

DISCUSSION

AN EXPERIENCED ETHNOLOGIST'S THOUGHTS ON DIGITALIZATION, OPEN ACCESS, AND OPEN DATA AS NEW RESEARCH ASSETS

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During the last two years of Covid pandemic we have seen the issues related to digitalization, Open Access, and Open Data (meaning open access to research results and research data) become more salient. Scientists have been unable to access archives and libraries in person, or to meet colleagues and students in physical meetings in the form of seminars, conferences or congresses. Distance has become the key word. Digital contacts have become the norm that shapes the scientific working day. In this subjectively oriented article, I intend to describe and comment on the new situation scientists have to face. These comments are based on my own background as a scientist since the 1970s. Scientists need to recognize the new opportunities that are offered by the new digital tools. This became particularly important in the conditions of the sudden pandemic outbreak in the early 2020s. What can we, scientists, learn from this development?

OPEN ACCESS AND INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS

I was educated as an ethnologist during the late 1960s, and defended my doctoral thesis in 1972, and then served as an associate professor during the remainder of the 1970s. The only means to present academic accomplishments was through analogue publications. My career as a scientist continued in Bergen, Norway, and then as a professor at Uppsala University from 1987.

While working on my thesis, I learned about the importance of establishing an international professional network. This led to many contacts with both West and East German ethnological institutions from the 1970s onwards. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 occurred during my professorship in

Uppsala. This led to the reestablishment of the three Baltic nations – Estonians, Lithuanians, and Latvians – as independent states. Being the head of the Department of Ethnology at Uppsala University, it was a natural step to assist in the reestablishment of the institutions of ethnology and folkloristics that had been discontinued during the Soviet era, from the 1940s onwards. Young Baltic scientists were invited to participate in a number of Nordic postgraduate courses in ethnology. Some of these scientists learnt Swedish so as to be able to participate in the scientific debates in the Nordic countries.

From the mid-1990s onwards, the focus for these scientists shifted away from learning Swedish. Instead, they turned towards the Anglo-Saxon world, preferring to work in ever-better English. This had not been possible during the Soviet era when contacts with the West were regarded as a political threat. I saw the same Anglo-Saxon and anthropological change in Sweden during the 1970s.

Prior to this, contacts with German ethnology had been more important, and I have maintained these contacts throughout the following years along with my connections with Anglo-Saxon anthropology.¹ The historic dimension has been more important in German ethnology than in Anglo-Saxon anthropology. Nordic ethnology is not common in the Anglo-Saxon world, whereas anthropology and folkloristics attract more interest – particularly the latter in the US.

One indication of this growing interest in contacts with the Anglo-Saxon world was the establishment of the Open Access academic journal *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* in Tartu, Estonia, in 1996, published in English. Publishing in digital form as was done in Tartu was not known in ethnology in Uppsala, but I was very much impressed by what I saw. The Baltic states had suddenly overtaken Sweden in the field of new technical tools in ethnological research. I have had several opportunities to publish in this journal.²

Online publication allows scientists to reach the world fast and develop new research networks at no cost. It is possible for me to see how many views and downloads my texts have received/attractioned. Scientists from the whole world have contacted me regarding these texts.

In 1997 I moved from Uppsala to Oslo to work at the University of Oslo as professor of ethnology. This helped me to develop broader contacts with Scandinavian research outside Sweden. As an ethnologist, I find it important to understand developments outside Sweden and to participate in international projects and networks. In the early 2000s, the issue was raised in Norway whether research which had received government funding should be made freely accessible to society at large.³

Today, publications should appear in both print and digital form. In the beginning, this raised objections from some scientists. It might make publishers less interested in publishing research reports since they might make less money. During

the two first decades of the twenty-first century, I published nine books through the publishing house Novus Press in Oslo.⁴ The empirical material was collected from Norway as well as Sweden. Six of these publications are written in English in order to develop international research contacts outside the Nordic countries.

During the years I have been working at the University of Oslo, a digital register has been established, covering all peer-reviewed research reports as soon as they are published in printed form or digitally.⁵

During the 2010s international journals made a growing number of offers to publish articles soon after the peer review. This meant a certain cost for the author. In 2014, I published two articles in the *Open Journal of Social Sciences* (JSS).⁶

When in 2011 I became senior professor at the University of Oslo, I became a member of Strömstad Academy. The Academy is meant primarily for scientists who have left their university positions. In the same year, the Academy started a digital series of reports, *Acta Academia Stromstadiensis* (AAS). Fellows of the Academy can publish, without any cost, reports which are peer reviewed (anonymously).⁷ Since 2016 I have been responsible for editing or co-editing five interdisciplinary anthologies which have been issued in digital as well as hard cover book form by the Strömstad Publishing House, a non-profit organization focussed on spreading current research information.⁸

I was elected a Science Fellow of the Royal Gustavus Adolphus Academy for Swedish Folk Culture in 1987. The Academy issues the journals *ARV: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore*, *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, *RIG: Kulturhistorisk Tidskrift*, *Saga och Sed*, and *Svenska landsmål och Svenskt folkliv*. The latest issues are freely available as PDF files. Earlier issues are being digitalized. The series *Acta Academiae Regiae Gustavi Adolphi* has been issued in 162 volumes from 1933 and is now digitalized.⁹ Responsibility has been vested with the Academy's Secretary Fredrik Skott and also Gunnar Ternhag.

The Folk Life Archives in Lund also include digitalized publications in the series *Skrifter från Folklivsarkivet i Lund*.¹⁰ This digitalization of old publications makes the ethnological history (which tends to be forgotten among today's ethnologists) easily available, enriching their work and contributing to the universities' third task, giving a broad public access to ongoing research.

The research pursued at universities is largely financed through taxpayers' money, which is a strong argument for making the results available to the public as it contributes to the financing of that research. It is my impression that at least humanistic scientists do not envisage making money through publishing. Instead, they focus on reaching their peers as well as the interested public. Research findings in ethnology should, when published, be written in a language that is interesting and easy to understand.

It is also becoming increasingly more important to publish reports in English so as to reach far outside the borders of Sweden and the Nordic countries, in books and English-language journals such as *Ethnologia Scandinavica* and *Arv: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore*. I have spent an increasing share of my time on these matters. Digital publication becomes ever more important in this context, allowing me to broaden my contacts with scientists working in many different parts of the world. International databases such as *researchgate.net* and *academia.edu* give me continuous updates on how my books and articles have been noted by scientists around the world.

OPEN DATA – ACCESSIBLE RESEARCH MATERIAL

It is important that a scientist can publish research findings digitally, but equally important is that research findings made by other scholars are becoming accessible on the web. It is a very positive development that cultural science archives have arranged digitally published older material. This rarely causes difficulties with regard to research ethics and respect for the personal integrity of the informants. The situation is different with current material on sensitive issues. I faced that difficulty when working on the answers in questionnaire 236 of the Nordic Museum, under the heading “Alcohol in my life”. The questions were posed to informants in the early 2000s, and the answers contained information about the misuse of alcohol that could not be published in a digital form. In a letter dated 23 February 2022, the archivist told me that “due to the sensitive – and the relatively current nature” of the information, it could not be published. Matters concerning sensitive issues of a relatively current date raise the importance of anonymity or pseudonymization of material in cultural science archives before digital publishing. This is also valid for the publication of ethnological studies based on the collection of data through interviews. At the same time, making archival material available saves a tremendous amount of time in collecting information as compared to my own experiences as a young scientist. I had to travel to each archive, spending days searching for and then transcribing or copying material. Digital publishing became even more important during the pandemic, which made physical visits impossible.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND THE SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSE

The scientific discourse has been forced to find new approaches during the pandemic. Thanks to Zoom meetings, the individual scientist has been able to participate in conferences worldwide – without having to travel. This saves both

time and money and makes it possible to participate in seminars, conferences, webinars, and theses defences in and outside of Sweden, sometimes all in the same day. Scientists from different institutions can all participate in seminars without having to leave their own department or their home. Requests for travel financing have been far fewer. I hope that there will be a large number of Zoom meetings once the pandemic has abated. The new digital tools have helped widen the scientific contacts, thus broadening the scientific discourse. It is my impression from digital seminars and conferences that willingness to participate and openness remains at least as high as during physical meetings around a table in a seminar. During 2022, I have experienced a hybrid form, with a few participants being physically present and others participating digitally via Zoom. This widens contacts outside one's own department and I hope that this will continue.

A LOOK AT THE FUTURE

I have written this article based upon my own research experiences over many years, to emphasize the immense value that digitalization offers for obtaining material and maintaining contacts with the scientific world. I find that a great deal of value is added through Zoom meetings between scientists from different institutions and nations to discuss research reports and themes. Regardless of whether the scientist sits alone at home or at work, they are able to interact with others across the world both visually and aurally. You can hear and see well in front of the screen. The sense of distance actually diminishes and the perspectives widen. Digitalization also offers new means of communication with a broad public. This can be achieved through Open Access and presentations through webinars. The rapid development of Open Data over the last few years will, I am certain, continue on a large scale to the benefit of science. I can see no negative consequences for science in such a development.

NOTES

¹ On 4–7 April 2022, I participated on Zoom in the 43rd congress arranged by Deutsche Gesellschaft für empirische Kulturwissenschaft on the theme “Zeit: Zur Temporalität von Kultur”. The issue of Open Data was raised in some of the presentations.

² This touches upon my research within a network which studies conceptions and rituals connected with dying and death (Gustavsson 2013). It is possible to obtain a printed version of the different volumes.

³ Swedish contributors now have the same obligations as the Norwegian ones.

⁴ The agreement with this commercial publishing house during the 2010s was that I was allowed to publish my texts as PDF files one year after the printed version had come out.

- ⁵ The research archive is available at duo.uio.no. DUO stands for the Digital Library of the University of Oslo. Most of the publications can be reached as PDF files.
- ⁶ The article on cycling as an innovation in Sweden and Norway (Gustavsson 2014a) has been downloaded 4,580 times since the time of publishing. Another article under the heading “Swedish Belief Narratives on Afterlife Earlier and Today” has been downloaded 3,962 times in 2022 (Gustavsson 2014b).
- ⁷ One of my studies concerned alcohol-related contacts over the Swedish-Norwegian national border from a historical perspective (Gustavsson 2018).
- ⁸ The most recent anthology (2021) was a study of pandemics. I studied several cholera outbreaks in the nineteenth century (Gustavsson 2021).
- ⁹ This relates to the anthology titled *Döden speglad i aktuell kulturforskning* (Death Reflected in Current Cultural Research), edited by me (2009).
- ¹⁰ It contains my doctoral thesis titled *Kyrktagningsleden i Sverige*, which is dedicated to the custom of churching of women after childbirth in Sweden and was published in 1972.

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