DIGITAL EXISTENCE
Memory, Meaning, Vulnerability

SIGTUNA STIFTELSEN

Conference at the Sigtuna Foundation October 26 – 28, 2015

A conference about what it means to be human in the digital age
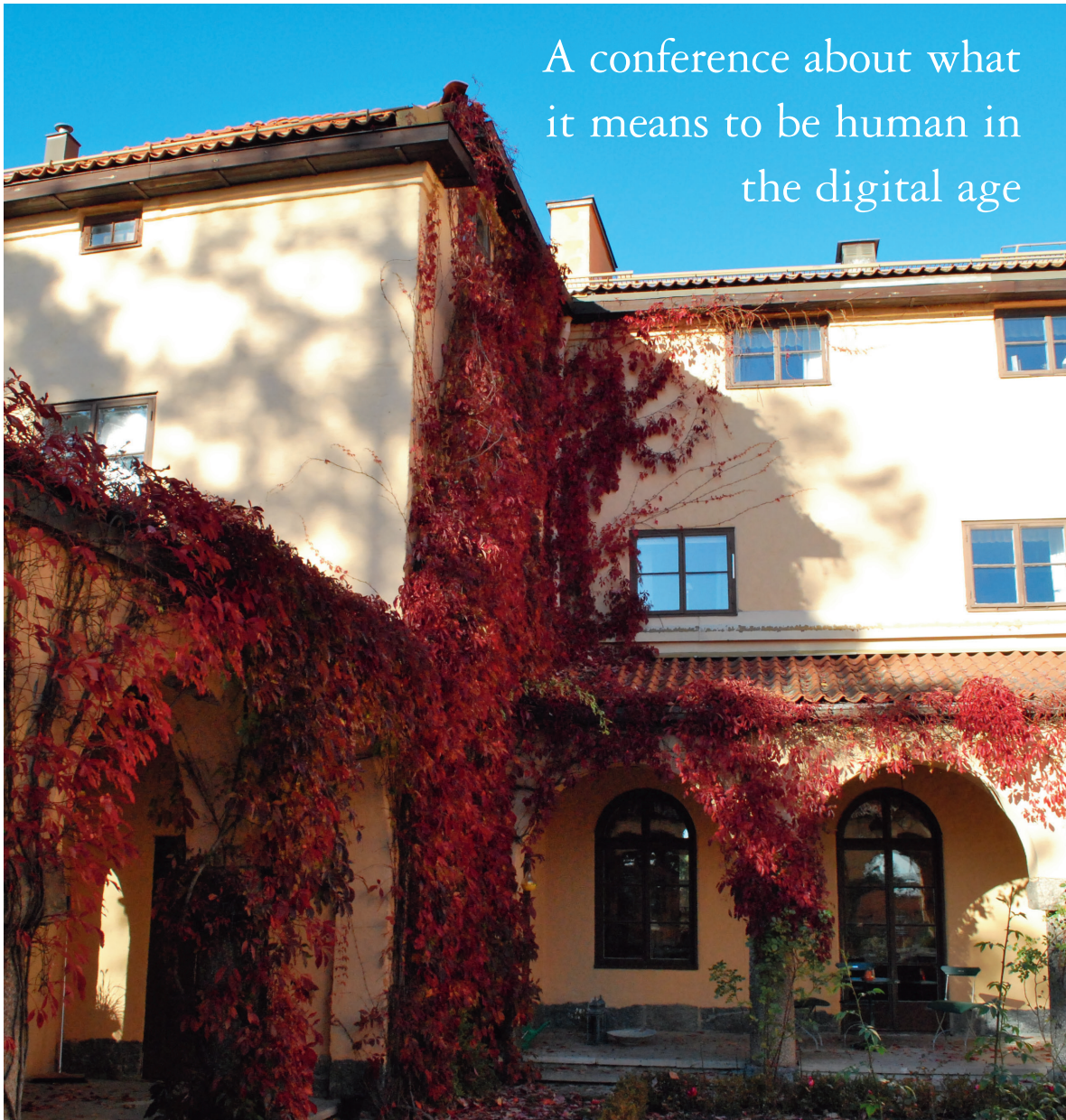
DIGITAL EXISTENCE: Memory, Meaning, Vulnerability

What does it mean to be a human being in the digital age? How are the basic conditions for humankind negotiated and understood in cultures of connectivity? Existential questions about meaning and purpose, who I am, and how I am presented before others, are more and more entwined with our digital lives. We inhabit a material media ecology in which technologies are enmeshed in our memories and identities, and our lives are profoundly technologized. Digital media have become places where people share and explore existential issues in connection with loss and trauma. Our communication culture, as an existential terrain, thus offers new spaces for the exploration of existential themes and of the profundity of our lives. But the speed of the transformations of our technologized existence and the affordances as well as vulnerabilities created by those transformations also raise new existential challenges.

Digital Existence brings together scholars working in fields where a burgeoning exploration of the existential dimensions of digitalisation is visible today; media philosophy, media memory studies, death studies, internet studies, and the field of media, religion and culture. In framing digital cultures existentially, particular emphasis is placed on the keywords memory, meaning and vulnerability.

The conference is organized by DIGMEX – a network within the research programme 'Existential Terrains: Memory and Meaning in Cultures of Connectivity' headed by Amanda Lagerkvist, Associate Professor and Wallenberg Academy Fellow, at the Department of Media Studies at Stockholm University, in collaboration with the Sigtuna Foundation and the Nordic Network for the Study of Media and Religion. The Existential Terrains programme is funded by the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation, the Marcus and Amalia Wallenberg Foundation, and Stockholm University.

Life, Death, and Time on the Digital Ship
John Durham Peters

Digital media have become the deep background for life on earth. Not only do many of us run our lives through digital databases, but so do oceans, forests, herds, and the clouds. Many commentators have observed how new and unprecedented this all is. Perhaps. In this lecture, I want to point to the deep concerns digital media raise. Digital media do not take us into uncharted waters: they revive the most basic problems of complex societies and cast the oldest troubles of civilization into relief. They also raise the oldest human questions about life, death, time, and meaning. Media studies should be understood as a form of philosophical anthropology, a meditation on the human condition. The effort to capture time and the simultaneous failure to do so constitute the history of media. Every new medium raises existential questions, and in our age, new media do so at both the individual and the species level. This lecture explores what it means to live aboard the digital ship, and how new media reconfigure-and do not reconfigure-the oldest textures of the human condition. Examples may be drawn from literature, religion, and ecology.

John Durham Peters is the A. Craig Baird Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa and in 2013 – 2014 was the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation Fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. He has published widely on media history and theory, and in fields adjoining media studies such as anthropology, music, philosophy, and religious studies, and social theory. He is the author of many articles and essays, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (1999), *Courting the Abyss: Free Speech and the Liberal Tradition* (2005), and *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (2015) with the University of Chicago Press.

Archive Me! Media, Memory, Uncertainty
Andrew Hoskins

Sharing without sharing: the digitally-fostered values of unbridled commentary, so-called 'open access', and the embrace of network narcissism, all perpetuate memory's uncertainties through the self's media entanglements. The remembering and forgetting of self and society under digital conditions is today less a matter of recollection, and more one of search. At least a greater reliance on human recollection once offered a degree of certainty in its relatively steady change, decline and dissipation, including with its embedding in the delimiting finitude of the media of the day ('decay time'). In contrast, search is premised on a model of the pursuit of total memory, where the ease and the compulsion of the recording of everything and the entanglement of the network ego obfuscate the precariousness of future access. At the same time, although preservation and remembering are not the same, the accumulation of digital content awaiting prospective emergence renders a generation perpetually spooked by an almighty dormant memory. The likelihood of potentially transcendent missed or hidden or thought deleted images, videos, emails etc. emerging to transform what was known or thought to be known about a person, place or event constitutes a spectacular uncertainty for the future evolution of memory and of history. In this presentation I map some of the developments of these twin uncertainties and consider the prospects of a return to a memory of greater security.

Andrew Hoskins is Interdisciplinary Research Professor in the College of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow. His research connects multiple aspects of emergent digital society – media, memory, conflict, security, and privacy – to explore holistically the interplay of contemporary media and memory ecologies. His latest book (with John Tulloch) is *Risk and Hyperconnectivity: Media and Memories of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2016). Hoskins and Tulloch argue for an interdisciplinary dialogue between three major intellectual paradigms that have dealt separately with risk events: risk theory, neoliberalization theory and connectivity theory. Hoskins is founding Editor-in-Chief of the Sage journal *Memory Studies*, founding Co-Editor of the Palgrave Macmillan book series *Memory Studies*, and founding Co-Editor of the Routledge book series *Media, War & Security*. Twitter @andrewhoskins

Ritual Existence –
Examining the Ethics of Public Mourning in a Digital Age
Johanna Sumiala

In this presentation my goal is to discuss public mourning in the framework of contemporary ritual theory. In particular, I will re-visit Catherine Bell's work on ritualization and bring it to a dialogue with the study of the mediatization of death and mourning in the current digital age. Special emphasis is given to Lilie Chouliaraki's work on the ethics of distant suffering and its application to the study of ritualization in public mourning. In addition to theoretical discussion, I provide a brief empirical illustration of the issue. I analyse in particular the events of Charlie Hebdo in Paris 2015 and the ritualization of public mourning carried out in the context of digital media. In conclusion, I argue that this intellectual venture of expanding the study of public mourning through the lens of Bell's ritual theory not only challenges our scholarly understanding of ritualization of public mourning (what it is and what it does) in the present day media-saturated digital world, but it also broadens our analytical thinking about public mourning as a moral practice with profound ethical implications. This issue of the ethics of public mourning and the related asymmetries of hierarchies and power in mediatized ritualization definitely deserve more attention as the scholarship of media, religion, and culture continues to grasp the complex intersections between transcultural, translocal and transnational religious and political phenomenon like Charlie Hebdo and its ritual communication in a digital age.

Johanna Sumiala is a Senior Research Fellow and vice director at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies and Adjunct Professor (Docent) in the Department of Social Research/Media and Communication studies at the University of Helsinki. Her special fields include media sociology, media anthropology, mediatization of social life, media, religion and culture. She is a co-editor of *School Shootings: Mediatized Violence in a Global Age* (Emerald, 2013) and author of *Media and Ritual: Death, Community and Everyday Life* (Routledge, 2013). She has published in journals such as *Media, Communication and Society, Social Anthropology, Communication, Culture & Critique*, and *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

Program

Monday 26 October (Venue: Stora salen)

11.00	Registration
12.00	Lunch
13.00	Welcome to the Sigtuna Foundation by Director Alf Linderman **OPENING** of the conference by Astrid Söderbergh Widding, Vice-Chancellor of Stockholm University
13.15	'**Digital Existence'** Introductory lecture by Amanda Lagerkvist
14.00	'**Life, Death, and Time on the Digital Ship'** Keynote lecture by John Durham Peters, University of Iowa **Response** by Mia Lövheim, Uppsala University
15.15	Coffee
15.45	Open discussion Mini break
16.30	**Paper session I: Digital Vulnerabilities** Chair: Liv Ingeborg Lied, Norwegian School of Theology

TITLE	*The Data-Driven Life: Existential Correlates of 'Knowing' in the Digital Surveillance Society*
PRESENTER	Sun-ha Hong, Annenberg School of Communication, Pennsylvania
TITLE	*"A Window onto Reality": Vulnerability and Meaning-making in Blogs about Mental Health Issues*
PRESENTER	Anna Johansson, Umeå University
TITLE	*Being Tagged – Tagged Being: From Networked Images to Digital Exuviae*
PRESENTER	Paul Frosh, Hebrew University of Jerusalem
TITLE	*Religious Vulnerability and Participation in Digital Environments:* *A Comparative Scandinavian Study*
PRESENTER	Knut Lundby, University of Oslo
	Respondent: John Durham Peters

18.00	End of day's sessions
19.30	Dinner

Tuesday 27 October (Venue: Stora salen)

09.00   **'Archive Me! Media, Memory, Uncertainty'** Keynote lecture by
Andrew Hoskins, Glasgow University
Response by Amit Pinchevski, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

10.30   Coffee

11.00   **Paper session 2: Memory, Meaning, (Im)materiality**
Chair: Evelina Lundmark, Uppsala University

TITLE   *Dead Matter: The Meaning of Iconic Corpses*
PRESENTER   Margaret Schwarz, Fordham University

TITLE   *Heat Death: The Thermodynamics of Media, Memory and Mind in the Age of Big Data*
PRESENTER   Alexander Wilson, Aarhus University

TITLE   *Our Digital Possessions, in Life & Death*
PRESENTER   Stacey Pitsillides, Goldsmith's College

TITLE   *In Bits, Bytes and Stone: Making Sense of Digital Afterlife, Remembrance and Heritage Designs*
PRESENTER   Jakob Borrits Sabra, Aalborg University

Respondents: Amanda Lagerkvist, Stockholm University &
Anna Reading, King's College

12.30   Lunch

13.30   **Paper session 3: Media, Religion, Existence**
Chair: Mia Lövheim, Uppsala University

TITLE   *Beyond Religion to Human Existence: A Shift in the Study of Media, Religion and Culture?*
PRESENTER   Peter Horsfield, RMIT University, Melbourne

TITLE   *The Consecration of Information: A Humanist Exegesis of Kopimism*
PRESENTER   Jonas Andersson Schwarz, Södertörn University College

TITLE   *The NRK Cross-Case as a Catalyser for Existential Anxieties*
PRESENTER   Mona Abdel-Fadil, University of Oslo

TITLE   *Seeking for (a) Sense of Being in Attention: The Church of Finland and 'Existential Crises' of the Digital Age*
PRESENTER   Katja Valaskivi, University of Tampere

Respondents: Stig Hjarvard, Copenhagen University & Tomas Axelson, Dalarna University College

15.00	Coffee

15.30	**Paper Session 4: Being Human: Being-in-and-with the Digital World** Chair: Tim Hutchings, Stockholm University

TITLE	*The Rights of Distributed Selves*
PRESENTER	Vincent Miller, University of Kent

TITLE	*Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era: Time to Shift from the Figure of a Rational Subject to that of a Relational Self*
PRESENTER	Nicole Dewandre, European Commission

TITLE	*Deconstructing the Path Towards "Homo Digitalis"*
PRESENTER	Britt Östlund, KTH, School for Technology and Health

TITLE	*ENTRE NOUS: Is Levinas Privileging the Analogue?*
PRESENTER	Per-Anders Forstorp, Linköping University

Respondents: Liv Ingeborg Lied & Amit Pinchevski

17.00	End of day 2 – time for collegial meetings and dialogues

17.00 – 18.00	**ADVISORY BOARD MEETING EXISTENTIAL TERRAINS. (Venue: Rådsalen)**

19.30	Dinner

Wednesday 28 October (Venue: Stora salen)

8.30	**'Ritual Existence: Examining the Ethics of Public Mourning in a Digital Age'** Keynote lecture by Johanna Sumiala, University of Helsinki **Response** by Anna Reading, King's College

10.00	Coffee

10.30	**Paper session 5: Death Online** Chair: Michael Westerlund, Stockholm University

TITLE	*"They were asking for it": Destruction, humor and shame in online gaming memorials*
PRESENTER	Anna Haverinen, University of Turku

TITLE	*Don't Rest in Peace: Cross Media Uses in Everyday Practices of Grief and Commemoration on Children's Graves and Online Memorial Sites*
PRESENTER	Kjetil Sandvik & Dorthe R Christensen, Copenhagen University & Aarhus University

TITLE	*Social Media as Resources in Bereaved Parents' Grief Process.*
PRESENTER	Dick Kasperowski, Gothenburg University

| **TITLE** | *Digital Afterlife: Ex-Yugoslav Pop-Cultural Icons and Social Media* |
| **PRESENTER** | Martin Pogačar, Institute for Culture and Memory Studies, Slovenia |

Respondent: Tony Walter, University of Bath

12.00	Lunch
13.00	**ENDNOTE** by Charles M. Ess, University of Oslo
	Discussion
14.30	Roundup comments, publication and future conference plans
	Amanda Lagerkvist & Mia Lövheim
	Conference Ends
15.00	Coffee
	Project and network meetings

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Stiftelse

STIFTELSEN
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WALLENBERGS
MINNESFOND

Stockholm
University

SIGTUNA STIFTELSEN

372
HOTELL 025

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