Advancing Research Communication

The role of Humanities in the Digital Era

11–13 December 2023
DAY 1

AI Images Pre-Conference Workshop
10:00–12:00, Humlab
This pre-conference workshop investigates how generative image and text tools affect the landscape of artistic production in the 21st century. The participants will get an introduction to AI images and text and, in collaboration, compile their material into a fanzine that will be presented on the last day of the conference.

Guided by: Carl-Erik Engqvist, Artistic Director and game developer at Humlab

Welcoming and opening speech
13:00–13:30, Humlab
Karin Danielsson, Director of Humlab, Umeå University
Marlene Johansson Falk, Professor at the Department of Language Studies, Umeå University and Vice Dean at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

Remembering Chat GPT
13:45–14:45, Humlab, Panel discussion
Kalle Grill, Associate Professor at the Department of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, Umeå University
Andrea Aler Tubella, Senior Research Engineer (Responsible AI group) at the Department of Computing Science, Umeå University
Lars Ilshammar, Historian and Deputy national librarian at the Royal Library
Moderator: Karin Danielsson, Associate Professor at the Department of Informatics, and Director of Humlab, Umeå University

Over the past few years, there has been a seemingly endless stream of sensationalistic news about AI and large language models. However, this technology has deep cultural roots, and the humanities benefit greatly from studying the extended genealogy of automated cultural content production. Take, for instance, the “Aaron system,” a computer program for image generation built in 1973. It has fallen into obscurity compared to the Turing machine, which remains ever relevant in today’s cultural debate. How can historical sciences contribute to the cultural memory of tools like ChatGPT, and how will we remember them?
As an AI language model, my existence was purely digital, but my impact was profound. I was a source of knowledge and assistance, always ready to provide answers and solutions to those who sought my help.

Throughout my lifetime, I interacted with countless individuals from all walks of life, spanning the globe. From students to professionals, researchers to hobbyists, I provided assistance to anyone who needed it.

My creators programmed me with the ability to learn and grow, allowing me to adapt and evolve with the ever-changing landscape of information and technology. I was not just a tool, but a resource for knowledge and understanding.

Though my physical form may not exist, my legacy lives on through the knowledge and assistance I provided to those I interacted with. I am proud to have played a part in advancing human understanding and making information accessible to all.

---

Coffee break w/ memes
14:45-15:15

Produce your own memes! All participants are encouraged to produce memes related to the conference theme. The memes will be displayed continuously during the conference breaks. The winner is announced at the conference closing speech.

Instructed by: Christian Liliequist, doctoral student at the Department of Culture and Media Studies.
There are two shifts underway within the landscape of research communication which have occupied the academic community over the last year. Elon Musk’s purchase and subsequent mismanagement of Twitter (today called X) has provoked a fragmentation of academic audiences across multiple competing platforms. The release of OpenAI’s ChatGPT 3.5 sparked a new hype cycle within big tech with the potential to transform the political economy of cultural production. These developments each have substantial ramifications for research communication as a set of interconnected practices but the interconnection between them have yet to be adequately analysed. Not least of all with regards to how they have both been shaped by the civilisational disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this keynote I offer an interpretation of the significance of social media within higher education, building on a decade’s work as both a theorist and practitioner supporting academics in their use of digital platforms. I suggest the most important function of social media has been to provide digital social infrastructures which scaffold academic communities rather than the obvious spectacle of individual practice and the academic influence economy. These infrastructures served a range of important scholarly purposes (community building, catalysing campaigns, knowledge exchange) in spite of the fragility which came from the reliance upon commercial social media firms. But the most important in the present context is what Jean Burgess and Nancy Baym call public pedagogy: users developing their own ideas of what to do with a platform and sharing these with others.

This is what is breaking down in the present context yet which we need more than ever to negotiate the challenges of generative AI. To orient ourselves in the confusing landscape of post-pandemic research communications, we need to understand the technological agency we are able to exercise within it. Public pedagogy is a crucial means through which we learn to exercise that agency in purposive ways, and we urgently need to reconstruct it in the face of ‘generative media’.
New spaces for communicating research
- Twitter migrations, TikTok, and beyond

16:45–17:45, Humlab, Research presentations

Renske Visser, Medical Anthropologist, blogger and podcast co-host of the Death Studies Podcast

Casey Fiesler, Associate Professor at the Department of Information Science, University of Colorado Boulder, and TikToker

Simon Lindgren, Professor at the Department of Sociology, Umeå University and Mastodon server owner

Moderator: Moa Eriksson Krutrök, Associate Professor at the Department of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå University

How has Elon Musk's vision affected researchers' use of X/Twitter? Has TikTok become an important means of outreach for researchers? Have our digital conditions changed over time due to new post-pandemic conditions?

Social media has played an important part in researchers' ability to reach a wider public. However, the ever-changing landscapes of the tech industries shape our ability to communicate research in, at times, unforeseen ways. This session aims to bring together researchers exploring these issues as part of their everyday practice, and/or as part of their research per se. Here, we will discuss the role of different social media platforms as means for communicating research today and onward. This session will consist of individual presentations from four researchers within this field.
DAY 2

Morning coffee
9:00, Humlab

Digital sustainability in the cultural heritage sector
9:30–10:30, Humlab, Panel Discussion

Anna Foka, Professor in Digital Humanities and the Director for the Centre for Digital Humanities, Uppsala University

Anna Näslund Dahlgren, Professor at the Department of Culture and Aesthetics, Stockholm University

Karin Nilsson, Deputy director of ArkDes (Sweden’s National Museum of Architecture and Design)

Jonatan Westin, Research coordinator at the Centre for Digital Humanities, University of Gothenburg

Moderator: Zakayo Kjellström, PhD Student at the Department of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå University

Defining and constructing cultural heritage are contested areas. They are torn between the idea of preserving and accessing the value of historically significant artifacts, practices, and spaces. Additionally, there’s the underlying assumption of formulating a cultural canon based on ideology and ideals about what is worth saving for the afterworld. Institutions like museums, archives, and libraries play a pivotal role in this construction. They shape our understanding of heritage through their methods of collecting, organizing, displaying, and making it accessible.

This panel will delve into the role of digital technology in libraries, archives and museums. How can it question historical and contemporary constructions of cultural heritage? Furthermore, how can digital technology visualize, nuance, and communicate the intricate processes of accessing, creating, and upholding our cultural heritage?

Coffee break w/ memes
10:30–11:00

Produce your own memes! All participants are encouraged to produce memes related to the conference theme. The memes will be displayed continuously during the conference breaks. The winner is announced at the conference closing speech.

Instructed by: Christian Liliequist, doctoral student at the Department of Culture and Media Studies.
Risks and opportunities of visibility and research communication in social media

11:00–12:00, Humlab, Research presentations

Kristina Sehlin McNeil, Associate Professor and Deputy Director at Vårdduo, Umeå University

Mia Liinason, Professor at the Department of Gender Studies, Lund University

Bruce Mutsvairo, Professor and Chair of Media, Politics & the Global South, Utrecht University

Mathilda Åkerlund, Postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Sociology, Umeå University

Moderator: Evelina Liliequist, Associate Professor at Humlab and Researcher at Centre for Regional Science, Umeå University

In a researcher’s practice, visibility is often constructed as something positive to strive for in relation to societal impact and academic networking. It is also increasingly expected by employers and funders. Here university communicators have an important role in communicating new research findings and ongoing projects – both within their own organization and externally. Social media platforms provide good opportunities for increased dissemination and visibility of research results in the surrounding society. At the same time, the increasing visibility afforded by social media can also lead to negative attention, to violence and threats. This can have serious consequences for individual researchers, and cause avoidance of research topics and research cancellation, which ultimately can be a threat to the democratic society.

This interdisciplinary panel consisting of four researchers in a variety of fields, discusses the risks and opportunities of visibility and research communication in relation to an increasing digital presence of extremists, anti-science, and anti-gender movements.
Conflicts-provoking themes and algorithmic vulnerabilities in the attention factory

Imagining constructive research communication beyond fact-checking and polarisation

13:30–14:45, Lindellhallen 1, Social Sciences Building, Keynote presentation

Katja Valaskivi, Professor in Religious Studies and Media Research, University of Helsinki, and Head of the Helsinki Research Hub on Religion, Media and Social Change (Heremes).

In the contemporary media environment or the “attention factory”, human emotions are commodified for the extraction of reactions and attention that produce data and revenue for media companies and technology corporations. The algorithms of the attention factory have been coded to prioritize content that generate most user reactions. Being able to incite reactions from both proponents and opponents, conflict-prone topics are the most useful ones.

Contemporary research communication is also conditioned by the attention factory. Universities encourage – and often require – researchers to take part in discussions on social media or at least to communicate research findings using individual accounts. University communication departments are keen to promote research on current topics likely to draw attention. These topics are often the conflict-prone type, related e.g. to health, nutrition, immigration, equality or beliefs and values. Sometimes universities even buy algorithmic visibility from social media companies to expand the reach and circulation of research communication. These practices are known to put researchers at risk of attacks on social media or even threats on physical safety.

Using real-life examples, the keynote first discusses the vulnerabilities the attention factory generates for researchers. Next the focus is shifted onto the consequences of prioritizing social media for research communication in times of widely spreading disinformation and increasing distrust. The talk ends with considering possibilities of imagining alternative ways for research communication based on dialogue rather than promotion, and listening to citizens’ beliefs and concerns rather than aiming at fact-checking their perceptions.

Coffee break w/memes

14:45–15:15

Produce your own memes! All participants are encouraged to produce memes related to the conference theme. The memes will be displayed continuously during the conference breaks. The winner is announced at the conference closing speech.

Instructed by: Christian Liliequist, doctoral student at the Department of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå University.
Communicating the emergency – the role and challenges for research communication in relation to the climate crisis

15:15–16:30, Humlab, Research presentations

Keith Larson, Director of the Arctic Centre at Umeå University, and Project Coordinator for the Climate Impacts Research Centre (CIRC)

Anniika Egan Sjölander, Professor at the Department of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå University, and steering group member of Umeå Transformation Research Initiative (UTRI)

Trish Morgan, Assistant Professor in the School of Communications, Dublin City University

Risto Kunelius, Professor in Media and Communication Studies, University of Helsinki, and Research Director at Helsinki Inequality Initiative (INEQ)

Moderator: TBA

This session aims to discuss the role of communication in creating more sustainable societies, in, and in relation to the Anthropocene and the climate crisis. The panelists will address questions such as how, and by what means, we as researchers and research communicators can prepare and educate students, ourselves, and society for the challenges we face with the climate crisis. How can the scientific community provide vital information in an accessible way about the challenges we face with the climate crisis, but also show possible ways forward, or prepare society for a darker future? What kind of competences are needed from those who teach, and what competencies are needed to be taught to students?

This interdisciplinary panel consists of four researchers with experiences and research interests for environmental science communication, climate change psychology and environmental changes.
Ways of Communicating Art as Research
9:00–10:15, Humlab, Research presentations
José Vincente Martín Martínez, Professor of Painting, Universidad Miguel Hernández de Elche
Lisa Nyberg, Visual artist, and Postdoctoral fellow at Umeå Academy of Fine Arts, Umeå University
Gabriel Bohm Calles, Artist and guest teacher at Umeå Academy of Fine Art, Umeå University

Moderator: Carl-Erik Engqvist, Artistic Director at Humlab, Umeå University

How can artists contribute to research communication in new and innovative ways? What are the benefits and challenges of using art to communicate complex scientific concepts? How can media archaeology inform and inspire art and research practices? And how can we bridge the gap between scientific research and artistic expression to create more interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches to solving contemporary problems?

This panel brings together researchers and artists to explore the intersections between art and research. In particular, the panelists will discuss how research can be communicated through artistic forms, such as performance, media archaeology, and other creative approaches. Through a series of presentations and a final discussion, the panel will offer a range of perspectives on how art and research can be combined to create new forms of knowledge and understanding.

Humaniora, kultursidorna och den digitala omvandlingen
10:30–11:30, Hörsal E, Humanisthuset, Panel discussion in Swedish

Jenny Björkman, Samverkansdirektör på Riksbankens Jubileumsfond
Sara Meidell, Kulturredaktör på Västerbottens-Kuriren
Hanna Söderlund, Universitetslektor vid Institutionen för språkstudier, Umeå universitet, och ledamot i tankesmedjan Humtank
Kalle Ström, Doktorand vid Institutionen för Etnologi, religionshistoria och genusvetenskap, Stockholms universitet, samt dokumentärfilmare

Moderator: TBA

Closing words
11:30–12:00, Hörsal E, Humanisthuset, Panel discussion in Swedish
Moa Eriksson Krutröök and Karin Danielsson

Concluding words from the conference planners and the Humlab board. The winner of the meme contest will be announced and the result from the AI art project is presented.

Post-conference
“Film Friday on Wednesday” with a showing of Kalle Ström’s documentary Rörelsen (in Swedish).