Bibliotek, bildning och läsning som arena och praktik

en festskrift till Kerstin Rydbeck

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Universities, however [...] have utterly forgotten [their] glorious history. [...] On the other hand [they] have finally succeeded in forming once again a complete media system. Turing’s universal machine — vulgo the computer — processes, stores, and transmits whatever data it receives, whether textbooks, measurements, or algebras. Computers, therefore, have come full circle; from the mathematics departments where they once began, making their way through physics, chemistry, and medicine, they have finally arrived in the humanities. For the second time in its eight centuries, the university is technically uniform simply because all departments share one and the same hardware. (Kittler 2004)

In 2015, and for quite some time, it had become evident that the production and inscription of knowledge within the University could no longer exclusively be said to belong to the domain of printed media and individual memory – as it had been for hundreds of years prior. Instead, as one of the authors (Lindström) of the present essay noted that year, in a co-written book chapter in the collected volume Universitetet som medium (2015), knowledge was now, increasingly and by default “stored as electromagnetic traces in anonymous server halls” (Lindström and Wickberg Månsson 2015: 8)
Just as society in general was rapidly moving towards digital mechanisms for storing, disseminating and processing information, the media infrastructure of academic research was changing similarly. This included the Humanities – a field with a very long history, deeply and very specifically intertwined with the printed book and the library as its primary technical means for storing and organising information. Instead of libraries there would now be servers, instead of pages in codices there would be screens. By the mid-2000s it seemed inevitable that new digital tools and methodologies – beyond regular word processors and web browsers – could provide entirely new ways of extending the interpretive and analytic practices of humanities scholars, so that hermeneutics would be complemented by algorithms, visualisations and interactions. This impulse was further strengthened by the fact that massive amounts of cultural heritage data – “big data” for the humanities – had only recently started to become available on the Internet through projects such as Google Books and Archive.org. By 2015 digital humanities had clearly moved toward becoming the centre of attention in many quarters.

This also created obvious tensions that were raised in *Universitetet som medium*: “For a long time, a common perception has been that the role of the humanities scholar is to act as a critic in relation to the technological changes that transform society” (Lindström and Wickberg Månsson 2015: 8). As was noted, this tradition of challenging and questioning, having intellectual roots in Heidegger, Husserl as well as the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno, is both important and influential – even though it runs the risk of crossing over from healthy scepticism to active hostility in its critical regard of technology. Nevertheless, digital humanities as it seemed in 2015, could potentially open up a possibility for the humanities scholar “to not only act as a guardian, but also enter into a productive relationship with the technology”, something which would even imply “[a] new form of knowledge production, not exclusively bound up with criticism and critique [kritik]”. “To the digital humanist”, these new possibilities could mean “radically changed practices.” At the same time, it was noted, “[i]f the technological sphere is becoming increasingly important for humanities research, there is a need for continued – and critical – awareness of the implications of this influence.” (Lindström and Wickberg Månsson 2015: 8)

One central question then, in 2015 when *Universitetet som medium* was published, was how such a “productive relationship” and “radically changed practices” could be conceived and configured while still maintaining the critical distance to technology that the “traditional” humanities had so skillfully upheld. A related question concerned in what sort of context – whether institutional or in a more loosely organised form – such new “digital” research could take place. One of the already established ways of institutionalising and organising digital humanities was the “laboratory” or “centre” – and “In many places”, the authors noted, “especially on the other side of the Atlantic, humanities ‘laboratories’ have become so common that, seemingly, every self-respecting university needs to accommodate one.” (Lindström and Wickberg Månsson 2015: 8-10). In Sweden the clearest examples of this development were the two Humlabs present in Umeå and Lund, which at the time were already well established as prominent digital
humanities milieus, not only nationally but also internationally.\textsuperscript{1} However, beyond these exceptions, with their histories going back to the late 1990s (Umeå, 1999) and early 2000s (Lund, 2007) respectively, the presence and influence of any form of institutional Digital Humanities in Sweden was still quite limited in 2015. At Uppsala University despite important yet fragmented research activity, there was no actual collective and systematically organized institutional efforts to create a digital humanities unit akin to those in aforementioned institutions.

However, this was about to change within just a year when, in 2016, an initiative to explore new ideas concerning humanities and digital technology was constituted with the University Library as its venue. In a public announcement, The Forum for Digital Humanities was described as “a meeting place for researchers and practitioners in this vital area [of Digital Humanities]”. The main purpose of the Forum, with its activities held in the Carolina Rediviva University Library was to provide a new arena for “discussion and exchange of experiences”, and – importantly – to also provide a stepping-stone for establishing “more stable organizational forms” for digital humanities at the university, including developing “forms for technical support . . . and to organize common multi-disciplinary tasks of development and research.” A close connection between libraries in general and Digital Humanities was also underlined with the argument that “big university libraries have since long had the leading role in the area of digitalization particularly related to the humanities, there is here a mutual interest of cooperation between researchers and library.” (https://dhnb.eu/new-forum-for-digital-humanities-constituting-meeting-january-18-2016/) [...]. The Forum’s activities focused on organising seminars with invited guests that shared insights and experiences from a broader international Digital Humanities field. These seminars that took place in the University Library were ongoing until 2018, when further events would bring digital humanities at Uppsala University another step closer to a more organised configuration.

In 2018, soon after the Forum for Digital Humanities wrapped up its activities, the two authors of the current chapter arrived in Uppsala. We arrived to jointly build an interdisciplinary research network for digital humanities that would function as a direct continuation and expansion of the Forum for Digital Humanities at the University Library. The network was named Digital Humanities Uppsala – or “DH Uppsala” in short – and was funded by the Disciplinary domain of Humanities and Social Sciences, the Faculty of the Arts and the Disciplinary

\textsuperscript{1}Collaborations between technologists and arts and humanities scholars in Sweden date back to the 1960s and the period long before the creation of the World Wide Web, as Foka et al (2019) has shown in a review of historical DH units in Sweden.
Domain of Science and Technology. The aim was to collect, support and make visible ongoing Digital Humanities research at Uppsala University. In doing this the network built on and expanded on the platform that was previously established by the Forum – even organising seminars in the same locale at Carolina Rediviva, to underline this continuity. Another aim was to survey and establish a profile of all digital humanities research that was currently ongoing at the university. The offices were physically and administratively located at the Department of ALM which stands for Archival Science, Library and Information Science, Museum and Cultural Heritage Studies.

Anna, who was recruited as the project leader, had a background in classics, ancient history and archaeology, culture and media studies more broadly and had experience as research coordinator from Humlab at Umeå University. Matts, who was hired as research coordinator, had just recently completed his doctoral dissertation at Stockholm University, where he had used the cultural history of microfilm to explore themes and historical contexts that connected to an early “pre-history” of digitalisation. Neither of us, however, had any previous background in Uppsala, though we soon had to learn how to navigate not only the sometimes labyrinthine and confusing physical premises of campus Engelska Parken, but also the administrative structures of a large and unfamiliar university. At times, it must be admitted, these spatial convolutions did seem to us like a perfect metaphor for the bureaucratic intricacies of the organisation. We had thus been appointed cartographers and builders at the same time, working on a territory that was wholly unfamiliar – but, at the same time, exciting to traverse.

The activities initiated by DH Uppsala were broad and wide reaching, and the growing network connected a large number of researchers, both in Uppsala and at other universities. We organised regular seminars and workshops on an almost weekly basis during the period that DH Uppsala was active. The workshops covered a broad spectrum of DH areas, from game design, text mining and web scraping with python to various platforms for geo-visualisation; the seminars included researchers invited from both national and international contexts and covered topics such as digital history (Benjamin Martin), digital infrastructures (Johan Åhlfeldt, Bill Kretzschmar), the philosophy of synthetic cognition (N. Katherine Hayles) to analysis of digital reading practices (Karina van Dalen-Oskam) and so on. Many of these activities resulted in interviews, video recordings and other traces that are still archived and accessible at the DH Uppsala blog (https://digitalhumanities.blogg.uu.se/). While planning these activities we took pains to ensure that both the potential of a “productive relationship” between human researchers and the critical perspectives called for in Universitetet som medium would be represented.

At the same time as the project organised activities that stimulated digital humanities and cross-disciplinary endeavours in general, we also surveyed the DH landscape at the university and tried as much as possible to set up the network as a pilot operation for a further organised and more grounded DH endeavour. This was important and it provided the basis for the next step of consolidation, as the funding for the network was about to end by 2020.
In 2021 The Centre for Digital Humanities Uppsala (CDHU) was initiated. The new organisation was a direct continuation of the DH Uppsala network effort – led by Anna (as Director), with Matts in a supporting role as Deputy Director. Again, funding was provided by the Faculty of Arts and The Disciplinary Domain of Humanities and Social Sciences. Additionally, substantial support from the Chancellor’s Strategic Funding was provided for developing a research infrastructure for supporting a digital transformation within the Humanities and Social Sciences. This time around The Faculty of Science and Technology did not provide direct funding – but instead provided important support by donating engineering time in-kind through a collaboration with the Uppmax super computer centre which at the time was a unit within Uppsala University. The initially funded period of activity was given as five years, and the Centre will, at the time of writing (spring 2023), be continuing its operations for several more years, ahead of evaluations and possibly further organisational transformations after 2026.

The current mission of CDHU is to coordinate “the digital transformation of Humanities and Social Sciences” across the university, in relation to three distinct but related areas: 1) research initiation, 2) education (including skill-training), and 3) providing a technical support infrastructure for research in the humanities and social science. This means that CDHU has become a major stakeholder concerning a variety of areas that are essential to the development of Digital Humanities in Uppsala – whether this concerns helping researchers with technical specifications needed for a research application, organising seminars and workshops, or supporting technical implementation and infrastructural deployment of already funded projects. To accommodate this we have now built an organisation with a number of employees working with both administration and with technical support (as research engineers), while also developing procedures and working practices to efficiently meet those goals. Importantly – from the earliest stage of recruiting the team of co-workers, to the actual planning of operations – we conceived of CDHU as a research infrastructure not in a exclusively technical sense, but rather in a socio-technological sense – identifying highly proficient people with expertise in programming, machine learning and AI as the key asset needed for achieving the “productive relationship” between humanities scholars and technology that was called for back in 2015.

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In the multi-year process of growth, reconfiguration and gradual consolidation that we have now described – a movement from Forum, to network to a more clearly institutionalised organisation – each stage built upon the previous one, while a thread of continuity was kept connecting CDHU with its previous history. Even though formally inaugurated on the 1st of January 2021, CDHU has clear roots going back to the activities of the Forum started in 2016, while also acting as the main institutional node within the network that was formed in 2018. The series of metamorphoses described above, however – as always – also reflects a much more complex and detailed history of decision-making as part of the university’s regular power-structures at all levels.

It needs to be stated that the two of us – being both actors and observers of this process – came in somewhere along the middle of the road. In this university
spanning, multi-year policy process, many other actors played important roles and provided invaluable support. As the appointed surveyors of the digital humanities landscape of Uppsala University, we were constantly forced to read this landscape, which included not only the researchers and their needs, but also internal political and bureaucratic processes that often seemed oblique to us. Sometimes we felt akin to the fictional surveyor “K.” in Kafka’s “The Castle”, struggling to understand the situation he has been thrown into, while desperately trying to interpret letters of instruction and contradictory messages arriving from the powers above. This was especially evident at the time when we were confusedly trying to grasp if and how the network would have continuation in some form or another. Luckily, unlike K. we were not alone, and our helpers were actually helpful. We needed to form a “reading community” among the two of us, but also with other people who were more experienced with the peculiarities of the organisation. One of those helpers certainly was Kerstin Rydbeck, at the time having the position as Dean of the Faculty of Arts from which she stepped down in 2020. Kerstin – who has done extensive research on, reading, reading practices and reading communities – provided crucial support and guidance during the process that led to the initiation of CDHU. As the current Chair of the Board of CDHU, Kerstins insights into reading an organisation, reading communities of researchers and reading the political landscape are still at work, as we continue the work of developing digital humanities at Uppsala University.

II

Historically, reading practices and reading communities developed side by side; involving elements such as the press, the modern book market and, as Kerstin Rydbeck remarks, “what Habermas calls the public sphere of Bourgeois society” (Rydbeck 2016: 233). Literary societies and circulating libraries – both examples of communal and shared reading – developed and became widespread in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Swedish word läsecirkel (meaning “reading circle”) is associated with free educational work in small groups composed of people with similar interests. In the 19th century this exemplified a secular and, predominantly, upper class reading culture (Rydbeck 2013).

The historical reading circle prefigures later developments following the digitalization of reading. We now speak about online book lover communities that have millions of members like Goodreads. Aside from virtual communities one can observe a heightened interest from the libraries for social reading which includes reading communities based on digital communication. As Rydbeck notes (Rydbeck 2016: 238)

In 2010 the Swedish county libraries jointly took over the responsibility for the most important Swedish virtual reading community, Bokcirklar.se from the librarian Nina Frid (2012).

Swedish readers, Rydbeck explains, are strongly connected to reading communities such as reading groups, book clubs and reading circles – a tradition which has been around for a long time and continues to be extremely popular. Reading communities can have a variety of functions, both from the participants’ point of
view and a wider social perspective. These activities can promote reading habits and foster connections between members in meaningful ways. They also expand knowledge, create opportunities for development and lead to an improved sense of belonging in society.

Technological innovation in the form of the World Wide Web had its own effect on reading communities, and particularly in a Swedish context. By the end of the 1990s this introduced a new dimension to reading as the Internet made possible new forms of reading communities. At the same time, the study of computerised text and its effects on humanity and society became an important field of study. In Uppsala the project ITLIT (1999-2003) was initiated to study the effects of computerization on literature, with a focus on IT, storytelling and the literary system (see Golub et al 2021) and this was one of the earliest projects to consider these new dimensions and perhaps a project which gave shape and inspired, together with other ones, to the Centre for Digital Humanities.

Today we count numerous and popular online platforms beyond Goodreads. Wattpad, for example, which started in 2006 with 40 million constant users (see Rebora et al 2021, 230–250). Through these social reading platforms it is possible to share the experience of reading the same book as millions of other people, commenting on it, creating a collective experience of reading with your peers as well as people from all walks of life but also the other side of the world. But through the development of the latest Artificial Intelligence technologies the face of the reading community seems to be about to change yet again. In 2023 we may read together with – and form communities with – intelligent machines.

The latest development in AI, involving so-called Large Language Models like ChatGPT, seems to present a qualitative leap in performance and capability that immediately suggest radically new modes of both reading and readership. All Languages models are, at the most basic level, statistical machines reading a “prompt” with human input and predicting the most plausible next word following the last one, given the context previously provided to it. A human user of ChatGPT for instance, encounters a so-called “bot”, that is, an autonomous system of sorts that interacts with a user through a textual (chat) interface. The huge developments made through the latest models in natural language generation mean that the answers are actually “meaningful”, to a great extent. This seemed unthinkable just one or two years earlier. ChatGPT’s generated language is not only sensible and grammatically correct but can provide structured abstract arguments, factually correct information and even creative aesthetic expressions. At the same time the model has no conception of truth or truthfulness and regularly may actually invent a response in interaction with a human user. This is commonly described as hallucination, a term coined by Google AI researchers in 2018 (see Smith 2023).

The question and answer protocol presented by ChatGPT and similar technologies immediately produces a situation in which human and machine exist in a cognitively productive relationship where reading and writing takes place as an exchange between human and non-human. Katherine Hayles, in a recent argument, severs an otherwise commonly held link between consciousness and thinking: cognition is a process that interprets information within contexts that connects it with meaning – whereas interpretation is understood as connected
to choice. But when a choice is made by a machine then a choice refers to “pro-
grammatic decisions among alternative courses of action, much as a tree may
be moving its leaves to maximise sunlight does not imply free will but rather
the implementation of behaviours programmed into the genetic code”, explains
Hayles.

For Hayles, there is no ‘someone’ or ‘something’ that may read and interpret
but instead cognizers and noncognizers. Cognisers are humans and all other
biological life forms, as well as many technical systems; noncognisers are mate-
rial processes and inanimate objects. Choice and decision, and thus possibilities
for interpretation and meaning, may be made by cognisers, and computers are
thought of as such, since they have the ability to interpret language into ‘syn-
thetic image’ as well as to read and understand language and to communicate it
in different ways (Hayles 2017: 22–28).

An important theme in early digital humanities was focused on what could
be understood as the “writing capabilities” of computers, as they were primarily
understood as a form of inscription devices – how highly interactive, hypertextual
media like the Web provided new means for literary production (Hayles 2002).
With the generative capabilities of Large Language Models to create, to translate
and to interpret human language, the focus now seems to be moving towards
actual reading machines. This is a fast-pacing new technology that we only
superficially can grasp at the moment. With the latest version of GPT the user
can provide much longer prompts than previously and the ability of the model to
“remember” previous conversation, as well as to assist the co-interpretation and
understanding of text in interplay with humans. This technology only became
publicly available in 2022 and 2023. However, the public release of GPT3 (2022)
and GPT4 (2023) along with several other similarly sized Large Language Models
to the public meant that a performance leap was achieved that is still, to some
extent, in a nascent state, yet with a lot of possibilities for further development.

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Artificial Intelligence and autonomous systems such as GPT are changing
humanities research but perhaps even humanity itself. But could Machine
Learning replace human cognition, interpretation, meaning making and under-
standing? Katherine Hayles makes a stark distinction between cognition and
interpretation. For Hayles, as we saw above, and as the authors of this chapter
understand her work, OpenAI’s GPT technology is in fact a cogniser but perhaps
not necessarily, always, an accurate interpretator. Kate Crawford reminds us
that AI is neither artificial nor intelligent (see Crawford 2021). Can it be truthful
with information or visuals it provides the human user? For the purpose of
this book chapter the authors decided to run a small experiment based on the
honoured scholar for which this book is dedicated to. We primed GPT4 with some
contextual info on Kerstin Rydbeck’s current projects and publications, and we
received a pretty straightforward analysis of Kerstin’s career-to-date with no
obvious hallucinations:

User (Matts Linström):
Kerstin Rydbeck is a prominent Swedish researcher with a focus on readers’ circles and social reading in the context of contemporary Sweden. As an Associate Professor at the Department of ALM (Archival Science, Library and Information Science, and Museology) at Uppsala University, she has conducted extensive research on the role and significance of reading groups and their impact on the lives of individuals and society at large.

Her research interests include the history and development of reading communities, the social aspects of reading, and the role of public libraries and study organizations in facilitating and promoting these activities. By employing both quantitative and qualitative research methods, Rydbeck seeks to understand the complex landscape of reading groups in Sweden and to identify patterns and trends in their organization and impact on participants.

One of Rydbeck’s key research projects is the sociologically oriented study of reading group activities in contemporary Sweden, with a focus on their extent, geographic distribution, and participants’ demographics. This project includes two stages: a broad quantitative survey, followed by an in-depth qualitative analysis of selected reading groups. The research aims to provide insights into the reading group activities in Sweden today, as well as to compare the Swedish situation with international developments.

In recent years, Rydbeck has been actively involved in the promotion and study of Shared Reading (SR), a method of social reading developed in the United Kingdom by Dr. Jane Davis. She has organized workshops and collaborated with international researchers to introduce SR to Sweden, with the goal of fostering social inclusion and well-being among individuals who might not otherwise engage with reading.

Rydbeck has also participated in international research projects such as ‘The ALM-Field, Digitalization and the Public Sphere (ALM-PUB),” led by OsloMet University and funded by the Research Council of Norway. This project explores the impact of digitization and globalization on the role of ALM institutions as underpinnings of the public sphere.

In addition to her research, Rydbeck has published extensively on her work. Some of her most important publications include:


Through her research and publications, Kerstin Rydbeck has made significant contributions to our understanding of reading communities and their role in fostering social connection and cultural engagement in contemporary Sweden.

We were very pleased that everything provided by the GPT4 above seems to be more or less accurate. Kerstin Rydbeck's bibliographic references, titles and projects seem to be real and described correctly. Interestingly, however, as soon as we slightly changed the question, GPT4 started to hallucinate, i.e. provide us with inaccurate and erroneous information that GPT4 made up on the spot.

User (Matts Lindström):

Thank you, now please provide me with a list of her earliest publications and a short summary focused on the early parts of Kerstin Rydbeck's career.

GPT4:

During the early stages of her career, Kerstin Rydbeck's research focused on the history of reading and the role of reading communities in Sweden. Some of her earliest publications include the following:


   ○ In this article, Rydbeck explores the relationship between public libraries and bookstores in Sweden during the interwar period. She investigates how the two institutions navigated the balance between competition and cooperation in the context of public education.


   ○ This doctoral thesis examines the role of reading circles in the educational work of popular movements during the interwar period in Sweden. It explores the development of reading groups, their
organization, and their impact on participants’ reading habits and personal development.


In this journal article, Rydbeck focuses on Swedish reading circles during the 1930s, analyzing the role they played in shaping readers' tastes and preferences. She also investigates how these reading circles contributed to the broader cultural and educational goals of the time.


This article explores the activities of the Reading Bureau (Läsebyråns) from 1915 to 1938. Rydbeck examines how the Reading Bureau promoted reading circles and contributed to public education in Sweden during this period.

These early publications showcase Rydbeck's dedication to understanding the historical and social aspects of reading communities in Sweden. Her work during this period laid the foundation for her later research, which continues to focus on the impact of reading groups on individuals and society at large.

To return to our argument, while GPT4 is most certainly artificial, it's behaviour is not always very intelligent. The limits of GPT4 and of generative Large Language Models in general are revealed by the fact that the model only was only able to adequately describe Kerstin Rydbeck as a researcher based on information on current projects that we fed it. GPT4 does not have a sense of time on its own, nor a sense of honesty, truthfulness or even research skills of its own. A Large Language Model is programmed to answer with or without knowing something, with or without knowing that it knows something and with no independent research skills. GPT4 was fed correct data but was not equipped to disambiguate between a researcher's early career and current research interests and deliverables. This resulted in a random generation of artificially made research deliverables by Kerstin Rydbeck – the large language model hallucinating her early career based on information on her later career that we provided it with. Could it easily trick the authors of this chapter if and only if they did not know Kerstin's work or had no critical perspectives of their own? Probably. But what does this say about technology and our relation to it as scholars?

To return to Digital Humanities, in a world of fast-paced technology, humanists are yet to understand and to interpret what technological tools and methods may be able to do for humanity and society, beyond research alone. Artificial Intelligence and autonomous systems such as GPT technologies are indeed changing humanities research but also humanists. Machine Learning may be able to replace human cognition, but interpretation, meaning making and understanding is not – not yet at least – about to be replaced. A machine learning algorithm might function as a productive member of a reading circle,
even assist a human in reading and writing – yet its interpretation will only be as good as the human who made it, as good as the data it was made from. To paraphrase Levi-Strauss – technology is good to think with, and this, in a world of fast technological development, is what digital humanities seeks to interpret in a myriad of ways.

References