the central phenomena.

3.1.2. Use of Constructivist Grounded Theory in this Master's Thesis

Several reasons made Kathy Charmaz's (2014) Constructivist Grounded Theory particularly well-suited for this study. The research question at the centre of this study delves into a relatively underexplored area, offering few proven research strategies or theories that could be drawn on. Due to the inductive nature of CGT, it enabled this research to originate in the observation of a phenomenon, thereby supporting the generation of new knowledge without a predetermined theoretical framework. The flexibility aspect of CGT allowed for a continuous adaptation of the research process as new findings emerged, which was particularly important in the case of this study. The discourse surrounding Digital Humanism in Vienna quickly turned out to be constantly evolving. Since interviews were conducted at different times, sometimes with a time interval of 3-4 months, the circumstances that shaped the interviewees' perceptions also changed. The possibility of repeatedly switching back and forth between old and new data during the analysis process allowed for the comparison of "real-time" data with older data, capturing ongoing changes within the discourse. One consequence of this was that the data became richer as it captured changing circumstances in the discourse. Conversely, it quickly became apparent when theoretical saturation had been reached. If new interviews, which were often conducted at a considerable time interval from older interviews, no longer provided any new findings, and this saturation persisted through further new interviews, it was considered that theoretical saturation had been reached. Through its flexibility, CGT enabled a thorough analysis over a longer period, effectively capturing the constant evolution of the discourse while making core issues visible. A welcome side effect of constantly going back and forth between data is that researcher bias was challenged. Reflexivity is also demanded to a certain extent; for example, in this study, the code 'dissatisfied with political action' was not used in isolation. It was only through constant examination of the data towards the end of the analysis process that indications of satisfaction with political action were revealed, which in turn contributed to the conceptualisation of the theory.

The discourse surrounding Digital Humanism in Vienna should be understood as a multifaceted process that constantly evolves and shapes societal realities. As mentioned in

the previous section, Charmaz (2014) advocates for focusing on different processes, rather than solely on their outcomes or themes emerging. This study aims to explore not just the factual implementation of Digital Humanism but also the diverse interpretations and perspectives of policymakers, scholars, and practitioners involved in digitalisation in Vienna. Instead of focusing solely on policies as a result of political action, it is more about what can be learned from the processes and the perceptions of those involved in how and through whom these policies come into action. CGT furthermore acknowledges that knowledge and meaning are co-constructed through interactions, rather than being objective truths that await discovery.

Reaching theoretical saturation is a central aspect of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014). As this study was conducted with a limited number of interviews due to reasons explained in section 3.2.1 *Interview Design*, theoretical saturation may not have been reached. While recurring patterns and themes emerged across the dataset and a constant comparison took place over the course of the analysis process, it cannot be ruled out that further interviews, especially with actors from other institutional or political contexts, could have added new dimensions to the findings. This might have affected the validity of the findings. While this study provides a first step at understanding the concept of Digital Humanism translated to political practice, the concept developed here, using CGT, should be further tested and refined through future research.
The following section provides further insight into why CGT was chosen as a suitable method by comparing three methods that were considered as suitable to answer the research question posed here.

3.1.3. Choice of Method – A Comparison

It is not always immediately clear which method will yield the desired outcome of a research project. Therefore, in considering the most appropriate methodological approach for this study, different qualitative research methos were evaluated. Among them were Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) (Mayring, 2014) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000) (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). This section briefly outlines the nature of these methods, before comparing them with one another to illustrate why CGT was the best choice.

Qualitative Content Analysis, as proposed by Mayring (2014), offers a systematic and transparent coding framework that is well-suited to summarising and comparing textual data. It combines qualitative interpretation with rule-based coding procedures. The method enables the deductive (theory-based) or inductive (data-driven) development of categories, which are applied systematically through coding rules. Depending on the research aim, QCA can summarise, explicate, or structure data thematically. However, its emphasis on descriptive content and structured category systems makes it less appropriate for inductively developing new theoretical concepts (Cho & Lee, 2014). For example, if applied as a method in this study, the documents and interview transcripts would have been coded based on predefined categories. It would have focused more on frequency and thematic structure in the data than on the underlying conceptual meanings and theoretical developments.

Critical Discourse Analysis, as described by Blommaert & Bulcaen (2000; Powers, 2007), originated from Foucault's method of Discourse Analysis. It is a theoretically rich method that examines the performative nature of language and how discourses shape social reality. It analyses political texts, spoken words and social practices, looking for power relations and ideological formations. Emerging from broader traditions of discourse analysis, particularly those influenced by Foucault's work on knowledge and discourse, CDA assumes that discourse is both shaped by and shapes social structures (ibid.). CDA does not offer a single method, but rather a framework that requires researchers to engage deeply with questions of power, hegemony and representation. For example, Fairclough (1992) developed a three-dimensional framework for conceiving of and analysing discourse: discourse-as-text, discourse-as-discursive-practice and discourse-as-social-practice. The dimension model is grounded in a theory of ideological processes in society, which is viewed in terms of processes of hegemony and shifts in hegemony. Within CDA, analyses often focus on how certain narratives become dominant, how authority is constructed through language, and how exclusion or legitimation is discursively produced, requiring thorough theoretical knowledge and methodological training to apply this method (cf. Powers, 2007) effectively. In this study, the application of CDA as a method could help uncover how the concept of Digital Humanism functions discursively in political texts, council statements or public communication, revealing the gap between political rhetoric and institutional action. Still, it is often guided by pre-existing theoretical frameworks and places less emphasis on the situated meaning-making of actors.

In comparison to QCA and CDA, Constructivist Grounded Theory offers a more open approach, allowing researchers to go from asking “What is happening here?” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 73) to constructing new insights on a phenomenon grounded in participants’ experience.

Aspect	**Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014)**	**Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) (Mayring, 2014)**	**Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Powers, 2007)**
Goal	Develop new theory from data	Interpret meaning of textual data by identifying patterns, themes or categories	Unvocer how language constructs meaning/power
Use of Theory	Emerges from data / throughout the research process; inductive (data-driven)	May guide or follow coding; inductive (data-driven) or deductive (theory-based)	Typically guides the analysis, already existing; deductive (theory-based) or abductive (explanation-oriented)
Analysis Process	From open to theoretical coding (3 phases)	Predefined or emergent coding frame	May not involve formal coding; Analysing written and spoken language and social practices
Focus	Meaning, experiences, processes	Content, categories, comparison	Language, power, ideology
Researcher Role	Reflexive co-constructor, interpreter	Transparent observer	Critical interpreter

Output	Conceptual categories, theory	Structured thematic results	Discursive patterns and narratives

Table 2 provides a literature-based overview of the three methodological approaches which were compared for this study.

Although both Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) offer methodological tools for analysing qualitative data, they were not selected for this study due to their respective analytical orientations. While CDA's examination of how language constructs and reinforces power, ideology and dominance in discourse, which aligns partially with aspects of the present study, such as the symbolic function of Digital Humanism, it is typically driven by strong theoretical frameworks and focuses more on macro-level linguistic structures than on participants' situated meaning-making (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). In contrast, QCA is a systematic method for coding and categorising content, often guided by predefined categories or theoretical assumptions (Mayring, 2014). While it allows for transparent comparison and description of themes, it was not applicable to investigate how the discourse of Digital Humanism was constructed through perceptions. Constructivist Grounded Theory, therefore, seemed to be the most suitable method for this study. Its inductive nature allows for research that is not based on already existing theory, e.g. in novel fields such as the concept of Digital Humanism. Its focus on people's perceptions helps to gain valuable insights into how actors make sense of Digital Humanism, while allowing for the emergence of theoretical categories grounded in their empirical reality. Through this, it demonstrates how reality is constructed through subjective experiences and perceptions, without being limited by pre-existing assumptions. Given the aim of this thesis, which is to understand how political and institutional actors make sense of Digital Humanism and how this concept is enacted symbolically or structurally, Constructivist Grounded Theory was the most suitable research method.

3.2. Data Collection

This section highlights the data collection process. Interviews were used as a qualitative method, which were designed to be semi-structured. The process included a total of 7 interviews with different stakeholders closely connected to the Digital Humanism discourse

in Vienna. In addition to the interview design, this section outlines ethical considerations related to the conception and implementation of the interviews.

3.2.1. Interview Design

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This allowed flexibility and granted the interviewees room to share their experiences and perceptions on what feels important to them, apart from the questions posed by the researcher, while still maintaining a focus on the research question (Prainsack & Pot, 2021).

The decision to conduct seven interviews was based on several factors. After analysing the data over a longer period, it became apparent that no more profound or new insights were generated from interviews 6 to 7 onwards, and that theoretical saturation had occurred to a degree at which the analysis could be elevated to a meta-level and concluded. Furthermore, the field of Digital Humanism in Vienna is small, and within this field, there are only a few people who are actively involved. Therefore, the selection of interviewees was also limited. A total of 9 interviewees were asked to participate, with one person cancelling directly and another not responding after repeated contact. The amount of work involved in analysing the data using CGT as a method was also a limiting factor. More time resources, for example, by involving another researcher or a longer survey and analysis period, could have increased the number of interviewees.
Interview participants were selected based on their professional engagement with digitalisation and their proximity to the discourse around Digital Humanism in Vienna. As interviews were conducted over a longer period, it became apparent that the interview participants, chosen based on two criteria (profession and proximity to the discourse), already reflected diverse institutional perspectives and provided contrasting viewpoints. Each interview lasted approximately 60–110 minutes and was conducted either in person or via online video conferencing, depending on participant availability. A semi-structured format allowed for open-ended responses while ensuring that core topics were covered across all interviews. The interview guide included questions about the participants' understanding of digitalisation and how digitalisation influences their lives, the application of Digital Humanism principles within different areas defined by the City of Vienna (see Chapter 4), various actors involved, and their influence on the discourse. The full interview guide can be found in the appendix.

Although this thesis is written in English, interviews were conducted in German to match the participants' first language (the language in which people are raised). According to research conducted on this matter, this proved to be crucial for several reasons. First, it enhances communication and understanding, allowing participants to express themselves more accurately and comfortably in their native language, which leads to richer data. Hennink et al. (2011) found that participants felt more at ease sharing personal experiences when interviewed in their mother tongue, facilitating more profound reflections. Second, language is a key vehicle for cultural expression, and using the mother tongue allows researchers to capture cultural nuances that may not translate well. Kosslyn and Koenig (1992) emphasised that language carries cultural meanings essential for understanding participants' perspectives. Additionally, participants might be more comfortable discussing sensitive topics in their native language. Polkinghorne (2005) urges researchers to be aware of a potential loss of information when interviewing participants in a language other than their first language. Therefore, interviews conducted in the participants' first language can minimise misunderstandings and misinterpretations, enhancing the accuracy and credibility of the findings.

However, translating information from one language to another in a later stage of the research process can still result in a loss of information, ultimately affecting the study's findings. Possible issues arising with the translation of findings from German to English will be highlighted in section 3.7 *Translating Metaphorical Meaning*.

3.2.2. Information on Ethical Considerations regarding the Interviews

Before the interviews, each participant was provided with an informed consent form that outlined the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures in place to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were assured that all personal identifiers would be removed from the interview transcripts (Wiles et al., 2008), and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. The anonymisation took place in two rounds: first, all personal identifiers were removed; second, contextual details that could indirectly reveal identities were reviewed and further redacted. This process followed the logic of two anonymisation categories: (A) direct

identifiers (e.g.: names, institutions, roles) and (B) contextual identifiers (e.g., specific affiliations or recognisable projects).

With participants' written consent, which was obtained through a physical signature, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of data collection. These recordings were then transcribed verbatim. Transcription was performed using transcription software, followed by manual checking. All data were securely stored in a password-protected digital folder only to the researcher and the supervisor. The consent form can be found in the appendix.

Once data collection was completed, the interview material underwent a preparation process to serve as the foundation for the subsequent coding and analysis, in line with CGT principles.

3.3. Data Preparation

Data preparation for this study involved three key steps to ensure the accuracy, confidentiality, and readiness of the collected data for the analysis. All seven interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. These recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcription process was done in two stages. First, the software *Sonix.ai* was used to create a first draft of the transcripts. This provided a quick and efficient method for generating textual data, relieving the researchers' workload. This was followed by the correction of audio-to-text errors, including manual error correction, clarifying unintelligible sections, and verifying that the transcriptions accurately reflected the participants' spoken words. Most software mistakes were based on incomprehensible pronunciation due to the use of dialect words and accents. This step also served as a familiarisation process through engaging with the data before diving into the coding process. The transcripts were then imported into the qualitative data analysis software *MAXQDA 2024* to facilitate systematic coding and analysis. The software enabled the researcher to code, tag, and categorise data segments efficiently, aligning with the Constructivist Grounded Theory approach,(Charmaz, 2014). During the data preparation phase, preliminary thoughts about the data, emergent ideas, and potential analytic directions were documented in a research diary to help understand how assumptions before analysing the data changed throughout the process. Documenting furthermore gave an insight into possible biases.

The anonymisation of the data did not occur during data preparation, as the content to be anonymised was extensive and contained important information. The anonymisation process, therefore, only took place after the data analysis had been completed. Following the preparation for the interview material, the data were analysed through various phases of coding and constant comparison during the process, to develop conceptual categories grounded in participants' perspectives.

3.4. Data Analysis

In line with the principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory, the data analysis in this study was conducted as an iterative process, going back and forth between the codes generated throughout the process (Charmaz, 2014). This approach was chosen to allow for the inductive development of conceptual categories directly from the empirical data. The goal of the analysis was to explore how participants construct meaning around the implementation discourse of Digital Humanism in the City of Vienna and to identify the underlying structures, tensions and expectations shaping this process. Coding phases and category development were supported by active memo-writing. From time to time it was necessary to away from the process of analysing data, which lengthened the process, but also allowed for reflexivity and different perspectives. The following subsections provides a detailed outline of this process.

3.4.1. The Analysis Process

During the analysis process, line-by-line coding was applied to fully capture the perspectives and experiences of the interview participants, aiming to preserve the depth inherent to their narratives. Line-by-line coding proved effective in this study due to the complexity of the research topic and the rich data provided by the participants. Line-by-line coding furthermore enabled the capture of explicit and implicit meanings in participants' statements. As Charmaz (2014) suggests, "Detailed observations of people, actions, and settings…lend themselves to line-by-line coding" (ibid., p. 241), allowing researchers to dissect the data carefully and avoid projecting preconceived notions onto participants' words. This approach also supported a systematic examination of each sentence, ensuring a focus on participants' perspectives rather than the researchers' interpretations of broader situations (ibid.). After transforming a multitude of sentences into code throughout the initial coding phase, the phase was completed with 3156 Codes generated.

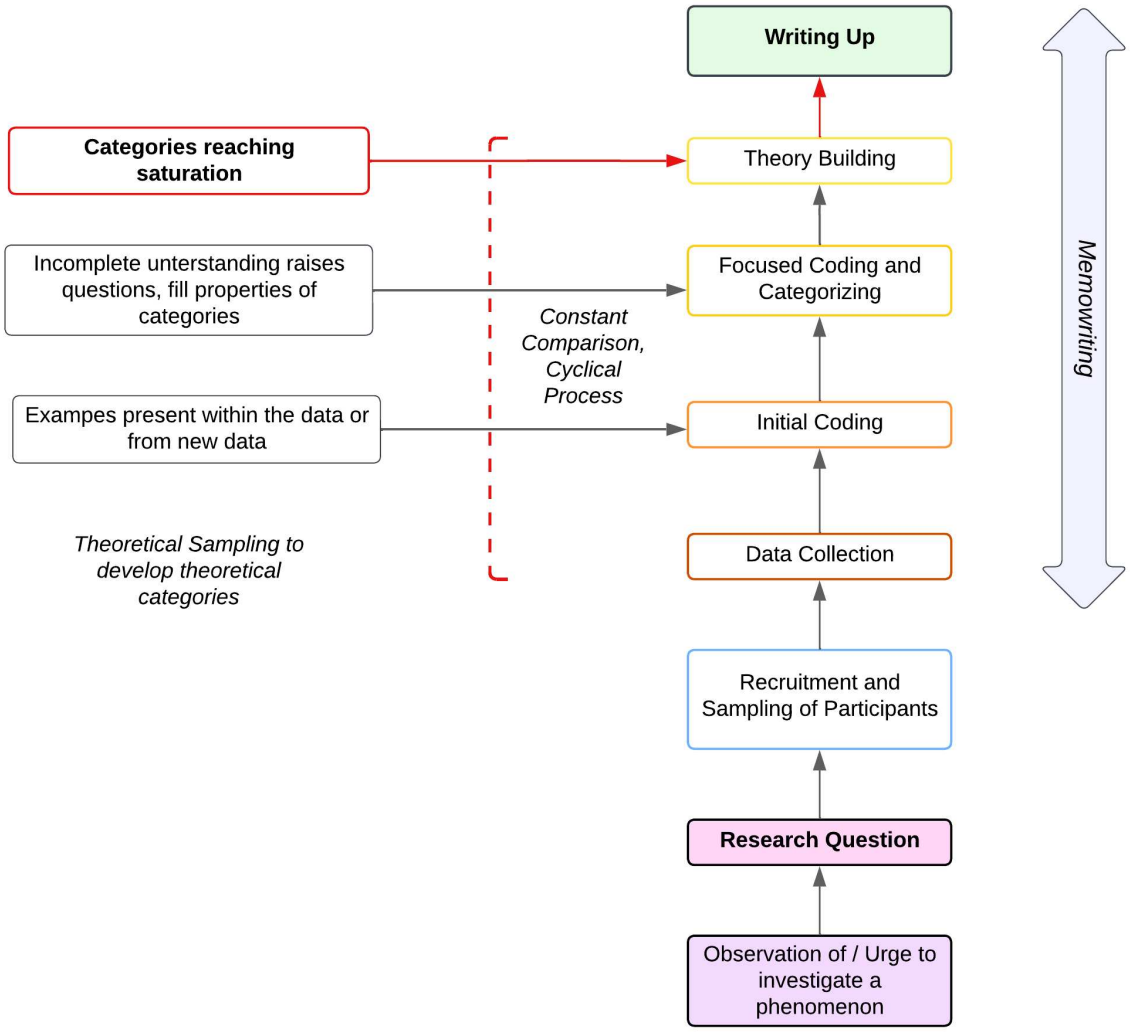

Figure 1 is an adaption of Charmaz' (2014, p. 18) representation of a grounded theory. It was adapted to accurately visualize the research process employed in this study.

The initial coding phase was followed by focused coding, where patterns that emerged from the initial codes were identified and grouped into higher-level categories. Throughout this stage, the constant comparison method (see Charmaz, 2014, p. 26) was employed, continually comparing codes from different interviews to refine and expand emerging themes. This iterative process led to the identification of six categories made up of approximately 30 codes. The 1,356 initial codes were either merged or selectively deleted where other codes fit more accurately or shared a similar meaning.

From the focused coding phase, abstract patterns emerged, which became increasingly visible throughout the analysis. This led to the adoption of a more abstract view, ultimately initiating the process of theory building. The multitude of topics emerging from this process

made it difficult to distinguish between those relevant to answering the research question and those that were interesting to explore. Here, the iterative nature of the analysis process helped to maintain focus on the research objective. Figure 1, an adaptation of Charmaz's visual representation of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014, p. 44), illustrates this cyclical process where each step is revisited and refined based on new insights, emphasising the fluid, non-linear nature of Constructivist Grounded Theory. The concept standing at the end of this thesis was "constructed" through engagement with the data.

3.5. Clustering

Due to the vast amount of data and the need to create a "bigger picture" based on the data at hand, clustering was employed as a technique in the final phases of the research process (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 185-186). Even though the number of codes had been reduced significantly by the time this phase was reached, and initial, vague categories had already been formed, it proved difficult to fully understand the connections between the codes and to leave behind preconceived assumptions. By clustering the remaining codes after the focused coding phase and visually embedding them in existing categories, a picture of new code relationships emerged. New categories, which described the phenomena that took place on a more meta-level, were formed.

The new categories and relationships between the codes revealed throughout the process were visualised using MAXQDA's "MaxMaps" function and refined in the mapping process. By using different colours for the various subcodes, codes, and categories, as well as for illustrating the other contact points and relationships between them, thoughts and concepts were documented in a comprehensible manner. One of the maps generated will be displayed in Chapter 5.

3.6. Memo Writing

Memo writing played a crucial role throughout the research process. Due to the combination of vast amounts of data and the time-consuming line-by-line coding approach in the initial coding phase, it became challenging to keep up with the thoughts and ideas that had emerged during the process. Through continuously capturing these thoughts in the form of memos, it was possible to identify several patterns and "threads" within the data that were then easier to pursue. Additionally, it proved to be be helpful to actively identify researcher

biases, either ad hoc while writing a memo or retrospectively. Besides continuously working with memos, ideas and thoughts were written down in the form of a research diary. The digital “Logbook” in MAXQDA provides a space to store all written ideas and thoughts in one place, keeping everything within a single software.

Researcher’s Note: There are several approaches a grounded theory researcher can use to write memos (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 341-342). Writing down my thoughts based on what came to mind worked best in the first stages of the research process. I did not engage in any scientific practices, nor did I organise my thoughts or memos at first. In later stages, I connected certain memos with similar content, forming one comprehensive, often more specified memo. This step felt necessary to me so that I would not get lost among the multitude of ideas that had emerged at the beginning. It also helped me to stay with one of several phenomena that had emerged from my data and would have been interesting to investigate. I found this particularly difficult because of the curiosity with which I approach the field. The assumptions that emerged from my memos and became relevant in the later steps were continuously documented and saved in MAXQDA. This in turn helped me to check these assumptions, both through literature and by returning to my data, and, depending on their relevance, to incorporate them into my discussion.

3.7. Translating Metaphorical Meaning

Before proceeding to the analysis, I would like to highlight once more that the data analysis was conducted in German. Translation to English took place during the last step, referred to as “Write Up” in Figure 1. All translations were carefully considered and carried out to lose as little meaning as possible in the translation process. For transparency reasons, the original text is provided in form of footnotes.

During the analysis, one in-vivo code began to play an increasingly central role, effectively capturing the experiences of the interviewees. It also proved to be representative of the difficulty of translating results. The German in-vivo code “*Mühsam ernährt sich das Eichhörnchen*” is a metaphorical expression that describes the idea that progress or success often requires consistent hard work and can feel tough, especially when the process is slow or challenging (cf. DWDS, 2025). The direct translation from German to

English is "*The squirrel eats with difficulty*", which makes little sense in terms of conveying the metaphorical meaning. It distorts the actual statement the interviewee wanted to make:

> The squirrel eats with difficulty. I feel it would probably be more important to ask someone else who isn't so preocup-. So of course, I look for every plant that comes out of the ground, yes, absolute bias. It's a tough business, it is - even within the bubble [...] that is sceptical of the new monopoly and extraction capitalism - is that a term of 100 in Europe, worldwide, or worldwide. So, the world hasn't been waiting for us to say we've now found the term and now you convert to it. This is laborious, long-term work.[2] (Interviewee 6, pos. 896-904).

From the statement, we can infer that establishing the term Digital Humanism is perceived as very challenging. Based on this in-vivo code, a code with the same name emerged, summarising multiple codes with similar meaning but oftentimes linked to different problems arising in the context of the implementation of the term Digital Humanism. To convey the feelings and meaning behind this code, I chose "Breaking through is like pushing a boulder uphill" as a suitable translation, believing that this is the feeling Interviewee 6 wanted to convey by using the German metaphor.

According to the online dictionary tureng (2025), the correct translation would be "little by little the bird builds its nest" (ibid.). I decided against this metaphor, as it does not convey the sense of hardship the interviewee wanted to bring across, or so I sensed it. Interpreting a metaphor based on the surrounding context and how it reflects the participant's feelings shows that the focus is no longer on objective translation accuracy. Instead, this highlights a key feature of Constructivist Grounded Theory: it not only allows, but requires the researcher to engage in this kind of contextual and meaning-oriented interpretation (cf. Charmaz, 2014). Wiktionary (2025) suggests that the correct translation is "slow and steady wins the race" (ibid.), which, too, captures only partially the meaning conveyed in the

[2] „Mühsam ernährt sich das Eichhörnchen. Ich spüre es wäre wahrscheinlich wichtiger, jemand anderen zu fragen, der nicht so preocup-, also ich schaue natürlich nach jeder Pflanze, die aus dem Boden herauskommt, ja, absoluter Bias. Es ist ein zaches Geschäft, es ist selbst innerhalb der Blase, oder das, des Wolkengebildes, das da dem neuen Monopol und Extraktionskapitalismus skeptisch gegenübersteht, ist das ein Begriff von 100 in Europa, weltweit, oder weltweit. Also die Welt hat nicht gewartet auf uns, dass wir jetzt sagen Wir haben jetzt den Begriff gefunden und bekehret euch. Das ist eine mühsame, langfristige Arbeit."

German metaphor. Again, the hardships our interviewee experiences in establishing Digital Humanism as a term within the City of Vienna's digital governance are not conveyed here.

Loss of meaning throughout the translation process can distort study content and results. With in-vivo codes, it is even more important to be sensitised to this, because they are codes that use the exact words of participants to capture their meanings, experiences, and perspectives in a way that stays close to their lived reality (Charmaz, 2014). These codes offer insight into the ways participants make sense of their experiences and resonate deeply with their worldviews. The meaning of metaphors is underlined by Lakoff and Johnson (2008) in their book *Metaphors We Live By*. Lakoff and Johnson (ibid.) argue that metaphors are not merely linguistic flourishes but are foundational to human thought, shaping how people conceptualise abstract concepts and structure their understanding of the world. In-vivo codes that capture metaphorical language, such as the one described above, thus carry considerable analytical weight. They reflect not only individual perspectives but also broader, culturally embedded ways of understanding. In this case, a participant describing their efforts as "pushing a boulder uphill" offers a vivid metaphor that encapsulates their emotional experience, the challenges they face, and the perseverance required. Such metaphors, when preserved as in-vivo codes, can enrich Constructivist Grounded Theory analysis by connecting individual narratives to collective conceptual frameworks, bridging the gap between personal creation of meaning and societal discourse (cf. Charmaz, 2014). Conversely, a more advanced translation technique and an analysis of their meaning are required.

How can we ensure that as little meaning as possible is lost, or at best not lost at all? In "A Textbook of Translation", Newmark (1988) demands interpretive sensitivity when translating metaphors. He differentiates between various types of metaphors. The metaphor in the in-vivo code is what he calls a stock metaphor: "An established metaphor which in an informal context is an efficient and concise method of covering a physical and/or mental situation both referentially and pragmatically - a stock metaphor has a certain emotional warmth - and which is not deadened by overuse" (ibid., p. 108). Stock metaphors can only be translated accurately when the target language contains a similarly conventional and culturally accepted expression. Suppose a new or unfamiliar image is introduced in the translation, even if it is appropriate for the target language. In that case, it typically alters the original sense and often shifts tone as well. I aimed to convey the sense of the metaphor

above by finding a metaphor with a similar sense, rather than translating it literally. Supported by an interpretation of the feeling conveyed by the metaphor in the original language, an attempt was made to retain as much meaning as possible. Schäffner (2004), who shares Lakoff and Johnson's (2008) understanding of metaphors carrying cultural and experiential meaning, emphasises that translators should aim to identify equivalent conceptual structures in the target language, ensure the communicative function of the metaphor is preserved, and remain attentive to shifts in tone, emphasis, or cultural resonance. Rather than relying on fixed procedures, metaphor translation requires context-sensitive strategies. This does not mean that a loss of meaning can be avoided. Still, it can at least be minimised, depending on the translator's efforts and sensitivity to the complexity of metaphors.

Applying these principles to the present study requires close attention not only to the translation of in-vivo codes but also to all other codes derived during analysis. To enhance transparency and preserve meaning, original-language versions of selected quotations are included in footnotes, allowing multilingual readers to grasp the nuance of the statements more clearly while offering non-German-speaking readers the possibility to use translation tools to critically examine the translations made in this study, if desired.

3.8. Limitations and Ethical Considerations

In the spirit of Ross and Bibler Zaidi (2019), I would like to highlight two specific limitations that this study is subject to. First, the possibility of loss of meaning in the data through language translation and the researcher bias arising from my current profession.

First, translation challenges may have led to a loss of meaning in the data (van Nes et al., 2010). Van Nes et al. (ibid.) argue that when the participants and the primary researcher share the same language, there are no language barriers during data collection, transcription, or the initial stages of analysis, as the early coding process typically remains closely tied to the original data. Language differences may arise later when interpretations are discussed within a multinational research team. This stage in the research process is delicate, as multiple interpretations are explored, and even in the original language, the precise expression of meaning may still be unclear. To facilitate discussion, these initial interpretations must be conveyed in English, requiring a nuanced understanding of subtle

meaning distinctions to choose the most appropriate English phrasing. As the study involved translating participant responses from one language to another, subtle nuances, cultural idioms, or context-specific meanings could have been altered or lost in the translation process. This limitation is inherent in cross-linguistic research and may affect the richness and authenticity of the data interpretation. Efforts were made to mitigate this issue by employing professional translators and engaging in back-translation processes, but the possibility of misinterpretation remains (ibid.). Although this study's translation of findings occurred only after the analysis process, when writing them down, there is still a possibility that meaning was lost. To ensure transparency, the findings in Chapter 5 will be presented in both their original language (German) and English, while acknowledging this as a limitation.

Second, researcher bias in qualitative research refers to the influence that a researcher's personal beliefs, assumptions, and perspectives may have on various aspects of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Stake, 2010). This bias can stem from conscious or unconscious tendencies and may shape the study's outcomes in a way that reflects the researcher's views rather than the participants' authentic experiences (ibid., pp. 164-166). Instead of asking scientists to eliminate their biases, Charmaz (2014) proposes acknowledging the presence and potential influence of researcher bias as an integral part of the research process. In Constructivist Grounded Theory, the researcher is not viewed as a detached, objective observer, but rather as an active participant in co-constructing meaning alongside the data and the participants. She emphasises the importance of reflexivity, encouraging researchers to critically examine how their personal perspectives, experiences, and assumptions shape their interactions with the data. She states, "We are part of the world we study, the data we collect, and the analyses we produce" (ibid., p. 17). Rather than viewing bias as inherently negative, Charmaz suggests it can provide insight when acknowledged and thoughtfully addressed.

After working in the regional political landscape of Vienna for over four years, I claim to have gained a certain understanding of policymaking and the actors involved in the process. Having the pleasure of analysing the discourse from a scientific point of view required me to reflect on potential biases, even before engaging with potential interview participants, some of whom I had already known through my work. By engaging in reflexive practices throughout the whole research process, as proposed by Charmaz (ibid.), I took aspects

such as work environment and how it shapes the relationship with the interviewees, as well as the field study itself, into consideration. Reflexivity furthermore helped me remain aware of how my own perspectives might influence this co-constructive process by critically reflecting on how my understanding of policymaking in Vienna could affect the framing of interview questions, my approach to data analysis, or even my rapport with participants.

Outlining the methodology and the analysis process in this chapter laid the foundation for a better understanding of how answering the research question at the centre of this thesis was approached. The following chapter introduces the first part of the analysis, focusing on textual data which provides information about the understanding and implementation of Digital Humanism in Vienna. This chapter primarily draws on document analysis and serves as a contextual foundation for the subsequent exploration of the interview material in Chapter 5.

4 Understanding Digital Humanism in Vienna

While Chapter 3 outlined the methodology applied for analysing the empirical core of this thesis, the interview analysis, Chapter 4 deals with documents such as press releases, minutes of the city council and provincial parliament sessions, and the official brochure of the City of Vienna on Digital Humanism in Vienna. This analysis was conducted to complement the findings of the interview analysis and capture the Digital Humanism discourse in Vienna from the city government's point of view.

After the local elections in Vienna in October 2020, a new state and city government was formed. This resulted in two parties, NEOS – Das Neue Österreich und Liberales Forum and SPÖ, the Austrian Socialist Party, developing a joint coalition agreement for the upcoming legislative period. The coalition was sworn in on November 24th, 2020 (City of Vienna, 2021a). One and a half years after the Vienna Manifesto on Digital Humanism (Werthner, 2020) called for politicians and policymakers to act upon new digital and technological developments, the newly elected Viennese government incorporated the concept in its coalition agreement. The literature on written agreements between newly constituted coalition governments differentiates between different types of governmental documents. Austrian scientific literature on that matter distinguishes between a coalition agreement and a government declaration. Usually, both documents are released by a newly formed government. A coalition agreement is referred to as "[…] a joint declaration of intent by the parties represented in the government [and] refers to the actions of the government as a unit, but also to those of the parties and in particular the parliamentary groups" (Müller, 1994, p. 348). A government declaration is primarily concerned with governmental actions (ibid.). According to Hofferbert & Klingemann (1990) a government declaration can be understood as a written commitment to different topics or goals by parties sharing a coalition agreement (ibid. , p. 136). Guggenberger (2021) defines a government declaration as a „[…] declaration of intent of a newly formed government […]" (ibid., p. 798), overlapping with previous definitions. Both Guggenberger (ibid.) and Hofferbert & Klingemann (1990) argue from the perspective of the political system in Germany. The publicly available document released back in 2020 by the newly formed city government is called "Koalitionsabkommen" in German. In English, it translates into "coalition agreement". Even though it gives no clear insight about party or parliamentary group actions and is closer in content to a government declaration than to a coalition agreement, I will refer to it as a coalition agreement based on the literal translation.

Vienna, the city at the heart of this study and one of the states within the Austrian federation, operates within the overarching framework of the country's federal political system. As a state within a federal republic, Vienna enjoys a considerable degree of autonomy in various policy areas, enabling it to independently govern specific matters through the principle of subsidiarity. The city has its own state government, the Landesregierung, headed by the Mayor and Governor (Bürgermeister und Landeshauptmann), with the Landtag serving as the state legislature responsible for enacting laws and overseeing regional governance (Stainer-Hämmerle, 2023, p. 245). In comparison to other federal states, Vienna has both a state parliament and a municipal council. These are linked by a personal union, which is why the same people hold the state and local political mandate (Dolezal & Fallend, 2023, p. 214). The legislative process in Vienna follows a systematic and democratic structure, aligning with the principles of the Austrian parliamentary system. Initiating legislation can originate from various sources, including members of the Landtag (state legislature), the state government, or citizen initiatives (ibid., p. 223). Upon introduction, proposed legislation undergoes examination in specialised committees within the Landtag, each focusing on specific policy areas. The committees review the details of the bill before it moves to the floor of the Landtag for general debate and deliberation (ibid., p. 216). During this stage, members discuss the merits of the proposal, its potential impact, and propose amendments. A voting process takes place, allowing members to express their support or opposition to the proposed legislation and any proposed amendments. If the majority approves the final version, the legislation is officially adopted by the Landtag, signifying endorsement by Vienna's elected representatives (Stadt Wien 2024). In cases involving matters under federal jurisdiction, the legislation may be sent to the Bundesrat for consideration (Praprotnik, 2023, p. 177). Subsequently, the legislation is sent to the mayor of Vienna for final approval and signature. Following the mayor’s signature, the legislation is published and integrated into Vienna's legal framework. The relevant authorities oversee the implementation and enforcement of the law[3].

4.1. The Coalition Agreement and Digital Humanism in Vienna

On November 17, 2020, the Viennese city government, formed by NEOS and SPÖ, presented its written coalition agreement to the public (PID-Rathauskorrespondenz, 2020).

[3] For further information see §§27f. StF 1968 LGBl. 28/1968, Verfassung der Bundeshauptstadt Wien

The agreement comprises nine chapters, each addressing a distinct focal area. Such an area consists of an outline of the status quo and a problem definition. At the end of each focal area, a section titled "What we agree on" follows. The contents of this last section are the most important written commitments due to their assessability. It enables voters to hold the government accountable for the implementation and non-implementation of projects outlined in the coalition agreement. To distil the content relevant for this research from the coalition agreement, I searched the digital version of the document for the term “Digitaler Humanismus” (Digital Humanism). The document is available online and is open access. The search yielded six results, divided into two separate sub-chapters within the document.

Sub-chapter 2.3, “Stadt der Wissenschaft” (City of Science), states the goal to further develop and expand Vienna as a centre for research and provides an overview of the current status, as well as the need to further strengthen its position (City of Vienna, 2020). Three long-term goals are laid out in accordance with the Vienna 2030 Innovation Strategy and the Smart City Framework Strategy. These long-term goals are for Vienna to become one of the five leading research and innovation metropolises in Europe by 2030, to make Vienna a magnet for top international researchers and research units of international corporations and to focus on research-intensive topics with a social impact (health, digitalisation, smart city) (ibid., pp. 55-56). One of the research foci resulting from these objectives is "Digital Humanism and Artificial Intelligence (AI) - (Digital Humanism as a leitmotif for an interweaving of ethical issues in the context of digitalisation)” (ibid., p. 56). Central to this research focus is the interdisciplinary collaboration between the humanities, social sciences, and computer sciences. The same section includes a concrete project linked to Digital Humanism as a research focus. To build sustainable knowledge for large research consortia and secure international leadership in the field of interdisciplinary research, the Vienna Science and Technology Fund (WWTF) will issue a call in 2021 for interdisciplinary projects (ibid., p. 57) [4]. The following sub-sections will provide an insight into the realisation of this concrete project.

[4] Note: The Vienna Science and Technology Fund plays a central role for research funding in Vienna. Within the coalition agreement, the city government therefore committed itself to concluding a three-year financing agreement with the WWTF for all programmes, the co-financing of WWTF calls and doubling the number of endowed professors sponsored by the WWTF. See *City of Vienna (2020)*. Die Fortschrittskoalition für Wien. Vienna: City of Vienna.

In sub-chapter 6.2, "Digitalisation Capital Vienna" (ibid., pp. 139-148), which is part of the chapter “Smart City Vienna” (ibid., pp. 136-172), the coalition aims to make Vienna the “digitalisation capital”. It does not specify the context or scope, such as whether it is global or national. The digitalisation capital is based on a so-called digital agenda, which outlines a digitalisation process contributing to the Smart City strategy. The statement “Under the term ‘Digital Humanism’, an open laboratory for alternatives to the current paradigms on the Internet is to be created in Vienna.” (ibid., p. 140) leaves room for interpretation about how this open laboratory is envisioned in practice. Content-wise, the open lab concentrates on finding solutions to potential dangers posed by digitalisation and the digital realm, developing “more socially compatible” (ibid.) algorithms, establishing common standards, and creating governance models. The section emphasises “managing the digital transformation” (ibid.), implying that digital transformation is urgent and potentially threatening to society. Like sub-chapter 3.2, Digital Humanism is mainly linked to the scientific sphere, where interdisciplinary collaboration is central. The last reference to the term "Digital Humanism" is found within Vienna's digital agenda and data strategy. The necessity of data across various research fields, including Digital Humanism, demands a strategy for generating and collecting data that also ensures data privacy. Therefore, the coalition commits to establishing a data strategy for scientific purposes, which will benefit Digital Humanism research, among others (ibid., p. 140).

Based on the findings of this subsection, it can be concluded that the mention of Digital Humanism in the coalition agreement is primarily associated with an expansion of research in that area and is never a standalone project. It is integrated into the smart city strategy and forms part of the research fields that help further elevate Vienna’s position as a centre for research. The 2021 call for interdisciplinary projects by the Vienna Science and Technology Fund is the only concrete initiative that permits a further review of its implementation. Due to the lack of concrete information on the realisation of an open laboratory, any additional details about projects undertaken between November 2020 and December 2024 can only be interpreted as related to this project.

4.2. The Brochure on Digital Humanism in Vienna

A coalition agreement can be understood as a document to inform citizens about planned projects during the coalition's term, with written contracts generally serving to hold a

government accountable for their actions. The coalition agreement is not the only written commitment to integrating the concept of Digital Humanism into Vienna's policymaking. According to the City of Vienna, the brochure "Digital Humanism in Vienna" (City of Vienna, 2022) explores how the city is aligning technological progress with social responsibility through Digital Humanism. It is the central piece of information on Digital Humanism directed at the public, which is why, in this study, it is considered one of the most important documents or releases in this discourse. The document outlines a framework for integrating digital solutions into daily life in a sustainable and inclusive manner, ensuring that technology serves human interests rather than controls them. Through that, it promotes one of the central principles of Digital Humanism – putting the human at the centre of technological development (Werthner, 2020). A notable aspect addressed in the brochure is the interdisciplinary collaboration that seems to drive the integration. Originating from academic and research communities, a network of stakeholders has formed and continues to develop, fostering dialogue among various actors, including representatives from social partnerships, non-governmental organisations, academia, and industry. The brochure is one outcome of the interdisciplinary work conducted by this network, as outlined in the brochure (City of Vienna, 2022). From an analytical perspective, the brochure attempts to give practical substance to the term "Digital Humanism" through highlighting the impact of digitalisation on various aspects of life and presents practical ways in which Digital Humanism can be implemented in everyday contexts. It also serves as an open invitation to citizens to actively participate in shaping Vienna's digital environment.

The brochure focuses on four main questions aimed at integrating Digital Humanism principles into the city's digitalisation practices. Each question relates to one or multiple meta-areas, targeting various issues that have emerged over the past decades (cf. Strohmaier et al., 2019). The first question focuses on **ethics and regulations**, asking which foundational rules need to be established for people to lead a good digital life. **Digital sovereignty** is considered an integral part of a good digital life and is closely linked to the question of what is necessary for self-determination in the digital sphere. The discourse on **privacy and security**, often conducted in connection with digitalisation, forms the third open question. **Democracy, participation, and media** in a digitalised world are the fourth concern, questioning what democracy means in this context and how digital participation in Vienna can work (City of Vienna, 2022, pp. 8-11). To provide a better understanding of how the City of Vienna perceives digitalisation, the challenges arising from it, and the role Digital

Humanism can play in different fields of impact, the individual issue areas stated in the brochure have been briefly summarised.

Digital Humanism and work. The brochure states that technologies have transformed the workplace by increasing flexibility, automating tasks, and creating new job opportunities. This also presents challenges, including blurring work-life boundaries, the risk of job displacement, and the rise of precarious labour conditions. To ensure fair labour conditions, workers' rights need to be updated and safeguarded in this new digital landscape. Emphasis is placed on maintaining safety, inclusion, and equity for workers in this evolving environment (City of Vienna, 2022, pp. 16-17).

Digital Humanism and education. The brochure acknowledges that digital tools have changed the educational discourse and forms of learning. The pandemic accelerated the shift to digital education and highlighted the need for new competencies, such as critical thinking, digital literacy, and ethical use of technology. Ensuring all citizens acquire digital skills, regardless of age or background, is crucial for social inclusion. (City of Vienna, 2022, pp. 18-19).

Digital Humanism and the economy. From the city's point of view, digitalisation presents numerous opportunities for local economies, including automation, global market access, and innovative business models. However, it also raises concerns about concentration of power in platform-based economies, data misuse, and distortion of competition. To safeguard social welfare and local businesses, Vienna aims to foster transparent, fair, and human-centric digital economies (City of Vienna, 2022, pp. 20-21).

Digital Humanism in art and culture. Digitalisation has introduced new methods in the creation of art, providing artists with innovative tools and expanding their audiences through global networks. Challenges, such as digital piracy and ensuring fair compensation for digital creators, did not go unnoticed. In the city of Vienna, art continues to play a critical role in reflecting societal changes, providing spaces to critique the digital transformation and engage with complex realities (City of Vienna, 2022, pp. 22-23).

Digital Humanism and health. By supporting personalised medicine, telemedicine, and remote monitoring, enhancing patient care and diagnosis, digital technologies are

transforming the health sector. With this transformation, issues such as the management of sensitive health data require strict privacy regulations. While AI can assist in diagnostics, ethical concerns arise about human oversight in medical decisions. The focus remains on maintaining trust between healthcare professionals and patients, ensuring that the benefits of digital innovation do not compromise human-centred healthcare (City of Vienna, 2022, pp. 24-25).

Digital Humanism and sustainability. Digitalisation has the potential to promote sustainability by optimising resource use, reducing emissions, and enhancing urban systems such as energy and mobility. However, the growing digital infrastructure itself consumes a significant amount of energy and resources. Thus, it is essential to balance digital growth with environmental sustainability by implementing efficient, resource-conscious technologies (City of Vienna, 2022, pp. 26-27).

Although these issue areas do not provide insights into how problems arising from the employment of new technologies and an emerging digital sphere, they tell us something about how the City of Vienna perceives the digital transformation by stating a problem and, in most areas, concluding with a reminder of what needs to be kept in mind addressing digitalisation in the different areas. Questions about the perception of the different issue areas were also integrated into the interview guidelines to assess how the interviewees evaluated possible realisations made within the various areas. Furthermore, the brochure explains how the City of Vienna integrates Digital Humanism into its framework, focusing on key players responsible for its development and implementation. The strategy is built around initiatives such as flagship projects, research calls, funding channels, cooperation projects, certifications, inclusion in procurement processes, courses and training programs and integration into governance structures. A coordinating body, consisting of the Chief Executive Office of the City of Vienna – Office of the Director for Science, Research & Business Location, working closely with the Executive Group for Organisation and Security – ICT Strategy and Process Management Group, is in charge of the implementation and development of Digital Humanism in Vienna. Their responsibilities involve coordinating initiatives, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, and enhancing communication and awareness about Digital Humanism in the city (City of Vienna, 2022, p. 29).

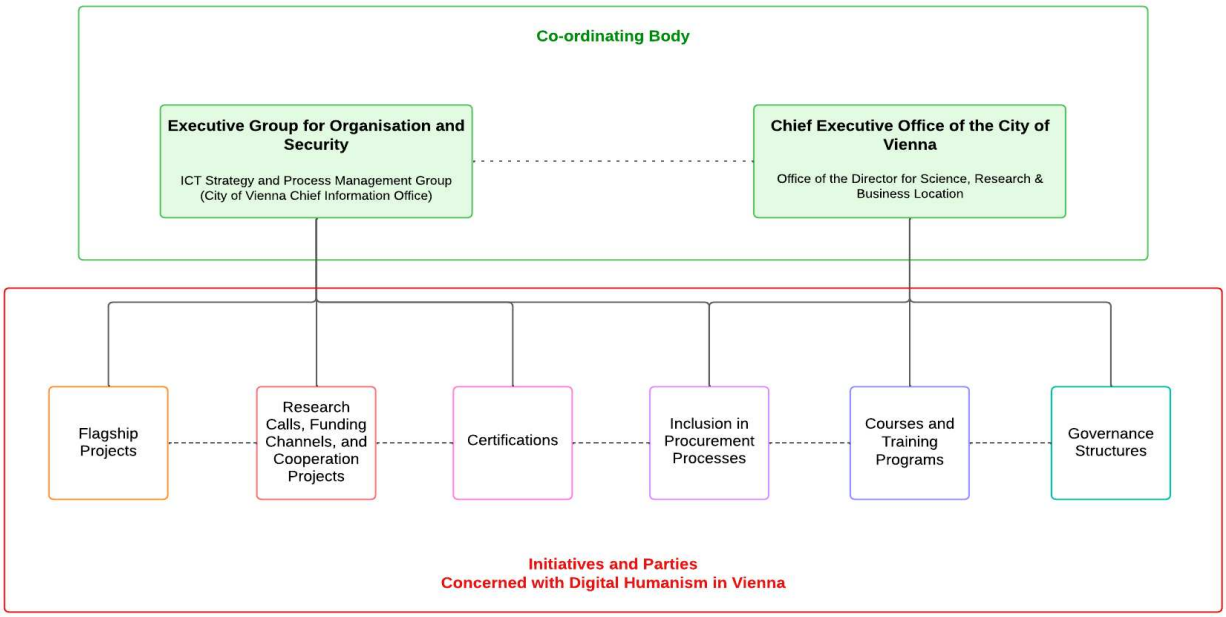

Figure 1 visualises the implementation and development strategy of Digital Humanism in Vienna as developed by the City of Vienna.

Figure 2 illustrates the actors and strategy as outlined in the brochure, depicting the two high-level administrative bodies that lead the project. When comparing the coalition agreement and the brochure on Digital Humanism in Vienna, the levels of abstractness vary. The brochure does not directly touch upon the idea of making Vienna an “open laboratory for alternatives to the current paradigms on the Internet” (City of Vienna, 2020, p. 140), as stated in the coalition agreement. In contrast, the coalition agreement has a much higher level of abstraction and does not address operative strategies to reach the goals proposed in it.

4.3. Reports of the City Council

To determine the political focus on Digital Humanism in Vienna, 59 reports of the municipal council meetings were analysed, starting with the first meeting under the new municipal government in November 2020. I decided against focusing on verbatim protocols and the sole Mention of Digital Humanism during a council meeting. Instead, I investigated reports in search of proposals in the form of bills and motions. I understand a proposal as a political commitment to anchoring Digital Humanism within the city legislature, or to present and decide on specific projects. Within 59 reports, each summarising one municipal council meeting, the word “Humanismus” (“humanism”) was mentioned twice. I would argue that the number of motions and inquiries related to Digital Humanism in the local council over a

four-year period is notable, at least if one assumes that the frequency of such mentions reflects on the topic's perceived relevance. The first mention regarded a motion by the City Senate, which was adopted without a hearing: "(412589-2022-GFW; MA 5, P 6) The implementation of the Digital Humanism funding initiative as described in the motives report and the related call for proposals (submitted in draft form) is noted with approval. The financial coverage of the required funds, in the amount of EUR 200,000, will be provided within the framework of the financing agreement concluded with the Vienna Business Agency (City of Vienna, 2024a). The motion was approved during the 21st meeting of the municipal council on March 30, 2022. The second mention was in the form of an inquiry from a member of the municipal council to the City Councillor[5] (ECC) for Culture and Science (in detail: Science, Research and Business Allocation), stating the following:

> An important element of the Digital Humanism initiative in Vienna is the large-scale facilitation of interdisciplinary research: the humanities, social sciences and cultural studies must work together with the computer sciences from the ground up on new theories, approaches and possible solutions. You repeatedly emphasise that you want to place people at the centre of developments. How is this being implemented and how is the City of Vienna currently driving its Digital Humanism initiative forward? (City of Vienna, 2024b).

The inquiry took place during the 32nd session of the municipal council on December 21, 2022, and was answered by the ECC, Maga. Veronica Kaup-Hasler. The statement by the CC of the Chief Executive Office of the City of Vienna – Office of the Director for Science, Research & Business Location gives insight into the implementation of Digital Humanism from the perspective of the person responsible. Therefore, it differs in its relevance from other statements made by politicians during meetings of the municipal council and provincial parliament and will thus be integrated in the discussion.

[5] „City Councillor" translates to the German word "Stadtrat", referring to a member of the Vienna City Council responsible for specific political areas or departments, such as urban development, social affairs, or public health.

4.4. Press releases on Digital Humanism

Press releases are vital for political parties as they highlight the issues parties *wish* to inform the public about and how they intend to communicate their political actions (Catenaccio, 2008; Strömbäck & Esser, 2017). Parties release press statements through their communication departments, or, in the case of governments, via a state or city communication department. In Vienna, the Communications and Media department (formerly the Press and Information Service) coordinates and manages the city's public relations work (City of Vienna, 2024c). Based on this, press releases from the Communications and Media department were examined for any mentions of Digital Humanism to better understand its importance to the city government. Press releases in Austria are generally published through the Austrian Press Agency (APA, 2023).

The research covers the period from November 24, 2020, the day the current city government was sworn in, to December 9, 2024. During this period, the City of Vienna's media service issued 20 press releases containing the words “Digital Humanism”. Of these 20 press releases, 3 explicitly dealt with Digital Humanism, while the others could be classified as summaries of local council and state parliament meetings or previews of upcoming meetings. The classification is based on the title of the press release, which explicitly includes the words “municipal council” and “provincial parliament”. These press releases contained citations and statements made by members of the municipal council and city parliament on Digital Humanism. Regarding the media debate on Digital Humanism, it was not the title of a press release that was considered decisive for acceptance, but its content. The reason for this is that Digital Humanism is often mentioned in the context of a specific implementation or discussion during an event or measure. An example of this is the press release “Vienna Science Days in Berlin” (City of Vienna, 2024e)” whose subheading “Digital Humanism, deep geothermal energy and decarbonization - Vienna and Berlin are shaping the city of the future.” (ibid.) only refers to a discussion on Digital Humanism.

The first press release that explicitly addressed Digital Humanism offers insight into the embedding of Digital Humanism within the context of educational practices. Titled “*Wiener Volkshochschulen setzen auf digitalen Humanismus*” (City of Vienna, 2021b), the City of Vienna released an article informing about how the Wiener Volkshochschulen (VHS) are advancing inclusion by introducing an avatar system that allows course instructors with

disabilities to teach remotely while engaging interactively with students. This innovation aligns with their broader commitments outlined in the brochure on ensuring educational accessibility for everyone. According to the press release, VHS also expands hybrid "Home Advantage" courses, offering flexible participation options (in-person or online). The initiative underscores a vision of modern adult education that integrates technology and preserves human interaction (City of Vienna, 2021b). From a political communicational point of view, the press statement displays what the city government wants to inform citizens about and a practical measure relevant for assessing the implementation of Digital Humanism in Vienna. The second press release, “Vienna Science Days in Berlin,” informs about a cross-city cooperation. At the Vienna Science Days in Berlin, Digital Humanism was highlighted as a key theme, among others, emphasising the collaboration between city administrations and universities to shape the future of urban life. Experts discussed the integration of ethical values into digital advancements to ensure that technology is used responsibly for serving society (City of Vienna, 2024e). In this case, Digital Humanism was discussed as a concept relevant for the city’s digital future, but no concrete measures were implemented. The third press release covers a meeting of the Austrian Association of Cities and Towns, focusing on digital resilience, cloud computing, and cybersecurity in municipal administration (City of Vienna, 2024d). It informs about experts who discussed the opportunities and challenges of adopting technologies like AI and cloud solutions while emphasising the importance of data privacy and compliance. Digital Humanism was highlighted, stressing that technology should improve lives, rather than threaten them. In this case, the human-centred aspect of Digital Humanism was discussed and embedded in a national urban discourse. No concrete measures for implementation were mentioned.

Based on the textual data outlined in the previous sections, complemented by the findings from the interview analysis outlined in Chapter 5, the question of the nature of policy measures in the context of Digital Humanism in the City of Vienna arose. Before taking a deep dive into the results of the interview analysis, this chapter concludes with an attempt to categorise these measures.

4.5. Categorising Symbolic and Practical Measures

The analysis of the documents outlined in this chapter offers insights into how the City of Vienna communicates about Digital Humanism. The documents provide information on

planned measures or measures that have already been implemented, allowing comparisons between what has already occurred, what still needs to be done, and who is responsible. Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that the various measures do not always align with one another. For example, this becomes apparent when comparing the coalition programme and the brochure, where, for example, the “open laboratory” (City of Vienna, 2020, p. 140) does not appear as a goal to be reached in the brochure, despite being framed as a central idea in the coalition programme.

A key finding from the interview analysis presented in Chapter 5 is the perception of interview participants that Digital Humanism is often only used symbolically by politicians without being put into practice. To visualise how this aligns with the findings from the document analysis, a table was created, attempting to categorise measures into symbolic and practical ones. Additionally, the table helps to better understand how the document analysis and interview analysis complement each other. This will become more apparent over the course of the next chapter. The documents are understood as the ‘voice’ of the City of Vienna and therefore judged as highly credible when assessing policy measures.

TYPE	MEASURE	LEVEL OF ABSTRACTION	SOURCE
SYMBOLIC	Use of “Digital Humanism” in public materials	Low–Medium	Brochure on Digital Humanism in Vienna, Coalition Programme (City of Vienna, 2020, 2022).
	Inclusion in speeches/press releases	Medium	Various press releases (e.g. City of Vienna 2021b).
	Vision of “Vienna as an open laboratory…” (no operationalisation)	High	Coalition Programme (City of Vienna, 2020, p. 140).
	Framing DH as aligning tech with social responsibility / invitation to shape future	Medium	Brochure on Digital Humanism in Vienna (City of Vienna, 2022).
	Four guiding questions (ethics, privacy, democracy, sovereignty) - open	High	Brochure on Digital Humanism in Vienna (City of Vienna, 2022, pp. 6-13).

	questions, no proposed actions		
	Sectoral issue areas described as aspirational goals (e.g. work, education, economy, culture, health, sustainability)	Medium	Brochure on Digital Humanism in Vienna (City of Vienna, 2022, pp. 16-27).
PRACTICAL	Operational instruments in brochure (flagships, procurement, training etc.)	Medium	Brochure on Digital Humanism in Vienna (City of Vienna, 2022, p. 29); see .
	Coordinating structure: Chief Executive Office + Executive Group for Organisation	Medium	Brochure on Digital Humanism in Vienna (City of Vienna, 2022); see .
	Funding Calls throughout the years, e.g. €200,000 motion for DH via Vienna Business Agency (March 30, 2022)	Low	Municipal Council Record, City of Vienna (2024a).
	VHS avatar & hybrid learning framed as DH implementation	Low	PID – City of Vienna (2021b).
	Digital Humanism Summer School, taking place on a yearly basis	Low	City of Vienna / Technical University of Vienna (Digitales Wien, 2025).
MIXED	Council inquiry: DH discussed, responsibility deferred to science	High	Municipal Council Record, City of Vienna (2024b).
	DH mentioned in *Digital Agenda Vienna* as cross-sector theme, but without formalised implementation	Medium	Digital Agenda Vienna (City of Vienna, 2025a)

Table 3 is a categorisation of symbolic, practical, and mixed measures of Digital Humanism in Vienna.

Table 3 categorises political measures into three categories: symbolic, practical, and mixed. I define symbolic measures as those that appear in political discourse in the form of speeches, brochures, or coalition agreements. What distinguishes them from practical

measures is that they are not accompanied by concrete implementation mechanisms (cf. Edelman, 1985). Practical measures refer to initiatives that have been demonstrably implemented, including funding decisions, structural arrangements, or programmatic action. Mixed measures include elements of both: they carry symbolic weight but are also partially realised through political or administrative steps. I furthermore added the category “Level of Abstraction” to facilitate the policy assessment. A low level of abstraction indicates that a measure is clearly formulated and precise, which could increase the likelihood of implementation. The higher the level of abstraction, the more effort is required to concretise it, and the probability of implementation could decrease. This category was developed based on the study by Haag et al. (2024), who found a correlation between policy complexity, ranging from low complexity and a low level of abstraction to complex policy, indicating a high level of abstraction, and implementation performance in the EU. While the study is primarily dedicated to policymaking at the EU level, its findings can be understood in a broader context. If a policy is clearly formulated, indicating a low level of abstraction, and administrative capacities to implement it are available, the success rate for implementation rises. If multiple policies with a high level of abstraction are to be implemented and administrative capacities are lacking, the success rate for implementation falls. This argument is underpinned by Black and Geer’s (2024) research on the so-called “abstraction gap” that hinders effective implementation (ibid.). Their findings suggest that when abstract policy goals are not clearly connected to concrete actions, stakeholders may struggle to internalise and act on them. Implementation measures with a symbolic character and a high level of abstraction are therefore not suitable for implementation without further clarification and the active deployment of administrative resources.

While the brochure on Digital Humanism (City of Vienna, 2022) outlines structural tools that point towards practical application, much of its content remains at a symbolic level. The framing of Digital Humanism as a human-centred ethical approach, the open-ended questions about digital life, and the aspirational language across thematic areas such as education, sustainability, and labour reflect a discursive strategy. These measures help set the tone for Vienna’s digital policy landscape, but without binding mechanisms, they remain symbolic, intended to inspire alignment but not enforce it. The same applies to the mention of Digital Humanism in the coalition programme (City of Vienna, 2020). Apart from a vision for the future, no concrete actions or measures to achieve this vision were specified, which is why it is categorised as symbolic. A notable example of practical implementation is the

introduction of avatar technology in the Wiener Volkshochschulen, which is presented as part of the city's commitment to Digital Humanism (City of Vienna, 2021b). The level of abstraction is considered low, as the measure is clearly signposted and has already been implemented. The same principle applies to funding calls, which usually include clear guidelines and requirements, and in return, allocate a specific amount of funding. The operational tools mentioned in the brochure on Digital Humanism in Vienna (City of Vienna, 2022), shown in , are categorised as practical due to being traceable. By clearly identifying which measures are planned for the realisation of Digital Humanism, it is also possible to examine these independently and determine those that have already been implemented. However, they are not signposted in detail, making it difficult to recognise and understand the single measures forming larger projects. Therefore, the level of abstraction is classified as medium.

Mixed measures, which contain both symbolic and practical elements, stem from symbolic measures that are partially practical due to their integration into political practice. For example, when the ECC responsible for Digital Humanism in Vienna was asked how the City of Vienna is currently driving its Digital Humanism initiative forward, the answer implied that the scientific sphere needs to deliver more recommendations about implementation before actual measures based on those recommendations can take place (City of Vienna, 2024b). In this way, while a symbolic discussion of Digital Humanism took place, an action was taken - the transfer of responsibility to science, which, however, does not indicate any practical outcome around implementing Digital Humanism. In the case of the city's *Digital Agenda* (City of Vienna, 2025a), action took place in the form of integrating Digital Humanism into the Digital Agenda, but without clear implementation.

4.6. Translating Symbolic Measures into Practice

The implementation of symbolic measures, such as those listed here, depends on several factors and is closely tied to political responsibility (see Chapter 5.3). The table shows that the more specific and clearly defined a measure is, the less abstract it becomes, increasing the chances for a successful implementation. Additionally, other factors, such as administrative, budgetary and focus constraints, need to be taken into consideration. How exactly a reduction in the degree of abstractness can be achieved depends on the measure and can range from little effort to a complex endeavour (cf. Black & Greer, 2024; Haag et

al., 2024). The question of what can be done to foster the practical implementation of Digital Humanism, rather than its symbolic use, will be further addressed at the end of this study.

The analysis in Chapter 4 has shown that while Digital Humanism features prominently in Vienna's strategic communications and official documents related to the discourse, many of the referenced measures remain on a symbolic level. A closer look at instruments such as the coalition agreement and the official brochure on Digital Humanism in Vienna reveals a discourse shaped by ethical commitments, visionary framing and a selective number of concrete initiatives. Yet, as the categorisation of symbolic, practical and mixed measures demonstrates, the operationalisation of Digital Humanism remains uneven and fragmented across different policy areas. To gain a deeper understanding of how these political commitments are perceived and evaluated by those engaged in the field, the following chapter presents expert interviews as the empirical core of this study. The interviews provide insight into how stakeholders interpret the implementation of Digital Humanism in practice, how they experience the governance structures surrounding it, and what challenges or contradictions they observe between symbolic discourse and tangible action. In doing so, Chapter 5 complements the document analysis by foregrounding perspectives from the professional field.

5 Case Study – Digital Humanism in Action

This chapter turns to the perspectives of experts following the development, implementation, and critique of Digital Humanism in Vienna, partially complemented by the document analysis of Chapter 4. Drawing on the interviews conducted during this study, the analysis seeks to unpack the political, institutional, and normative dimensions of Digital Humanism as articulated by those closely watching, shaping and navigating its trajectory from different points of view. For reasons of anonymity, this chapter does not discuss any information that could reveal the identities of the interviewees. When cited, the participants' names are replaced with a number from 1 to 7, assigned at random.

The interviews were analysed using the methodological framework outlined in Chapter 3, which employs Charmaz's CGT. This approach, as previously detailed, facilitates the development of categories and codes that are grounded in the data itself, capturing recurring themes, points of consensus, and areas of contestation. By foregrounding these perspectives, the analysis reveals underlying power dynamics, governance practices, and strategic priorities that shape the realisation of Digital Humanism in Vienna. This enables a deeper interrogation of the interplay between political discourse and policy action, offering insights into how Digital Humanism is located within a broader discourse on digital transformation. It furthermore draws on possible structural issues within the political sphere, the symbolic nature of normative concepts such as Digital Humanism, and how political action within a newly emerging discourse is judged based on the quality and quantity of measures taken.

The following analysis is structured around two central categories that emerged through an iterative coding process. In the sections that follow, I trace the analytical steps from the development of these categories to the conceptualisation of the phenomenon I term distributed inattentiveness.

5.1. Central Categories

Two central categories emerged throughout the analysis process. Previously, the analysis process resulted in five categories, all of which moved in a similar direction.

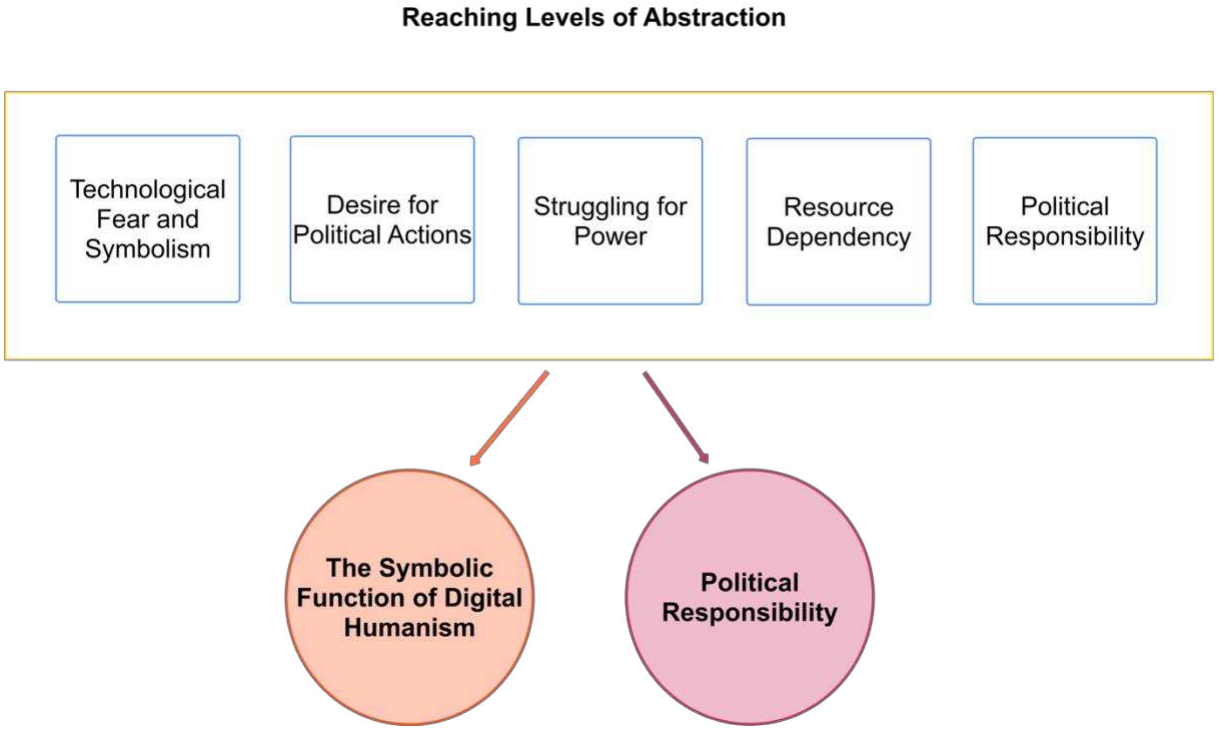

Figure 3 shows the process of how five categories were summarised into two final categories at the end of the analysis.

To reach a higher level of abstraction, the categories were merged, resulting in two central categories: **(1)** *The Symbolic Function of Digital Humanism* and **(2)** *Political Responsibility,* representing the final step in the analysis process, strengthening and sharpening the still vague theory. To enhance analytical clarity, I will elaborate on selected subcategories and codes that were particularly relevant to the development of each category. Where analytically appropriate, I also incorporate reflective notes from the research process as well as visualisations generated using MAXQDA's MaxMaps function to trace the conceptual steps that led to the formulation of the respective category.

5.2. The Symbolic Function of Digital Humanism

Analytic Note: As coding progresses, it becomes increasingly evident to me that Digital Humanism is not primarily invoked for its operational content but as a symbolic proxy for ethical digitalisation. Other concepts and frameworks are also viewed positively, suggesting that what matters most is not terminological precision but what Digital Humanism stands for. It symbolises a cure for the unpleasant side effects of digitalisation. It is intended to

promote everything positive while eliminating everything negative. Digitalisation and technologies are tools for the modern homo digitalis. (Excerpt from Logbook Notes)

This category captures how Digital Humanism functions as a symbolic counterweight to the rapid and often disorienting dynamics of digital transformation. Rather than focusing solely on implementation or practical applications, interviewees frame Digital Humanism as a normative anchor and a conceptual response to perceived dehumanisation, commercial dominance, and social fragmentation in the digital age.

Participants described digitalisation as a rapid, industry-driven process that is hard to regulate, leading to a perceived loss of control. Interviewee 4 highlights the loss of personal autonomy and the overwhelm it causes: “Digitalisation promotes this speed, so to speak, which we can't really keep up with. The thing is constantly ringing, emails, back and forth, and permanent availability. So, you don't have any rest periods anymore […]. Digital Humanism would offer us all the chance to do something new and good for ourselves, together with politics.” 6 (Interviewee 4, pos. 455-461).

One interviewee has described himself as a “heavy user” (Interviewee 5, pos. 14) to emphasise that his use of technology affects almost every aspect of his life. This is underlined by Interviewee 7, describing its all-encompassing character: “Yes, society can no longer function without digital technologies. […] it goes hand in hand.”[6] (Interviewee 7, pos. 64-65). Instead of empowering themselves in the face of technology, humans have become “slaves” (Interviewee 4, pos. 72-75) to technology. “This is a technology that we will have to learn to live with in the future. But people must be smarter about it and not make themselves slaves [...] as they do at the moment.”[7] (ibid.).

Within this context, Digital Humanism emerges as a hopeful and integrative vision that re-centres human values in technological discourse. Its symbolic role is not confined to abstract ideals but is embedded in critiques of power asymmetries and the erosion of self-

[6] „Ja, mittlerweile geht ja die Gesellschaft nicht mehr ohne digitale Technologien. […] das geht mittlerweile Hand in Hand.“

[7] „Das ist eine Technologie, mit der wir in Zukunft leben lernen müssen. Aber die Menschen müssen klüger damit umgehen und sich nicht so zum Sklaven […] machen, wie sie es derzeit tun.“

determination in the digital sphere. The category was analytically developed through two subcategories: **(A)** *Digital Transformation as a Balance of Power* and **(B)** *Symbol of Hope*.

Subcategory A - Digital Transformation as a Balance of Power

Interviewees frequently framed digitalisation as a highly politicised and power-laden process. It is not perceived as neutral or purely technical but as shaped by economic, institutional, and societal forces. As Interviewee 5 remarked, “It's about power. And it's about politics. […] and that is the main aspect.”[8] (Interviewee 5, pos. 156-161). This view underscores the wish for a political response to digital transformation that ensures democratic governance and resists the monopolistic dominance of private corporations. The title of the subcategory arose from the interview participants’ description of how science, politics and the private sector are all shaping the digital transformation, often balancing power between them through contributing to it in different ways. This leads to noticeable power struggles. It furthermore describes the balance of power between the emergence of technologies and the political response to it.

Technological development is further described as inseparable from structural inequalities and dependencies. Several interviewees referenced digital labour platforms as dehumanising, raising questions of justice and control. As stated above, humans can be seen as slaves to technologies, raising questions about self-determination and agency in a digitalised world. The following code is connected to a statement that goes in a similar direction but pursues the idea of structural inequalities in terms of the exploitation of workers through services offered on digital platforms.

Code: Technologies as Powerful Tools

Technologies are described as tools whose effects depend on how and by whom they are deployed. Their potential for both empowerment and control was emphasised, with Interviewee 1 stating: “Digital technologies are tools and should be described as such. And the question is, how do I deal with these tools?”[9] (Interviewee 1, pos. 23). The interviewees called for ethical regulations to counterbalance commercial incentives for technologies that

[8] „Also es geht um Macht. Und es geht um Politik. […] und das ist der Hauptaspekt.“

[9] „Digitale Technologien sind Werkzeuge und als solche auch zu bezeichnen. Und die Frage ist, wie gehe ich mit diesen Werkzeugen um?“

could endanger humans or the environment. The heavy usage of such tools can lead to psychological issues, which ultimately harm humans and society, as some interview participants argued. The energy consumption resulting from the use of technologies, which is constantly increasing, is also presented as a significant environmental problem. Interviewee 4 claimed: "The digital contradicts climate protection, so to speak."[10] (Interviewee 4, pos. 775-776), while other participants argued in favour of Digital Humanism principles related to environmental protection and technology use.

Code: Concerns about Impact on Society

Several participants expressed concern about the social consequences of digital platform usage and how it perpetuates structural inequalities. Interviewee 6 described the transformation of service work as dehumanizing: "[…] what part in this development of Foodora-people and parcel delivery people and digital invisible basement people who do something remotely or do something so that the whole thing, the system runs like, like [...] there is algorithmic management and other control instruments in these serving professions, where he is not your servant, but is your servant for the moment." [11] (Interviewee 6, pos. 571–577).

This idea of temporary servitude in a democratic, European country underscores the urgency of addressing power imbalances and ensuring labour dignity. The term "digital invisible basement people" suggests that this system is perceived as precarious for workers. Through as little engagement as possible with the customer, workers are only seen for the services the platform offers. Poor working conditions and exploitation are thus concealed and become irrelevant to the consumer. In the interview, Interviewee 6 explicitly emphasises that they do not care whether it is Digital Humanism or another concept that leads to stronger regulation of digitalisation and technologies. They simply wanted something to be done as they were concerned about the societal disruption they noticed, caused by technologies and digitalisation. This highlights the significance of symbolic

[10] „Das Digitale widerspricht sozusagen dem Klimaschutz."

[11] „[…] welches, welchen Anteil an dieser Entwicklung der Foodoraboten und Paketzusteller und digitalen unsichtbaren Kellerleute, die fern irgendwas erledigen oder etwas tun, damit das Ganze, das System läuft wie, wie, wie […] es [sind] algorithmisches Management und andere Steuerungsinstrumente in diesen dienenden Berufen, also wo er nicht Ihr Diener ist, sondern für den Moment Ihr Diener ist."

meaning. By sticking closely to Digital Humanism, workers will be protected from exploitation.

Subcategory B - Symbol of Hope

Digital Humanism symbolises an ethically responsible and safe digital future through a well-regulated digital transformation. It offers a unifying framework that can guide ethical, sustainable, and inclusive digital development. Interviewee 2 captured this integrative function by saying: “Und da ist es gut, dem Ganzen eine Klammer zu geben.” (“And it is good to give all of this a unifying bracket.”) (Interviewee 2, pos. 1124–1125). This “bracket” symbolises how the concept can bring together fragmented efforts and values. It links to the subcategory *Digital Transformation as a Balance of Power* by representing both a product of the current digital transformation and an influence on its future direction. Digital Humanism exists *because of* the rise of digitalisation and technologization, and how the phenomena have developed over the past years. Yet it also serves as a symbol of hope for shaping a more ethical and morally grounded digital future.

Code: Digital Humanism as a Holistic Approach

Digital Humanism is seen as inherently interdisciplinary, requiring cross-sectoral collaboration. However, its breadth also poses challenges to implementation due to split responsibilities, resulting in a lack of focus. Interviewee 3 described how the political handling of digitalisation shifted when responsibility for the issue was reassigned: “That was back when Hanke was still [City Councillor for] Finance [and] was still the City Councillor for Digitalisation. He brought a drive, and I think he recognised the importance. And of course, it’s easier when it (funding) comes from the finance resort. Now it doesn't have so many resources.”[12] (Interviewee 3, Pos. 855-859). The responsibility switch made it seem “trickier” to obtain funding for projects aligned with the city’s Digital Humanism agenda.

When asked about current responsibilities among the city politicians, Interviewee 5 answered: “So I think it should be the economy - it should be a joint activity of Hanke and [City Councillor] Kaup-Hasler. It is now the responsibility of Kaup-Hasler. Digitisation is the

[12] „Das war damals, als der Hanke noch Finanz, noch Digitalisierungsstadtrat war. Der hat schon einen Drive da reingebracht und er hat, glaube ich, dessen Bedeutung erkannt. Und natürlich ist es leichter, wenn es aus den Finanzen kommt. Jetzt ist es nicht mit so vielen Mitteln versehen.“

responsibility of [City Councillor] Sima. These are the worst possible conditions."[13] (Interviewee 5, Pos. 678-681). As mentioned in a previous chapter, Kaup-Hasler refers to the City Councillor for Culture and Science (see Chapter 4).

A similar comment was made my Interviewee 4, reflecting on the splitting of responsibilities and the difficulties associated with interdisciplinarity: "You have resorts for culture, you have social affairs and health, you somehow have digital and finance, you have [City Councillor] Sima with the environment, not anymore, that's back with [City Councillor] Czernohorsky, yes and no matter what […] interdisciplinarity is always difficult."[14] (Interviewee 4, Pos. 929-932).

The critique here lies not with the individual policymakers. It is based on the understanding that politics play a crucial part in creating regulations and, through them, protecting citizens from possible threats. There is concern about a lack of focus due to too much division of responsibilities and multiple topics that need to be addressed at the same time.

Code: Transformative Nature of the Concept of "Digital Humanism"

The concept of Digital Humanism is not yet fully institutionalised, and participants expressed concerns about its potential misuse. Interviewee 7 warned of the risk of "ethics washing" and superficial appropriation: "I am concerned that, now that this term […] has very quickly become very widespread and significant […] that there is always a danger that [it] will soon be everything and nothing at the same time."[15] (Interviewee 7, pos. 875-881).

Code: Need for Data Protection and Transparency

[13] „Also ich glaube es müsste der Wirtschaft-, es müsste eine gemeinsame Aktivität vom Hanke und von der Kaup-Hasler sein. Es liegt jetzt bei der Kaup-Hasler. Digitalisierung liegt bei der Sima. Das sind die denkbar schlechtesten Voraussetzungen."

[14] „Da hast du die Geschäftsgruppe Kultur, du hast Soziales und Gesundheit, du hast irgendwie das Digitale und die Finanz, du hast die Sima mit der Umwelt, nicht mehr, die ist wieder beim Czernohorsky, ja und egal was […] Interdisziplinarität ist immer schwierig."

[15] „Ich habe schon die Sorge, dass das, nachdem das als Begriff […] doch sehr schnell sehr große Verbreitung und, und Bedeutung gefunden hat […], dass die Gefahr immer besteht, dass das, bald einmal alles und nichts ist."

Concerns about data misuse and loss of control were widely shared. Interviewee 7 describes how hearing about companies experiencing data breaches[16] triggers in them a feeling of distress and "[…] a bit of panic arises because you no longer know what it means, what kind of data do I have, what could it potentially be? I think that's what it's like, these are moments of panic, because you just realise you don't know what could be coming your way."[17] (Interviewee 7, pos. 120-124). Digital Humanism, in this context, symbolises a demand for stricter data protection and transparent digital infrastructures.

Code: Need for Inclusion/Participation

The code reflects how individuals seek agency amid digital constraints. Digital Humanism is viewed as a guarantor of civic participation, emphasising that digitalisation should serve to empower people rather than exclude them. Participation is not limited to technology use but includes shaping the digital society itself through initiatives like participatory budgeting, urban planning, and public health tools. Interviewees argued for accessible participation formats and digital literacy efforts to ensure inclusive involvement in shaping digital futures.

Code: Enabling Self-determination

Finally, Digital Humanism is associated with the ambition to secure individual autonomy in the digital age. While technical safeguards are necessary, participants also called for internalised ethical principles and critical engagement with digital technologies as a form of empowerment.

In summary, the category illustrates that symbolic interpretation is not peripheral to implementation but rather foundational to it. The ways in which Digital Humanism is understood and communicated by institutional actors shape its legitimacy and practical relevance. As a symbolic framework, it provides coherence, direction, and normative grounding for ethical digitalisation practices. Without this symbolic dimension, implementation efforts risk lacking political resonance and strategic clarity. The participants'

[16] A data breach refers to an occasion when private information can be seen by people who should not be able to see it. Cambridge Dictionary. (2025). *Data Breach*. Retrieved 11.7.2025 from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/data-breach

[17] „Also so ein bisschen die Panik aufkommt, weil man nicht mehr weiß, was heißt das eigentlich, was habe ich da für Daten, was könnte das potenziell überhaupt sein? Ich glaube, das ist so, das sind so Panikmomente, weil man einfach merkt, ich weiß jetzt gar nicht mehr, was da auf mich zukommen könnte."

perceptions also shed light on the expectations of those viewed as responsible for implementation, namely those within the political sphere.

5.3. Politics as the Bearer of Responsibility

The category illustrates how interview participants articulated the role of politics in ethical digitalisation. Most interview participants referred to "politics" as a domain, often without specifying actors or distinguishing between regional, national, or European level. It does not primarily denote individual political actors or specific offices, but rather an institutionalised and symbolically charged domain that embodies societal authority and responsibility. While the political domain does not possess agency in a literal sense, it is attributed a form of symbolic agency in the discourse of the interviewees. It functions as an imagined collective actor — the entity presumed responsible for safeguarding the public interest when other forces (such as the market or technological momentum) appear unaccountable or unregulated. Participants did not describe politics as a sole actor in the discourse but rather emphasised its unique capacity and obligation to create normative and regulatory frameworks. However, politicians in general were viewed as powerful agents within the political sphere. Interviewee 4 attributes politics an important role in shaping the discourse: “Politicians could steer very strongly with regulations.”[18] (Interviewee 4, pos. 345), with regulations embodying power. When asked about which actors are highly relevant in the discourse of Digital Humanism in Vienna and its implementation, Interviewee 6 answered: “The political actors have the highest importance.”[19] (Interviewee 6, pos. 845).

Politics as such is perceived as a *responsible* party. It is responsible for implementing regulations in relation to digitalisation, among other things. In comparison to the frequently occurring feeling that the ability to act of an individual person, but also of society, is not sufficient to bring about large-scale, sustainable change, politics becomes an insurmountable obstacle. The power to change lies primarily with politics as an “enabler” (Interviewee 2, pos. 388). Without cooperation between the individual domains of science, society, and politics, the possibility of changing something at a societal level is perceived

[18] „Die Politik könnte sehr stark mit Regulierungen steuern.“

[19] „Die politischen Akteure haben [die] höchste Bedeutung.“

as almost non-existent. Passing what is viewed as political responsibility on to other actors, such as individuals, creates anger.

Interviewee 5 describes politics as something: "[…] that changes society, acts in a balancing way and is something where you moderate, shape and understand overall social processes."[20] (Interviewee 5, pos. 259-261). This was put into perspective by describing how politics nowadays feels more like "[…] an almost sclerotic process that serves to maintain power for one's own interests."[21] (Interviewee 5, pos. 262-264*),* pointing out a gap between their idea of politics and how they perceive it now.

Policymakers in Vienna were described more concretely. Several participants perceived them as lacking digital literacy, not understanding relevant topics, and not actively engaged in the implementation of Digital Humanism's principles. Although the term was occasionally invoked for promotional purposes, respondents emphasised a lack of financial resources and political leadership to substantively anchor the concept within the city's digitalisation efforts, stirring up a growing frustration over the years. As described by Interviewee 3: "[They] believe that it's easy, believe that it's enough to take one look, one word in the mouth and then that's it. That's not it. It's hard work. It's damn hard work and money. And they must realise that."[22] (Interviewee 3, pos. 781-784). A "They" – refers here explicitly to politicians in Vienna's regional policymaking – vs. "us" dynamic emerged, with those desiring real change through Digital Humanism feeling as if policymakers are not taking their responsibility seriously. A difference in satisfaction with political action was found between those who were familiar with the working methods of the City of Vienna and those who were able to adopt an external perspective. Those who were more familiar with the political processes and people generally made milder judgments than the others due to understanding the load of topics individual politicians must attend to. A certain level of dissatisfaction was still detectable. Therefore, the responsibility that politics bears, including

[20] „[…] das gesellschaftsverändernd, ausgleichend agiert und es etwas ist, wo man gesamtgesellschaftliche Prozesse moderierend und gestaltet und begreift."

[21] „[…] einen fast sklerotischen Prozess, der zum Machterhalt der eigenen Interessen dient. Wo man sehr oft das Gefühl hat, wir sind dort, oder?"

[22] „[Sie] glauben, dass es einfach ist, glauben, dass es reicht, ein Blick, ein Wort in den Mund zu nehmen und dann Das war's. Das ist es nicht. Das ist harte Arbeit. Das ist verdammt harte Arbeit und Geld. Und das muss Ihnen mal bewusst werden."

for science and the economy, which it influences through its actions, should be recognised. Participants claim that the will to be guided and to adhere to rules is present in the fields of science and within society. Instead of acting in a self-determined manner and relying purely on personal responsibility, clear rules and framework conditions are perceived as having a lasting effect. During the analysis process, it seemed, at first, as if the interviewees were overall unhappy with political actions taken – or not taken – so far, resulting in a code named “Dissatisfaction with political action”. After several rounds of coding and engaging more and more with the data, this assumption changed. Another code, “Satisfaction with political action”, arose. The level of analytical comprehension rose, too, as it required reading more between the lines of what was said and the message behind it. Overall, this category is more complex than the first main category in terms of the variety of content in the subcategories and codes. Making sense of the data required a more abstract view of the data, as it did not emerge as clearly as the first category. The category *Politics as the Bearer of Responsibility* is analytically developed through three subcategories: (**A)** *Digital Transformation as a Balance of Power* and **(B)** *Implementation* and (**C**) *Exercise of Political Control*.

The visualised map (Figure 4) represents the analytical process that led to the formation of the main category. It includes a wide range of codes derived during the open coding phase. While not all codes are discussed in detail due to the breadth of material, those most analytically relevant for understanding the subcategories and the emergence of the main category are examined in the following sections. As can be seen in the following subcategory descriptions, some codes are not elaborated further, either because they were less central to the category-building process or because their meaning is largely self-explanatory based on their label. This selective focus ensures a coherent and analytically grounded presentation of the findings.

The different types of lines - coloured, black and/or arrowed, thick/thin - visualise the interrelations between single codes and subcategories. Dotted lines symbolise conditions or consequences reflecting on the perceptions of the interview participants. The code “breaking through is like pushing a boulder uphill” was already discussed before in terms of translation. Here, it emphasises how tough the implementation of Digital Humanism principles feels when politics does not seem to assume enough responsibility.

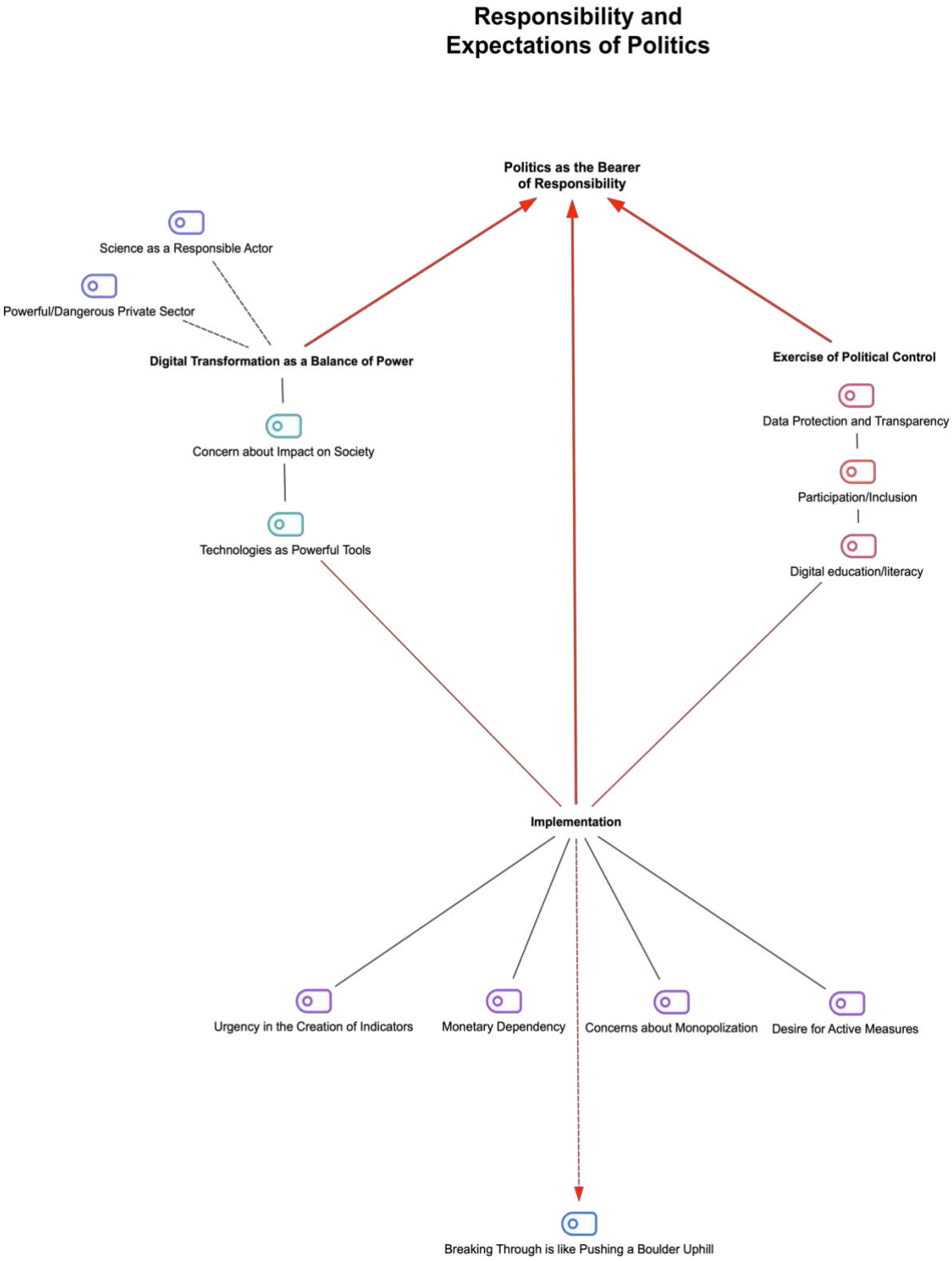

Figure 4 visualises the analytic development of the main category, based on the interrelations between the subcategories. This map was created with MaxMaps (MAXQDA 2024).

Subcategory A - Digital Transformation as a Balance of Power

As can be seen, the subcategory *Digital Transformation as a Balance of Power* is also relevant within this category. It has been extended by two codes concerned with science

and the private sector, representing two actors that are viewed as actively contributing to this perception of the digital transformation.

Code: Science as a Responsible Actor

Science bears a significant responsibility to shape technological possibilities responsibly and to discuss them with society. It must communicate its findings clearly and collaborate with other disciplines to address ethical and social issues. At the same time, it needs the support of policymakers. On one hand, this support involves the allocation of financial resources for research. On the other hand, politics acts as a mouthpiece and amplifier that can disseminate scientifically sound findings to society through policies and participatory processes.

Code: Powerful / Dangerous Private Sector

The private sector is perceived as powerful and dangerous because it is often less regulated than the public sector. There are concerns that private companies such as Google, Amazon, and Open-AI are gaining too much control over public goods and data. Research in the private sector is perceived as unregulated and non-transparent. Some Interviewees argue that these companies need to be better regulated at the very least, or even “radically destroyed” *(*Interviewee 4, pos. 297), as they have too much power and financial strength, which they do not use in the public interest. The private sector can only be regulated by politics.

Subcategory B – Challenges of Implementation

This subcategory centres on the question of how the principles of Digital Humanism can move beyond rhetorical commitment and be translated into concrete political and administrative practice. While the concept enjoys widespread normative approval, participants pointed to several obstacles that complicate its actual implementation. These obstacles are reflected in the codes. This subcategory is closely intertwined with the overarching category *"Politics as the Bearer of Responsibility*," as it reflects how political commitment - or its absence - directly influences whether and how ethical guidelines are put into practice. Its interrelation with the subcategory *Exercise of Political Control* becomes evident in the shared concern for institutional agency: both point to the need for political actors not only to regulate, but also to actively steer digital transformation through transparency, participation, and education. Furthermore, the connection to *Digital*

Transformation as a Balance of Power emphasises that implementation is not merely a technocratic or procedural task. Rather, it is embedded in broader power relations between states and corporations, or between political visions and economic dependencies.

Code: Urgency of Creating Indicators

Participants noticed a lack of measurable criteria for what constitutes human-centred digitalisation. Without clear benchmarks, implementation efforts risk remaining vague or fragmented, making it difficult to assess the effectiveness of political measures as well.

Code: Monetary Dependency of Digital Humanism Projects on Funding

A lack of financial resources emerged as a central concern regarding the feasibility of implementing Digital Humanism. Interview participants consistently identified financial resources as a key determinant for advancing concrete measures, whether in fostering interdisciplinary research, developing municipal projects aligned with digital humanist principles, or enhancing digital education through diverse and accessible formats. Budgetary constraints were seen as limiting the City of Vienna's ability to act effectively, while at the same time, the distribution of financial resources was described as shaping the balance of power within the digital landscape. In this view, money is not only a practical prerequisite for action but also a source of political and structural influence, leading to concerns about the monopolisation of digital spaces by financially dominant private actors.

Code: Concerns about Monopolisation

Monetary dependency and *Concerns about Monopolisation* are closely tied to each other, whereby the dominance of a few powerful actors in the digital sphere is seen to undermine pluralistic and democratic digital governance through global economic power and the associated financial resources that proprietary scientific research of this scale does not have access to.

Code: Desire for Active Measures

A desire for active measures expressed by several interviewees highlights a sense of inertia within current political processes. The implementation of Digital Humanism demands political will, financial commitment, and structural reform. In this context, the City of Vienna was criticised heavily, being called "very self-sufficient" (Interviewee 5, Pos. 651-652) and

that the regional policymakers “think on the surface and in headlines” (Interviewee 1, Pos. 632-633).

Code: Breaking Through is like Pushing a Boulder Uphill

Perhaps the most vividly articulated challenge was the emotional and institutional struggle involved in advocating for Digital Humanism. This code reflects the frustration with systemic inertia and structural neglect that participants felt. They frequently described their efforts as an uphill battle—fragmented, underfunded, and hampered by unclear institutional responsibilities, a lack of awareness of the importance of the topic and, as a result, not enough output in terms of regulations and financial resources. While isolated initiatives were named as hopeful signs – such as the Digitale Agenda (cf. City of Vienna, 2025a), taking part in the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights (Cities for Digital Rights, 2025, p. cf.) and the Smart City Initiative (cf. City of Vienna, 2025c) among others - these were mostly seen as not impactful enough to bring about the necessary change. As such, many reported a sense of disillusionment.

Yet, despite these barriers, respondents also expressed a sense of enduring commitment among the different stakeholders from the scientific field, within the city administration and a few politicians.

Subcategory C - Exercise of Political Control

The subcategory centres on the role of public institutions in actively shaping the conditions under which digitalisation unfolds, as well as the necessity to exercise political control to bring about sustainable and ethical change. At the same time, the power to exercise political control is seen as a chance that needs to be taken. It addresses how democratic oversight can be exercised through regulatory and educational measures that enable individuals and institutions to act with agency in digital contexts. This subcategory includes the codes *Data Protection and Transparency* and *Participation/Inclusion*, which were previously discussed in relation to the central category I - *Symbolism of Digital Humanism*. Here, however, these elements are interpreted less as symbolic commitments and more as tangible mechanisms through which public control and accountability are to be ensured.

Code: Need for Digital Education/Literacy

The need for digital education to raise the general level of digital literacy among people was consistently emphasised across interviews. It carries a dual meaning: on the one hand, it refers to the political responsibility of enabling the broader population to develop digital competencies, thereby fostering democratic participation and informed decision-making. On the other hand, interviewees highlighted a striking knowledge gap within the political sphere itself. Reflecting on their impression of digital literacy among Viennese politicians, interviewees argued that while a small number of actors within the City of Vienna are competent, the majority lack sufficient understanding of the discourse. This internal literacy gap was seen as a key barrier to effective governance in the digital domain. As such, digital literacy emerges both as a goal of policy and as a prerequisite for policymakers themselves - an essential condition for exercising meaningful political control over digitalisation processes.

In summary, the category shows that while the normative weight of politics in shaping ethical digitalisation is widely acknowledged, the practical execution of this responsibility remains viewed as contested. The three subcategories highlight distinct but interconnected dimensions of this dynamic: the power struggles in the light of a rapidly progressing digital transformation, the different challenges of implementation, and the demand for institutional control mechanisms executed by well-informed policymakers. Politics emerges not only as the key enabler but also as a potential bottleneck - capable of guiding change, yet often constrained by inertia, fragmentation, or insufficient expertise. The category thus encapsulates a central paradox in the implementation of Digital Humanism: the actors expected to lead the transformation are, at times, perceived as ill-equipped or unwilling to do so, making political responsibility a necessity and a site of tension.

5.4. The Paradox of Agency in Digital Governance: A Constructivist Grounded Theory

The Constructivist Grounded Theory arising from the categories *The Symbolic Function of Digital Humanism* and *Politics as the Bearer of Responsibility* provides a conceptual explanation for a perceived gap between the aspiration to lead an ethical digital transformation and political implementation in digitalisation governance. It explains why, despite various measures being promoted and partially implemented, achieving satisfaction with political action remains difficult.

5.5. Distributed Inattentiveness and a Paradox of Agency

This conceptualisation captures a paradox of agency in the governance of digitalisation. While politics is widely regarded as the only legitimate domain capable of steering digital change towards the common good, the very actors expected to substantially shape the discourse through regulations are either unaware of the full extent of transformation or subtly co-opted by its logic. The normalisation of digital technologies thus emerges as a central mechanism through which political action is both symbolically affirmed and structurally deferred.

The digital transformation is perceived as a rapid, diffuse, and insufficiently regulated process, producing a sense of unease and diminished control among both citizens and institutional actors. Yet the political capacity to intervene is limited by a condition I conceptualise as *distributed inattentiveness*: a term I developed in the course of this study. It refers to a structural dispersion of political attention in which digitalisation is deprioritised, not due to deliberate neglect, but because of the fragmentation of responsibilities across government portfolios and the invisibility of digital processes as they become embedded in everyday life. I argue that, as the awareness of technologies decreases due to their deep embedding in the daily lives of their users, the space for critical reflection and strategic oversight becomes increasingly narrow. As discussed earlier, the reassignment of digitalisation from City Councillor Hanke to City Councillor Sima as a direct example of the allocation of multiple topics to a city councillor illustrates how institutional fragmentation reduces political traction on digitalisation, even when formal responsibility is maintained. This dynamic exemplifies how administrative reorganisation can unintentionally hinder the continuity of digital policy efforts, reinforcing the conditions under which distributed inattentiveness arises. In such contexts, political actors and private stakeholders are either passively swept along by the momentum of digital change or actively benefiting from it, leaving a persistent vacuum of ethical-political agency. Digitalisation, while widely acknowledged as important, often fails to receive sustained focus from policymakers because it is absorbed into the broader machinery of political prioritisation. Digital Humanism, invoked as a normative orientation, functions primarily as a symbolic register: it impersonates political agency by signalling that intervention is both desirable and possible, yet through its vagueness, ultimately enables the postponement of substantive action. This theory contributes to our understanding of how ethical discourse can

simultaneously affirm moral responsibility and depoliticise structural inaction in the governance of digitalisation.

In the emergence of normative frameworks such as Digital Humanism, political actors often use the quantity of visible measures, rather than their depth or lasting quality, as the primary yardstick for legitimacy in the public eye. They present these measures as proof of political commitment. While the symbolic language of Digital Humanism initially suggests that meaningful political intervention is both possible and necessary, the public increasingly bases trust on whether a broad spectrum of tangible actions follows this promise. As a result, actors closely monitor implementation not only for effectiveness, but also for visibility. This dynamic reinforces pressure on policymakers to demonstrate output across multiple sectors, possibly at the expense of coherence or depth. It also encourages the public to adopt a more critical view of political actors. When symbolic commitments do not lead to visible change, legitimacy suffers. In this way, political actors risk using the symbolic appeal of frameworks like Digital Humanism to reinforce the very vacuum of ethical and political agency they intend to address.

5.6. Reflections on Scope, Contribution, and Limits

By shifting the analytical focus away from individual intentions or failures and toward the structural conditions that shape political (in)action, the concept of distributed inattentiveness contributes to a deeper understanding of digital governance. The term “distributed” refers to the dispersion or fragmentation of political responsibility across different actors, departments or policy areas. It implies that no single actor has full awareness of, oversight of, or accountability for digital policy because their focus and responsibilities are spread too thinly across multiple portfolios. This leads to policymakers being inattentive to issues or aspects relevant to guide the digital transformation. The concept is not primarily critical of specific decision-makers but of the institutional dynamics and symbolic expectations that produce inertia in the face of accelerating technological change. By foregrounding *distributed inattentiveness* and the paradox of symbolic affirmation without practical follow-through, the theory provides a novel explanation for why ethical frameworks, such as Digital Humanism, often remain discursively vibrant but practically under-implemented. Although the analysis is rooted in the case of Vienna, the insights carry broader relevance. Cities may face similar challenges, including fragmented responsibility, symbolic overload, and

the invisibility of digital systems, due to their deep integration into daily life. However, the theory's applicability to other contexts would require sensitivity to local governance structures and political cultures. Finally, the theory opens space for future research on how to re-politicise ethical discourses — not only as values to communicate but as mandates for structural reform.

The previous chapter presented the key findings of this study, derived from the analysis of expert interviews using Constructivist Grounded Theory. Two central categories emerged: *The Symbolic Function of Digital Humanism* and *Political Responsibility*. Together, they informed the conceptualisation of distributed inattentiveness. This concept describes a structural dispersion of political attention, shaped by overlapping responsibilities, institutional fragmentation, and the normalisation of digital processes. It helps explain why political actors, despite being regarded as central to guiding digital transformation, often struggle to implement ethical commitments in a sustained way. The following chapter situates these findings within the broader literature of digital governance, symbolic politics, and performative policymaking. It discusses how Digital Humanism serves as a symbolic framework in Vienna's discourse and explores the implications of this for regional ethical digital governance, providing recommendations for action. By connecting empirical insights with theoretical perspectives, this chapter reflects on the study's conceptual contribution and outlines implications for future research.

6 Discussion

This study aims to contribute to the scientific discourse on digital governance and research in the field of Digital Humanism. It furthermore offers policymakers a selection of practical measures to tackle the issue of distributed inattentiveness, urging them to recognise it as a structural challenge that needs to be addressed to enhance the quality and coherence of their own policymaking efforts. This chapter explores how the symbolic use of Digital Humanism and the concept of distributed inattentiveness can be embedded within a broader scientific context by drawing on existing literature. Using this as a foundation, implications for future research will be analysed, and implications for regional policymaking, including recommendations for actions, will be provided. The following section summarises the key findings and thereby prepares for the subsequent discussion of the content in the later sections.

6.1. Summary of Key Findings

This study examined how the City of Vienna has incorporated the concept of Digital Humanism into its policymaking and identified the challenges and opportunities that arise when utilising it as an ethical framework in digital governance. Based on an analysis of policy documents and expert interviews, conducted in the methodological tradition of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014), the findings of this study suggest that the City of Vienna has primarily integrated the concept of Digital Humanism on a discursive and symbolic level. While the concept appears in different forms of political communication and the framing of selected projects, it does not constitute a consistently applied or structurally anchored policy guideline. Instead, Digital Humanism operates as a symbolic register, signalling ethical responsibility and political orientation in response to a rapidly evolving digital landscape. This symbolic use, while initially welcomed, led to dissatisfaction among stakeholders closely monitoring the discourse on the regional level in the City of Vienna. The findings of this study suggest that the trigger for this symbolic use of the concept is partly because the quantity of visible policy outputs is used as a measure of the legitimacy of politicians and trust in them. This creates pressure on political actors, leading to a symbolic use of the concept when communicating with the public, without implementing tangible measures, which only serves to increase dissatisfaction among those who closely monitor the discourse. The findings further suggest that political action is structurally deferred due to a condition I term ‘distributed inattentiveness,’ whereby political actors lack

the structural capacity or focus to sustainably embed the concept of Digital Humanism into ongoing digital governance practices. This is compounded by a fragmentation of responsibilities across government portfolios and the invisibility of digital processes as they become embedded in everyday life. The concept of distributed inattentiveness thus emerged as a central explanation for the limited political engagement with Digital Humanism in the City of Vienna.

6.2. Situating Digital Humanism in the Academic Discourse

The case of Digital Humanism in Vienna reflects key themes within the academic field of digital governance (Sun et al., 2024). It serves as a normative framework, based on a set of principles and values, that defines how the task of shaping the digital transformation should be approached to make sure it is centred around human well-being. Through that, it seeks to guide the development and shaping of digital technologies and the digital sphere (Werthner et al., 2022). Digital governance encompasses a variety of focal points, such as institutional, legal, and discursive practices that manage digital transformation (Dunleavy & Margetts, 2025; Howlett et al.; Yeung, 2018). If applied, Digital Humanism offers policymakers and political institutions a value-driven framework that emphasises human rights, democratic control and social responsibility (Werthner, 2020), complementing the regulatory and infrastructural aspects of digital governance. This understanding of Digital Humanism is reflected both in the interviews and in the literature.

This study has shown that fragmented political responsibilities and the diffusion of focus across multiple portfolios contribute to the condition of distributed inattentiveness. Rather than attributing shortcomings to individual policymakers, structural hurdles are identified as the primary challenge to effective digital governance, as outlined in the case presented here. Researchers exploring how a wide range of policy topics and issues assigned to elected politicians affect their performance underpin what the concept of distributed inattentiveness suggests. Blinder (1997) argues that when politicians attempt to address numerous policy areas simultaneously, it can result in procedural gridlock, increased partisanship, and a lack of substantive progress on any single issue. Thematic overload furthermore contributes to public perceptions that politicians are more focused on political manoeuvring than on solving concrete problems, leading to frustration and estrangement between citizens and their representatives. This ultimately leads to overwhelmed elected

officials, reduced effectiveness and a weakened public appeal due to difficulty in prioritising, communicating and delivering policy promises (Blinder, 1997; Walter, 2018). Literature in the field of public administration research indicates that administrative structures and their influence on policymakers, along with the formal organisation of bureaucracies, play a crucial role in implementing policies. Fragmented or highly specialised administrative structures can pose challenges for policy integration and coordination, particularly in complex fields like sustainability or energy (Feiock et al., 2017; Krause et al., 2014). While fragmentation creates opportunities for bureaucrats to initiate policy changes, this sometimes results in outcomes that diverge from the intentions of elected policymakers (Talal, 2022). At the same time, elected officials may respond to such fragmentation by delegating more power to bureaucrats, especially in times of crisis or when technical expertise is needed (Curley et al., 2023). These findings are consistent with the perceptions of the interviewees.

According to Cairney (2016), policymakers are often caught between doing what works and doing what looks good, with the latter frequently prevailing under political pressure, but without leading to lasting content among the people. This aligns with Ding's (2020) theory of performative governance. With policymakers trying to avoid public dissatisfaction, they sometimes signify political commitment without it being firmly embedded in sustained institutional practice, resulting in a form of performative governance. Performative governance refers to a theatrical form of good governance, characterised by a low bureaucratic capacity and high public scrutiny. Bureaucratic capacity, or bureaucratic behaviour, emerges from state capacities. These vary between different parts of a state, with some enjoying higher capacities than others, depending on their entanglement with the public sphere and international context, as well as the amount of scrutiny they can endure (ibid.). Although Ding (2020) writes about performative governance from a state perspective, the theory can be broken down on a regional level. The apparatus may differ, featuring distinct structural elements and responsibilities. Still, regarding factors such as bureaucracy and dependency on external influences – e.g., in Vienna, there is a strong dependency on national policymaking, partially also supranational – the essence of the theory remains applicable. In the case of Digital Humanism in Vienna, I would therefore argue that bureaucratic capacity is closely linked to the city councillors, who function as leaders of the different departments and institutions and have the power to divide the focus on certain topics during a legislative period. According to the interviewees, Vienna's city

councillors are perceived as having too many focal points per person, leading to a limited capacity to engage with Digital Humanism, while simultaneously facing public pressure not to ignore a key societal challenge (Floridi, 2018). A case in point is the 2022 response of the City of Vienna's Executive City Councillor for Culture and Science during a municipal inquiry on Digital Humanism (see 4.3 Reports of the City Council). While reaffirming the city's normative commitment to ethically guiding digital transformation, the Councillor simultaneously deferred responsibility for implementation to the scientific community by stating that political action could not "get ahead of science" (City of Vienna, 2024b, p. 20). This rhetorical move exemplifies distributed inattentiveness: discourse is used to affirm political responsibility, yet concrete digital governance is redirected elsewhere, thereby reinforcing institutional fragmentation and structural deferral. It also underscores how symbolic affirmation can coexist with bureaucratic incapacity, lacking clear mechanisms for follow-through (cf. Ding, 2020; Edelman, 1985). This dissonance also aligns with Fischer's (2003) understanding of symbolic policy. Based on the findings of this study, the symbolic use of Digital Humanism constructs realities that do not fully match with each other, leading to dissatisfaction among different groups. According to Fischer, dissatisfaction among stakeholders is inevitable in the context of symbolic policy performance. Although symbolic performance can be perceived as negative if no real actions follow, it still holds significance, with public satisfaction being influenced not only by the technical results but also by how policy is interpreted (ibid.). This matches the findings of this study, where the symbolic use of Digital Humanism was initially perceived as positive because it showed policymakers addressing the issue, followed by criticism from various stakeholders.

In conceptualising distributed inattentiveness, a factor that emerged was a lack of awareness among policymakers regarding the impact of digital technologies, a result of these technologies being a constant and taken-for-granted part of their everyday lives. The pervasive and seamless integration of digital technologies contributes to this inattentiveness as political decision-makers, being the actors responsible for digital governance and technology users at the same time, fail to perceive the transformative power of these systems (Floridi, 2018; Zuboff, 2023). As digital infrastructures become ubiquitous yet invisible, Star and Bowker (2006) emphasise that infrastructures, often invisible, become more noticeable only when they break down or fail, and that they are deeply embedded in everyday practices, routines, and standards. Through that, their governance is potentially deprioritised until a problem arises. The need for digital literacy

among political leaders becomes more urgent, as it shapes their ability to navigate, communicate, and lead effectively in a digitalised political environment (Pérez-Escoda & Freire, 2023; Villaplana & Fitzpatrick, 2024).

Embedding of the concept of distributed inattentiveness in the existing literature brings together various areas of research. To simplify the conceptual relationships discussed in this chapter, the following figure illustrates the emergence of distributed inattentiveness and its consequences. Arising from a "thematic overload" (Blinder, 1997) & fragmented responsibilities based on administrative and legislative structures (e.g. switch of resorts every five years due to new government formations), as well as de-prioritisation of digital transformation due to the integration of digital technologies into everyday life, distributed inattentiveness leads to bureaucratic incapacities (cf. Ding, 2020) in the form of a resource distribution not favourable to specific issues, in this case, the implementation of Digital Humanism. Through facing pressure to meet policy expectations in every thematic area of responsibility, a symbolic affirmation is made towards other policymakers (in the case of the ECC reporting to the municipal council) and the public (ibid.; Edelman, 1985). Not being able to focus fully on the issue at hand, responsibility is partially shifted towards other actors, e.g. the scientific sphere, while maintaining the appearance of political leadership. An insufficient implementation of Digital Humanism principles is the result, affecting digital governance. To various stakeholders, monitoring and participating in the discourse, the symbolic use of

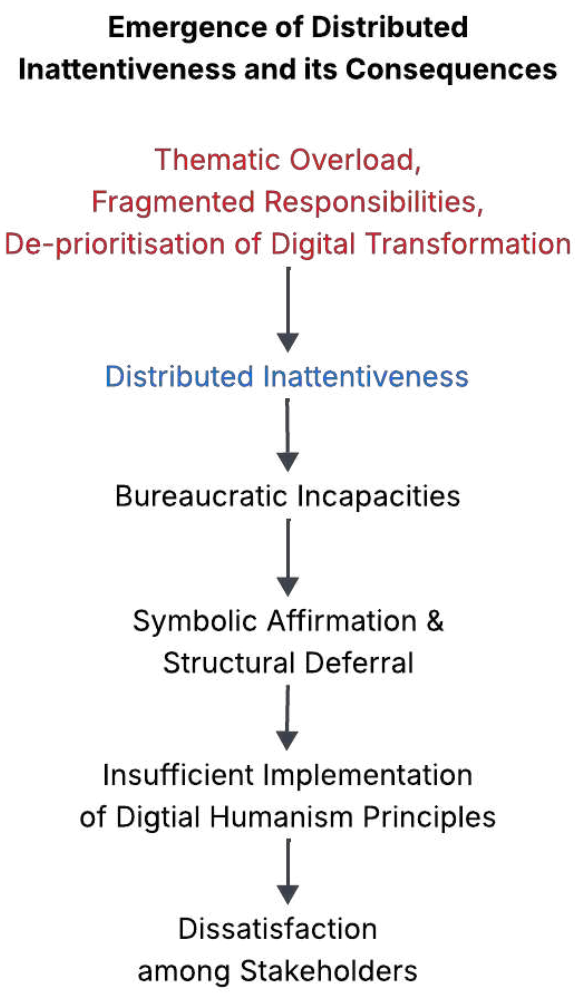

Figure 5 depicts the emergence of distributed inattentiveness and its consequences.

Digital Humanism does not suffice, leading to mistrust and dissatisfaction (cf. Fischer, 2003), as supported by the results of the interview analysis.

Figure 5 summarises the key points of this discussion and the embedding of the distributed inattentiveness concept in scholarly discourse, as well as its effect on the Digital Humanism case in the City of Vienna. Based on this, the next section considers the practical implications of this analysis for regional policymaking.

6.3. Practical Implications for Regional Policymaking

The findings of this study have practical implications for policymakers tasked with managing digital transformation, who aim to implement concepts such as Digital Humanism as ethical guidelines to form the foundation of their digital governance.

Addressing the issues previously analysed requires action at multiple levels. The following table summarises key implications derived from the findings and recommended actions to address distributed inattentiveness and enhance digital governance through institutional, organisational, and strategic measures.

Implication of Findings	Explanation	Recommended Action
Reduce Portfolio Overload for Policial Decision-Makers	*Too many thematic responsibilities cause diffusion of attention among political actors.*	Review and adjust city councillors' portfolios according to their fields of expertise; assign themes closely tied to each other; Assign deputies with oversight if needed (e.g., concept of Chief Information Officer (City of Vienna, 2025d)).
Concretise Ethics-Based Digital Governance Goals	*The current symbolic discourse risks being hollow without concrete goals.*	Break down and translate current symbolic commitments into binding digital policy guidelines, reducing level of abstraction to foster implementation (cf. Haag et al., 2024).

Design and Communicate Transparent and Relatable Performance Indicators	*Overemphasis on visible output can undermine focus on meaningful outcomes.*	Develop quality-oriented performance metrics for digital projects (e.g., equity, accessibility, governance sustainability) alongside traditional KPIS and communicate them transparently.
Offer Transparent Tracking Mechanisms for Policy Implementation	*Dissatisfaction arises from the symbolic use of Digital Humanism, with no tangible actions following.*	Integrate Digital Humanism related policy-projects into a publicly accessible monitoring system, e.g., the “Regierungsmonitor” (government monitor) of the City of Vienna (City of Vienna, 2025b).
Offer Digital Education / Implement Strategic Capacity-Building	*Low institutional literacy on digital topics contributes to inattentiveness.*	Offer training programs on digital ethics and digital governance for civil servants and elected officials. Establish ongoing training for relevant city councillors during their time in office, and their departments.

Table 4 offers an overview of strategic measures that aim at reducing distributed inattentiveness in regional policymaking.

While some actions require less effort to be realised, others signify bigger structural changes and can only be realised during a specific time. For example, the adjustment of city councillors’ portfolios is typically bound to the end or beginning of a new legislative period, during which the different resorts (thematic areas) are usually divided among elected politicians (Ecker & Gross). In Chapter 4, Table 2 compares symbolic and practical measures in the City of Vienna. Based on the findings of Haag et al. (2024) it was argued that reducing the complexity of policies increases the chances of successful implementation. Although the authors analysed the effect of supranational policies on national policymaking, the findings inspired the recommendation to concretise ethics-based digital governance goals. Having a clear policy goal makes it easier to assess the need for financial and other resources. This allows specific assignments to be given to the administration responsible for implementing policies (Fernández-I-Marín et al., 2021; Simoes Loureiro & Hadjar, 2025).

The design and communication of transparent performance indicators on digital governance is further recommended. Together with a transparent tracking mechanism for policy implementation displayed on official city government websites, similar to the Viennese government's monitoring website (City of Vienna, 2025b), this can lead to higher levels of stakeholder and citizen trust (Porumbescu, 2017). Research on policy transparency delivered through digital tools, such as e-government platforms or open data initiatives, suggests a positive effect on citizens' trust in politics, although the relationship is nuanced (Afiyah, 2024; Jopang et al., 2024). The act of disclosing information itself, especially when it exceeds legal requirements or includes performance and financial data, can enhance trust, particularly among citizens who already value transparency (Crepaz & Arikan, 2023; Ripamonti, 2024). However, the impact of transparency is also shaped by citizens' pre-existing attitudes and beliefs about government, meaning that transparency alone may not automatically lead to overcoming mistrust (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012).

The findings of this study suggest that distributed inattentiveness could be mitigated through systematic digital education for city councillors during their time in office, and civil servants working in their departments. Therefore, providing digital education to strategically develop capacities and promote informed political actors is recommended. Enhanced digital literacy enables policymakers to better understand and leverage technology for the public good, improve communication with citizens, and achieve more inclusive and effective policy outcomes (Lee et al., 2022; Reddy et al., 2020). Recognising the importance of digital literacy in policy development furthermore leads to more adaptive, equitable, and forward-looking governance (ibid.).

The recommendations listed here are not only aimed at structural changes within regional government systems. They address the issue of transparency and strengthening trust in the politicians responsible, taking different perspectives into account, from a structural to an educational. Taken together, they aim to reduce the fragmentation of attention and responsibility within the city of Vienna's governance system to foster responsive digital governance. If implemented, these actions can help translate the symbolic promise of Digital Humanism into concrete and accountable digital governance practice. However, the interdisciplinary body of literature regarding digital governance and policymaking offers a broad range of measures for governments to take. Whether the focus lies on what is being proposed here or in other studies depends on the acute needs of the different government

systems, like in the case of Vienna, and policymakers' will to act. What the findings of this study imply for future research will be addressed in the next section.

6.4. Implications for Future Research

The future development of Digital Humanism, both in a scientific and socio-political context, is not yet clear. If we believe what Floridi (2018) claims and we neither live online nor offline, but "*onlife*" (ibid., p. 2), describing living in a new sphere that is seamlessly analogue and digital (ibid.) – online and offline at the same time – guidelines such as Digital Humanism will become indispensable if (Luke, 2018; Whiting & Pritchard, 2017). Whether they are unified under the name Digital Humanism or implemented as part of a different concept, the ethical framework we ultimately decide to live by will determine the conditions under which the reality of our future lives will be shaped. The interdisciplinary nature inherent to the concept of Digital Humanism is also reflected in research, as was shown in the discussion presented here. Future research should take this into account, adapting different lenses through which this phenomenon can be analysed and examining the results as part of a broader picture. How policy comes to life might seem like a very objective process at first. Processes are predefined, and the rules are clear, but the people guiding these processes are anything but objective. Considering the worldviews and perceptions of policymakers can provide insight into how government structures and processes can be adapted to better fit modern realities and conditions.

The findings presented in this study could be regarded as the initial phase in a more extensive research programme, with many arguments yet to be further tested. Following the concept of distributed inattentiveness, a subsequent phase could entail a qualitative interview study focusing on the realities and perceptions of policymakers, to ascertain the extent to which the assumptions derived from this study align with their perspectives. Little research has been found investigating the views of policymakers on digital governance and the difficulties arising from managing digital transformation. With little research available in this field, even less is known about Digital Humanism as a guideline for digital governance and policymakers' perceptions. By walking the path this study has begun to explore, future research has the potential to yield further insights into the realm of Digital Humanism, public policymaking, and digital governance. From shedding light on the unconscious and pervasive integration of digital technology in the daily lives of policymakers to exploring the

concept of digital literacy and the ethical considerations surrounding technology, much remains to be discovered.

The preceding discussion has situated the concept of distributed inattentiveness within the broader landscape of digital governance. Through exploring its explanatory power and outlining practical implications for regional policymaking, it raises the case for Digital Humanism integration as part of the City of Vienna's digital governance to a higher level of abstraction. This has provided new food for thought for future research. As the final chapter of this thesis, the conclusion now returns to the research question, summarises the key insights, and reflects on the contributions and limitations of this study, before concluding with a short paragraph of final thoughts.

7 Conclusion

This chapter summarises the central insights of the thesis, reflects on its contributions and limitations and leaves room for the researcher's final thoughts. Before doing so, the central research question is revisited and answered based on the findings of this thesis, to help clarify to what extent the study has fulfilled its original objective and what insights can be drawn from the empirical case of Vienna.

7.1. Revisiting the Research Question

This thesis aims to explore the extent to which the City of Vienna has integrated the concept of Digital Humanism into its policymaking and what challenges and opportunities regional policymaking faces when following Digital Humanism as an ideological guideline in digitalisation policymaking. The results of this study indicate that the City of Vienna has largely incorporated the concept of Digital Humanism symbolically. Although it features in various political communications and the framing of individual projects, it does not represent a consistently applied or institutionally embedded policy approach. Rather, Digital Humanism functions as a symbolic reference, conveying ethical intent and political positioning within the discourse of the city's digital governance strategy. This symbolic use of the concept arises from a distributed inattentiveness among policymakers, a structurally induced lack of focus that can be attributed, among other things, to multiple thematic areas under the responsibility of a single policymaker and other structural circumstances such as recurring resort distribution. Apart from the danger of implementing digital humanism on a symbolic level without following it up with practical measures, the distributed inattentiveness is identified as the main challenge regional policymaking might face when trying to integrate Digital Humanism as the ethical foundation of its digital governance. This, however, is closely tied to the structures that regional governments adhere to and can therefore vary from one city government to another.

The opportunity lies in the unifying potential of Digital Humanism as a normative framework. If politically and institutionally reinforced, it could serve as a meaningful guide for ethical digital governance at the regional level. The case of Vienna, therefore, illustrates both the emergence and limits of symbolic ethics in fragmented governance structures and the potential of Digital Humanism to move from discourse to institutional practice.

7.2. Research Contributions

This study contributes to the scholarly discourse on digital governance by offering a conceptual framework to understand the structural constraints regional governments face when attempting to implement normative frameworks, such as Digital Humanism. The central contribution lies in the development of the concept of distributed inattentiveness, which describes a condition in which digital transformation is deprioritised due to fragmented political responsibilities, thematic overload among policymakers, and the invisibility of digital processes in everyday life. This conceptualisation explains why ethical frameworks such as Digital Humanism often remain symbolic rather than leading to structural change. By grounding this in a detailed case study, the thesis advances our understanding of how institutional conditions shape the possibilities and limitations of ethical digital governance at the local level.

The thesis furthermore offers an insight into how stakeholders perceive the concept of Digital Humanism and how the role of politics is understood in the context of implementing rules and regulations to protect citizens from potential dangers arising from rapid, uncontrolled digital transformation, while simultaneously fostering innovation and progress. It encourages reflection on how assigning multiple policy areas to a single decision-maker may impact the quality of policymaking, especially when public discourse creates pressure for visible actions. Rather than suggesting ignorance among policymakers, it might be that living in a highly digitalised society, with advancements unfolding at unprecedented rates, leads to an unreflected acceptance of living *onlife* (Floridi, 2018), with governmental structures fostering a distributed inattentiveness among the actors carrying the greatest responsibility.

This study emphasises the research possibilities and relevance of Constructivist Grounded Theory after Charmaz (2014) in the field of digital governance research.

7.3. Limitations

This study is limited by its single-case design, focusing exclusively on the City of Vienna, which restricts the generalisability of findings to other contexts. Therefore, the theory developed here may not transfer directly to other urban or regional settings without considering local governance structures, institutional capacities, and normative traditions.

The empirical material is based on expert interviews, which introduces selection bias due to the participants' deep engagement with digitalisation and Digital Humanism. Their perspectives, while valuable for capturing expert insights, may overemphasise internal expectations or frustrations that do not necessarily reflect broader political or societal views. As stated in the section above, further research would have to be conducted to back this study's findings.

A further limitation concerns the small number of interviews conducted and how it impacts theoretical saturation. While the seven expert interviews offered valuable insights into the practical application of Digital Humanism based on the case of Vienna, it might still constrain the analytical scope of the study and therefore requires further research to refine the concept of distributed inattentiveness. The limited number of interviewees arose from different factors. The narrow field of Digital Humanism in Vienna limited the potential participant pool. Out of nine interviewees who were invited to participate in the study, one declined, and another failed to respond. Resource constraints, including the time-intensive nature of CGT and the single-researcher setup, impacted capacities. Although it cannot be ruled out that additional interviews could have provided further insight, the findings still enabled the research question to be answered, leaving room for further investigation. However, researchers should be aware that issues might arise when attempting to apply the concept to other cities or policy levels.

Moreover, while the thesis explores symbolic and discursive dimensions of policy, it does not assess the practical implementation of measures in detail. The allocation of the concept of distributed inattentiveness in the field of performative digital governance builds on and adapts an analytical framework originally applied to the state level (Ding, 2020). While I argue that this framework is applicable at the regional level, the empirical basis for this claim remains preliminary. It would benefit from further validation across other cities or through comparison with national-level dynamics. Finally, it is important to note that this research was conducted within a specific political and legislative context, which may have influenced the perceived urgency and visibility of Digital Humanism. Political shifts such as elections, departmental reorganisation or new national policies may alter the relevance or interpretation of the findings presented here.

7.4. Final Thoughts

As a political scientist, I bring to this study both academic interest in the politics of digitalisation and practical experience in the political field. With Vienna being my hometown for a long time and given my proximity to policymaking processes and familiarity with the city's institutional landscape, I was offered valuable contextual knowledge and informed access to relevant interview partners. However, this professional background also required constant critical self-reflection throughout the research process, which I was fully aware of. To mitigate my own potential bias, I approached data collection and interpretation with methodological transparency, revisiting coding decisions and theory-building processes repeatedly. While my insights may have enhanced the depth of understanding, my position may also have influenced which aspects of the data I found most salient. This thesis is therefore shaped not only by empirical evidence, but also by my interpretive lens as a politically engaged researcher situated within the very structures under analysis. This might seem controversial to some, but it also encouraged me to critically reflect on my work, which ultimately made me a better researcher than I would have been without my background.

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9 Annex

9.1. Interview Guide (German)

Unterthemen	**Leitfrage**	**Teilfragen** *(zur Spezifizierung der Erzählungen der Befragten; Nachfrage, falls noch nicht erwähnt)*
Wahrnehmung von Digitalisierung und Ethik	Können Sie mir davon erzählen, welche Rolle Digitalisierung in Ihrem Leben spielt?	Wie nehmen Sie den Fortschritt in der Entwicklung von Technologien und deren Einbettung in die Gesellschaft wahr? Können Sie mir von einem Schlüsselmoment in Ihrer beruflichen Laufbahn, oder auch aus Ihrem persönlichen Leben berichten, in dem Ihnen bewusst wurde, dass es für den Umgang mit Technologien und Digitalisierung ethische Spielregeln braucht? Wie war das für Sie? Wenn Sie in diesem Kontext auf das bisherige politische Handeln blicken, wie empfinden Sie das?
Auffassung des Konzepts des Digitalen Humanismus	Was bedeutet Digitaler Humanismus für Sie?	Wenn Sie an Digitalen Humanismus denken, gibt es Aspekte in diesem Konzept, die Sie für besonders hervorhebenswert halten? Können Sie mir konkrete Beispiele dafür nennen? Können Sie mir etwas darüber erzählen, wie Sie sich ein „gutes digitales Leben“ (*zit. Stadt Wien*) für die moderne Gesellschaft vorstellen und welche Rolle Sie dem Digitalen Humanismus in diesem Kontext zukommen lassen würden? Bitte erläutern Sie mir Ihre Einschätzung der Praxistauglichkeit des Digitalen Humanismus und, in diesem Kontext, Ihre

		Wahrnehmung der Rollen der Politik, Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft.
Wirkungsfelder des Digitalen Humanismus	Können Sie mir bitte etwas über gesellschaftliche Wirkungsfelder des Digitalen Humanismus erzählen, denen Sie besonders große Bedeutung zukommen lassen? Warum?	**Datenschutz**: Was bedeutet Privatsphäre und Datenautonomie in einer digitalisierten Welt für Sie? Können Sie mir etwas darüber erzählen, wie die Prinzipien des Digitalen Humanismus dazu beitragen können, die Balance zwischen dem Nutzen digitaler Technologien und dem Schutz individueller Rechte zu wahren? **Arbeit**: Können Sie mir aus Ihrer Erfahrung oder Sichtweise darüber berichten, wie der Digitale Humanismus dazu beitragen kann, einen Übergang zu einer von Technologie geprägten Arbeitswelt zu gestalten, der nicht nur auf wirtschaftliche Effizienz ausgerichtet ist, sondern auch die Achtung menschlicher Würde, faire Arbeitsbedingungen und Inklusion berücksichtigt? **Bildung**: Können Sie aus Ihrer Perspektive heraus darüber erzählen, welche Bedeutung und Kompetenz Sie dem Digitalen Humanismus in der Bildung zukommen lassen? **Ökonomie**: Könnten Sie Ihre Einschätzung dazu geben, wie der Digitale Humanismus in der heutigen Wirtschaft dazu beitragen kann, ethische Grundsätze zu wahren und sozial verantwortliche wirtschaftliche Praktiken zu fördern? **Kunst & Kultur**: Können Sie mir etwas über Ihre Sichtweise erzählen, welche Bedeutung Digitalem Humanismus im Wirkungsfeld der Kunst zukommen sollte? **Gesundheit**: Erzählen Sie mir bitte etwas darüber, wie Sie die potenziellen Chancen und Herausforderungen wahrnehmen, die sich aus der Integration von „Digital Humanismus-Prinzipien“ im Gesundheitswesen ergeben könnten?

		Nachhaltigkeit: Wie empfinden Sie die Fähigkeit des Digitalen Humanismus, dazu beitragen zu können, den Wandel hin zu einer nachhaltigeren Gesellschaft durch die Förderung von umweltbewusstem Technologieeinsatz, digitalem Empowerment und sozialer Verantwortung zu beeinflussen?
Einschätzung der Digitalisierungspolitik der Stadt Wien in Zusammenhang mit Digitalem Humanismus	Erzählen Sie mir bitte davon, wie Sie Digitalen Humanismus in der Digitalisierungspolitik der Stadt Wien wahrnehmen.	Können Sie mir etwas darüber erzählen, wie es für Sie war, als sie erfuhren, dass die Stadt Wien den Digitalen Humanismus als ethische Leitlinie für Digitalisierungspolitik heranzieht? Welche Bedenken beschäftigten, oder beschäftigen Sie im Zusammenhang damit? Ich würde Sie bitten, Ihre Einschätzung zu teilen, ob der derzeitige politische Ansatz dazu beitragen kann, politische Entscheidungsfindung in der Digitalisierungspolitik, Bürgerbeteiligung und die Gestaltung von politischen Institutionen im Zeitalter der Digitalisierung menschenzentrierter und ethisch verantwortlicher zu gestalten. Welchen Akteur*innen schreiben Sie in der Implementierung des Digitalen Humanismus Bedeutung zu? Was bedeutet Bürger*innenpartizipation im Kontext des Digitalen Humanismus in der Praxis für Sie? Wie wäre es für Sie, wenn der Digitale Humanismus auf nationaler Ebene, oder auch auf supranationaler Ebene, in die politische Praxis aufgenommen werden würde? Wie würden Sie sich das vorstellen?
Abschluss	Wenn Sie auf Ihre bisherigen	Was würden Sie sich für die Zukunft von der Politik erwarten, um ethischen Herausforderungen in der

	Erfahrungen als [Expert:innenrolle] zurückblicken, haben Sie den Eindruck, dass die Implementierung des Digitalen Humanismus schon spürbare Erfolg und Veränderungen herbeigeführt hat?	Digitalisierungspolitk adäquat zu begegnen? Gibt es aus Ihrer Sicht noch irgendwelche wichtigen Aspekte, die Ihrem Gefühl nach im Interview zu wenig berücksichtigt wurden?

9.2. Participant Information and Consent Sheet (German)

Teilnehmer*inneninformation und Einwilligungserklärung zur Teilnahme an der Studie: Digitaler Humanismus in Wien: Eine Fallstudie zur Bewältigung ethischer Herausforderungen in der regionalen Digitalisierungspolitik

Digitaler Humanismus in Wien: Eine Fallstudie zur Bewältigung ethischer Herausforderungen in der regionalen Digitalisierungspolitik

Sehr geehrte*r Teilnehmer*in,

wir laden Sie ein, an der oben genannten Studie teilzunehmen.

Ihre Teilnahme an dieser Studie erfolgt freiwillig. Sie können jederzeit, ohne Angabe von Gründen, Ihre Bereitschaft zur Teilnahme zurückziehen. Die Ablehnung der Teilnahme oder ein vorzeitiges Ausscheiden aus dieser Studie hat keine nachteiligen Folgen für Sie.

Diese Art von Studien ist notwendig, um verlässliche neue *wissenschaftliche* Forschungsergebnisse zu gewinnen. Unverzichtbare Voraussetzung für die Durchführung von Studien ist jedoch, dass Sie Ihr Einverständnis zur Teilnahme an dieser Studie schriftlich erklären. Bitte lesen Sie den folgenden Informationsbogen sorgfältig durch und zögern Sie nicht, Fragen zu stellen.

Bitte unterschreiben Sie die Einwilligungserklärung nur

- wenn Sie Art und Ablauf der Studie vollständig verstanden haben,
- wenn Sie bereit sind, der Teilnahme zuzustimmen und
- wenn Sie sich über Ihre Rechte als Teilnehmer*in an dieser Studie im Klaren sind.

1. Was ist der Zweck der Studie?

Die vorliegende Studie widmet sich dem Konzept des "Digitalen Humanismus" als ethischer Leitlinie im Kontext der Digitalisierungspolitik und wird im Rahmen einer Masterarbeit durchgeführt. Im Fokus der Untersuchung steht die Frage, wie eine Umsetzung und Integration des digitalen Humanismus auf regionaler Ebene innerhalb der tatsächlichen politischen Gegebenheiten gestaltet werden kann. Als Fallbeispiel für diese Untersuchung dient die Stadt Wien, welche im Oktober 2020 den digitalen Humanismus in ihr Koalitionsprogramm aufgenommen hat.

Die primäre Zielsetzung dieser Forschungsarbeit besteht darin, Einsichten darüber zu erlangen, wie die Prinzipien des digitalen Humanismus in praktische politische Maßnahmen und Entscheidungen transformiert werden können. Die gewählte Fallstudie soll dabei helfen, die Umsetzungsprozesse des digitalen Humanismus zu analysieren und gleichzeitig die auftretenden Herausforderungen sowie Potenziale für die politische Landschaft und die Gesellschaft zu identifizieren.

2. **Wie läuft die Studie ab?**

Im Zuge dieser Studie soll Mithilfe von Expert*inneninterviews fundiertes Wissen generiert, und ein tieferer Einblick in die Thematik gewonnen werden. Während des Interviewprozesses werden Sie darum gebeten, Ihre Expertise auf den Gebieten des Digitalen Humanismus, Ethik, Technologie und Politik zu teilen.

Ihr Zeitaufwand für die Teilnahme an der Studie beträgt ca. 1.5 Stunden vom Erstkontakt bis zum Abschluss des Interviews. Die reine Dauer der Interviews liegt bei ca. 60 Minuten. Die Interviews können sowohl digital als auch physisch durchgeführt werden. Bei physischen Interviews richtet sich der Ort der Durchführung nach Ihrer Verfügbarkeit. Ruhige Büroräumlichkeiten bieten sich hier als Örtlichkeit an.

3. **Worin liegt der Nutzen einer Teilnahme an der Studie?**

Ihre Teilnahme an der vorliegenden Studie trägt dazu bei, das Verständnis für die praktische Umsetzung des digitalen Humanismus zu vertiefen und Einblicke in die komplexen Zusammenhänge zwischen Ethik, Technologie und Politik zu liefern. Die Erkenntnisse, die aus diesen Gesprächen gewonnen werden, sollen dabei helfen, die Herausforderungen und Potenziale einer humanistischen Digitalisierungspolitik besser zu erfassen und somit einen Beitrag zur Weiterentwicklung dieser Thematik zu leisten.

4. **In welcher Weise werden die im Rahmen dieser Studie gesammelten Daten verwendet?**

Die von Ihnen bereitgestellten Daten werden im Rahmen dieser Studie anonymisiert verarbeitet. Dieser Prozess gewährleistet, dass keine unmittelbare Zuordnung zu einer Einzelperson erfolgen kann und somit Ihre persönliche Identität sicher bleibt. Die im Rahmen der Studie durchgeführten Interviews werden in Form von Audiodateien aufgezeichnet. Diese Aufnahmen durchlaufen denselben sorgfältigen Anonymisierungsprozess wie die übrigen Daten. Die Verarbeitung Ihrer Daten erfolgt ausschließlich für wissenschaftliche Auswertungen. Die Ergebnisse der Studie werden in aggregierter Form präsentiert, ohne das auf individuelle Teilnehmerinnen und Teilnehmer rückgeschlossen werden kann.

Der Zugriff auf die gesammelten Daten ist ausschließlich der Leiterin der Studie, sowie der Betreuerin der Masterarbeit gestattet. Sie ist zur strikten Verschwiegenheit verpflichtet und darf keinerlei Informationen über individuelle Teilnehmerinnen und Teilnehmer preisgeben.

Die Teilnahme an dieser Studie ist freiwillig. Sollten Sie sich dazu entscheiden, Ihre Daten löschen zu lassen, kann dieser Wunsch jederzeit geäußert werden. Die gelöschten Daten werden aus den Aufzeichnungen entfernt. Bei Anfragen zur Löschung Ihrer Daten oder anderen datenschutzrelevanten Anliegen steht Ihnen Lisa Friesenbichler jederzeit zur Verfügung. Bitte berücksichtigen Sie, dass die Löschung innerhalb eines Zeitraums von einer Woche erfolgen wird.

5. **Entstehen für die Teilnehmer*innen Kosten?**

Für die Teilnehmer*innen entstehen keine monetären Kosten. Der entstehende Zeitaufwand wird nicht monetär vergütet.

6. Möglichkeit zur Diskussion weiterer Fragen

Bei Fragen im Zusammenhang mit der Studie stehe ich Ihnen gerne zur Verfügung. Fragen, die die Rechte als Teilnehmer*in an der Studie betreffen, werden selbstverständlich jederzeit beantwortet.

Kontaktperson (Leiterin der Studie)	xxx

Vielen herzlichen Dank für Ihre Unterstützung! Mit Ihrer Teilnahme tragen Sie maßgeblich zum Erfolg meiner Masterarbeit bei.

7. Einwilligungserklärung

Name der teilnehmenden Person in Druckbuchstaben:

.....

Geb. Datum: .....

Ich erkläre mich bereit, an der Studie *„Digitaler Humanismus in Wien“* teilzunehmen.

Ich bin von „der Forschenden“ ausführlich und verständlich über Zielsetzung, Bedeutung und Tragweite der Studie und die sich für mich daraus ergebenden Anforderungen aufgeklärt worden. Ich habe darüber hinaus den Text dieser Teilnehmer*inneninformation und Einwilligungserklärung gelesen, insbesondere den 4. Abschnitt (Gibt es Risiken, Beschwerden und Begleiterscheinungen?). Aufgetretene Fragen wurden mir von der Studienleitung verständlich und ausreichend beantwortet. Ich hatte genügend Zeit, mich zu entscheiden, ob ich an der Studie teilnehmen möchte. Ich habe zurzeit keine weiteren Fragen mehr.

Ich werde die Hinweise, die für die Durchführung der Studie erforderlich sind, befolgen, behalte mir jedoch das Recht vor, meine freiwillige Mitwirkung jederzeit zu beenden, ohne dass mir daraus Nachteile entstehen. Sollte ich aus der Studie ausscheiden wollen, so kann ich dies jeder Zeit schriftlich oder mündlich bei „Name Kontaktperson“ veranlassen.

Ich bin zugleich damit einverstanden, dass meine im Rahmen dieser Studie erhobenen Daten aufgezeichnet und ausgewertet werden.

Ich stimme zu, (bitte wählen Sie Zutreffendes aus) dass meine Daten dauerhaft in anonymisierter Form elektronisch gespeichert werden. Noch nicht anonymisierte Daten werden in einer nur der Projektleitung zugänglichen Form gespeichert, die gemäß aktueller Standards gesichert ist.

Sollte ich zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt die Löschung meiner Daten wünschen, so kann ich dies schriftlich oder telefonisch ohne Angabe von Gründen zeitlich unbegrenzt bei [der Forschenden] veranlassen.

Den Aufklärungsteil habe ich gelesen und verstanden. Ich konnte im Aufklärungsgespräch alle mich interessierenden Fragen stellen. Sie wurden vollständig und verständlich beantwortet.

Eine Kopie dieser Teilnehmer*inneninformation und Einwilligungserklärung habe ich erhalten. Das Original verbleibt bei der Studienleitung.

(Datum und Unterschrift der*des Teilnehmenden)

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(Datum, Name und Unterschrift der Studienleitung)

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