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## Relocating the owl of wisdom

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# Relocating the owl of wisdom

## Encyclopaedias in a life-historical perspective

Johanna Rivano Eckerdal & Olof Sundin

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### Abstract

*Artikeln undersöker människors förhållningssätt till uppslagsverk och encyklopedier i ett livshistoriskt perspektiv under en period när encyklopedier har genomgått dramatiska förändringar. En frågelista som skickats till fasta så kallade meddelare knutna till Folklivsarkivet i Lund har använts som metod. Svaren har analyserats med hjälp av post-humanistisk teori. Analysen visar de sätt som tryckta encyklopedier har spelat en roll i meddelarnas liv. Verken var dyra och fungerade som försäkringar för ett gott medelklassliv för familjen. Att makar ibland hade olika syn på uppslagsverks värde visar på förändringen som skett både av kvinnors ekonomiska villkor och av bokpriser. Böckernas materialitet är väsentlig i berättelserna även om de ofta skrymmande verken idag är svåra att husera när information kan nås online. Encyklopedier associeras till tryckta verk även om de flesta meddelarna idag använder Google. De tryckta verken har flyttats till kallare eller sommarhus där deras oföränderlighet gör dem aktuella på nytt.*

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Encyclopaedias are artefacts that both define and are defined by the culture in which they are produced and used. Encyclopaedias mirror the time of their creation, at the same time as understanding and use of encyclopaedias is tied to both time and space. From the 19th century until the present day encyclopaedias have changed from exclusive and costly collections of books kept mainly in libraries and other institutions, into affordable collections occupying a natural place in many homes and then nowadays, into free online services available almost everywhere and at any time. Thus, both the significance ascribed to encyclopaedias and the place assigned to them has changed over time. Nevertheless they have never failed to exert an important cultural influence. Yet interestingly, the question of how encyclopaedias are being experienced in everyday life has remained unexplored. Earlier studies on encyclopaedias have mainly focused on print encyclopaedias as historical artefacts and studied their publishing in a socio-historical context (e.g. Collison, 1964; Yeo, 2001). Despite apparent methodological difficulties, some attempts have also been made to discuss their use in the past (Blair, 2010). Research on today's dominant encyclopaedia, *Wikipedia*, differs from past research on encyclopaedias (e.g. Mesgari et al., 2015), both regarding the vast number of studies done and with regard to the fact that more humanities-oriented approaches which were typically adopted by previous research on encyclopaedias are underrepresented.

In this article we address the questions of how encyclopaedias as cultural artefacts are used and understood in everyday life and how the media-material changes of encyclopaedias have influenced this use and understanding. To answer these questions we have used a qualitative questionnaire sent to volunteer contributors to the Folk life Archive at Lund University, Sweden.

### **Encyclopaedias: a brief background of the contemporary history**

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* online describes encyclopaedias as a "reference work that contains information on all branches of knowledge or that treats a particular branch of knowledge in a comprehensive manner" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2015-05-01). The desire to compile or summarize all available knowledge goes as far back as Speusippos' Encyclopaedia from ca. 370 BC (Collison, 1964), but the encyclopaedic tradition that we have come to know during the 20th century - and which is of interest here - has its roots in the Enlightenment, not least in the famous French *Encyclopédie* (1717–1783) (Yeo, 2001). Ann Blair (2010, p. 260) describes the *Encyclopédie* as having "established the norm for the dominant modern conception of the genre as a multivolume, multiauthor, illustrated, alphabetized reference book". In *Wikipedia* this long tradition of encyclopaedic knowledge production is continued and combined with a changed view on expertise and information control (Haider & Sundin, 2010). The development from expensive printed encyclopaedias to the freely accessible *Wikipedia* also reflects a change from encyclopaedias as a part of high culture to encyclopaedias as a part of popular culture.

The production of professionally produced general encyclopaedias demands huge resources and such endeavours have often been seen as a matter of national importance. For instance, the Swedish *Nationalencyklopedin* was established in the 1980s by initiative of and with initial financial support from the Swedish government. The Norwegian *Store Norske Leksikon* is partly government-financed. The growth of the Internet has dramatically changed the conditions for publishing encyclopaedias. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, probably the best known example of the encyclopaedic tradition, may serve as an example. Susan Clark portrayed its recent history in the

following way: In 1994 Encyclopaedia Britannica published its first CD-ROM edition. The same year *Britannica Online* was released for universities and the year after for high schools and libraries. In 1997 *Britannica Internet Guide* was launched, a quality controlled web catalogue to enhance the online visibility of their product. In 1999 the entire encyclopaedia was made freely accessible online and in 2001 the complete online version of the encyclopaedia became available to subscribers. (Clark, 2001) Since 2013 no further print editions are being published. *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* future is digital only. Traditional commercial encyclopaedias, competing with *Google* and *Wikipedia* for people's attention, have in many cases changed their publication strategies online or, as in the case with the German *Brockhaus*, ceased to exist in their current form.<sup>2</sup>

The mutual shaping of the freely available *Wikipedia* and professionally produced encyclopaedias (like *Nationalencyklopedin* and *Encyclopaedia Britannica*), has been the subject of research. It has resulted for example in studies of the work of *Wikipedia* editors (Reagle & Loveland, 2013; Sundin, 2011) and of the knowledge production of professional encyclopaedias that has gone online (Sundin & Haider, 2013). The relation between print encyclopaedias and the digital successors is discussed in several of the articles in the 2014 theme issue "Changing Orders of Knowledge? Encyclopaedias in Transition" of the journal *Culture Unbound*. Among others, Siv Frøydis Berg and Tore Rem (2014) show how the issue of trustworthiness is a central rhetorical concept for digital encyclopaedias that build their encyclopaedic model on contributions from salaried experts. Seth Rudy (2014) discusses how Enlightenment ideals continue to show through even in the digital edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. There are also studies from the educational sector, concerning teachers', librarians' and pupils' understanding of the trustworthiness of different sources, including traditional and online encyclopaedias (Sundin & Francke, 2009; Francke & Sundin, 2012). Given the above sketched changes and the development of encyclopaedias, print and digital, we want to investigate how people relate to reference books in general and encyclopaedias in particular in a life historical perspective during the period when these changes occur.

## Theoretical starting points and method

The study has its starting point in an understanding of the world inspired by research subsumed as the ontological turn (Barad, 2003; Mol 2002). The world in this approach is understood as continuous doings or enactments or, what Karen Barad calls *intra-actions*, in which different material phenomena, such as reference books, are produced in an on-going flow of becoming. With the ontological turn, also called a post-humanistic understanding, the world is perceived as a whole where materiality or different bodies and discursive practices are mutually constituted (Barad, 2003, p. 822). Representations are therefore not viewed as separate from the matter, or bodies, they represent (ibid., pp. 804). With the neo-logism *intra-action*, instead of *interaction*, Barad draws the attention to how phenomena are enacted within the world. Instead of understanding things and bodies as discrete, separate and stable, the world is viewed as discursive-material phenomena, which are performed or enacted in specific meetings or relations, *intra-actions*. "The world *is* *intra-activity* in its differential mattering. It is through specific *intra-actions* that a differential sense of being is enacted in an ongoing ebb and flow of agency. That is, it is through specific *intra-actions* that phenomena come to matter – in both senses of the word" (ibid., p. 817). An *agential cut* is enacted in those meetings, creating and stabilising a local boundary between different phenomena (ibid., p. 815). The boundary between phenomena or bodies is always open to questioning and can potentially change in another meeting.

In our study we pose the question how encyclopaedias, seen as material artefacts in transition, have made themselves meaningful for people. Encyclopaedias are here allowed to work as "life-historical coat-hooks" (Löfgren, 1992, p. 270) with the help of which people can tell parts of their life history. Through stories about experiences of encyclopaedias during the time when encyclopaedias changed from print to digital we can learn about how people today understand this change. In the present study, people give an account of their life in retrospect. The different *intra-actions* with encyclopaedias are construed as different *agential cuts*, situations when understandings and local boundaries are stabilised.

Originally trained in physics, Barad's theory starts with examining and rethinking scientific practices.

She then enlarges the scope suggesting it as useful for understanding the world in general. In her analysis Barad shows that apparatuses, scientific or mundane, are not static but dynamic (ibid., p. 816):

"For example, as scientists are well aware, apparatuses are not preformed interchangeable objects that sit atop a shelf waiting to serve a particular purpose. Apparatuses are constituted through particular practices that are perpetually open to rearrangements, rearticulations, and other reworkings. This is part of the creativity and difficulty of doing science: getting the instrumentation to work in a particular way for a particular purpose (which is always open to the possibility of being changed during the experiment as different insights are gained)". (Barad, 2003, p. 816-7)

The method, or apparatus, used in this study is a qualitative questionnaire sent from the Folk life Archive at Lund University (LUF), Sweden, to contributors who on a regular basis answer qualitative questionnaires on various topics.<sup>3</sup> LUF has collected qualitative questionnaires since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Then the contributors were mainly farmers. Today, more women and city dwellers are enrolled as well as for instance workers, craftspeople and teachers. In March 2014 LUF had 131 contributors.<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing 74 out of 131 contributors had answered the questionnaire on the topic at hand. Fifty of the contributors are women and 24 are men. The youngest contributor was born in 1986 and the eldest in 1921. The majority (53 persons) of the respondents were born before 1950.

The contributors answering the questionnaire express and share memories and experiences. These are described for this specific situation. The contributors know that archivists and researchers will read the answers and that they will be archived at LUF. Different themes are of course more or less engaging for different contributors, and the contributors decide whether they want to answer a specific questionnaire or not. Contributors enrol for a long period, not for a sole questionnaire, which helps to reach not only those already familiar with a specific theme (Hagström & Sjöholm, 2003, p. 137). This distinctive feature of qualitative questionnaire responses is in focus when using the method in the present study. With a qualitative questionnaire we can obtain stories about experiences with encyclopaedias and reference books

from people that have not otherwise expressed a strong interest in the topic.<sup>5</sup> We may then reach an everyday level of understanding of encyclopaedias and reference books from a group of people not recruited because they have a passion for them. Rather, the contributors are driven by a passion to share their memories and views regarding various topics in their lives. The contributors' age, being rather high, is also of advantage, since it allows us to assume that the changes undergone by encyclopaedias will be included in many of the answers. Post-humanistic approaches reject the favorising of discourse over matter (Barad, 2003). This suggests methods that include participation in activities over methods focusing on discourse. Nevertheless, participation cannot be done when studying life history and the qualitative questionnaire has instead been developed to make the contributors reflect with their daily activities, using the role of the artefacts in these, as starting points.

The following questions guided the analysis of the material:

- How have the contributors intra-acted with reference books in general and encyclopaedias in particular during the course of their lives?
- How are these material phenomena enacted in the contributors' stories of their lives?

The analysis started with a close reading of the contributors' answers to the questionnaire. This was followed by an analysis of all instances where reference books were mentioned in the material. In relation to the reading the following 29 content categories were developed<sup>6</sup>: Remembers a specific reference book, had reference book in childhood home, has a reference book today, bought or got, the Owl, *Svensk Uppslagsbok*, *Bra Böckers Lexikon*, *Husmoderslexikon*, *Focus*, other general reference books, *Nationallencyklopedin*, dictionary of synonyms, cross word dictionary, dictionary, cookery books, atlas, almanac, nature, subject, Internet, *Google*, *Wikipedia*, source criticism, photographs, summer house, story, crossword puzzle, discarded. The third step involved a thorough theoretical reading in order to establish more specifically similarities but also responses that stand out as odd or surprising in the context provided by the other responses. In this sense, the questionnaire is our methodological apparatus (Barad, 2003, p. 816). It is the instrument we use for measuring, bearing in mind that an apparatus never is neutral. In

view of that, the questionnaire has both shaped the answers we got and the answers we did not get.

The analysis is presented through four themes. The first theme, *Printed encyclopaedias as middle class family insurances*, concerns how encyclopaedias were investments that became a part of building a family. It is followed by the theme *Housewives householding decisions* with a focus on how gender plays into the choice of acquiring encyclopaedias and reference books for a family. The third theme, *Placing the reference books*, is dedicated to how the placing of print encyclopaedias in the home has changed over time, and in the fourth theme *From the security of leather spines to "God bless Google"* we look into the development of online encyclopaedias and information resources and how they have influenced the notion of an encyclopaedia.

### **Printed encyclopaedias as middle class family insurances**

Meaning is in accordance with Barad viewed as an on-going performance (Barad, 2003, p. 821). The contributors' answers are their recollections of meetings, or intra-actions, with encyclopaedias. In their stories they make use of ways of understanding encyclopaedias that are available to them today. The way in which a contributor or their parents obtained encyclopaedias has a prominent place in many of the contributors' recollections. Even though it was a separate question it is evident that the act of purchasing or acquiring in itself was important.

For many people, books in general and particularly encyclopaedias were a large financial commitment. In several answers the purchase of an encyclopaedia is formulated as part of creating a home: "The first investment I did at home, once bed, sofa and carpet were in place, was to acquire an encyclopaedia." (M 26598, female, b. 1947).<sup>7</sup> For single households the purchase of an encyclopaedia became a step in the journey towards *bildung* and the purchase is described in relation to studies or starting a professional career. An encyclopaedia was also often bought when settling down and starting a family: "When my husband and I moved in together in the mid-70s we bought Bra böckers lexikon" (M 26604, female, b. 1948). Encyclopaedias served as supporting the kind of life that you aspired to live or achieve. Physically and in very concrete terms the reference books took

up space and created walls in different living-spaces as well as in the physical rooms in the home. The general encyclopaedia was put in the bookshelf in the living room or in the family library, if there existed one. When a couple started a life together encyclopaedias could even become a part of a story about romantic destiny:

"When I met my husband he also had a set of bra böckers lexikon. None of us had a complete set but our volumes together became perfect – no doubles! We have laughed many times at that – it must be a sign that we were meant for each other!" (M 26619, female, b. 1959)

In the answers many contributors tell that they or their parents bought encyclopaedias when they started their studies. Encyclopaedias are visible signs of and insurances for future prosperity and success. The family's joint journey toward more *book-dense* times, a life with books, is described as important. Books, and in particular encyclopaedias expressed a pursuit of *bildung*. One of the contributors reflects on that his family had an encyclopaedia in his childhood home:

"Svensk uppslagsbok was in the family since my early childhood. Part from that there was not a lot of books. Perhaps it was once bought to emphasize an interest in education or because some insistent salesperson persuaded my father to buy it. The family had Handelstidningen instead of Göteborgsposten, also a social marker. So I think it was the first. To buy an encyclopaedia, Svensk Uppslagsbok or Nordisk Familjebok, signalled middle class!" (M 26615, male, b. 1938)

The encyclopaedia was part of and enacted a good family home. In order to make intra-actions (Barad, 2003) with encyclopaedias possible they had to be introduced into the family, something that could be expensive. A general encyclopaedia was an investment that manifested the realisation of a middle class family-life. The set of books in the bookshelf was instrumental in creating the conditions for and the performance of a good life for the spouses themselves and their children. The reference books take on meaning as furniture that helps to create a home that is homely, safe and with a personal touch. This is in line with Magnus Andersson's finding that different media and their devices such as TV, radio and

newspapers are important for making a home and as he further points out, media are not only material but also symbolic (Andersson, 2005, p. 192). As Jutta Haider and Olof Sundin (2015) found in their study of memories of encyclopaedias; encyclopaedias are tools for identity construction and as such provide "a mirror for others to the self" (ibid.). The stories can also continue by highlighting how much use the children had of the books. "I seem to remember that we bought the set in cash. It was expensive, but would prove to be a good investment." (M 26604, female, b. 1948) The same contributor continues her story and tells about how the encyclopaedia that she and her husband bought no longer was used. So it was discarded when they recently moved to a smaller accommodation:

"We had not used the encyclopaedia for several years. The set just stood and gathered dust on the shelf. Since books today have little value and encyclopaedias also have a best-before date we drove the entire set to the dump. Hopefully it burnt well in the incinerator" (M 26604, female, b. 1948)

To invest in an encyclopaedia meant a future insurance that required a certain financial commitment. The children used the reference books to work with their school assignments and this way the family received value for the money they had invested. In the agential cut (Barad, 2003) that was performed at the time the children lived at home in the example above, the encyclopaedia was perceived as an investment for the future. Once the children had left home no one used it anymore. The books remained unopened for years and the ways they were understood changed, just because the encyclopaedia remained unchanged. In the intra-action (Barad, 2003) with the contributor they appear as numb, closed and dusty. In the quote above the change in the encyclopaedia's status is described in terms of a decline, from having been an expensive purchase that had proved to be a good investment - particularly as the children had good use of it-, to becoming dusty, bulky items. Today the encyclopaedia is no longer a part of this contributors' home. It is just a memory.

In many stories encyclopaedias are portrayed in similar ways as an investment for coming generations. Several contributors had received encyclopaedias, new or used, as a gift from their parents. Sets of encyclopaedias were inherited and this way they were

a source of knowledge but also of confidence that was passed on. This played an important role in the process of establishing a life of one's own. One contributor tells about an encyclopaedia that had been passed on for generations in her family:

"There was a set of an encyclopaedia in my childhood – Nordisk Familjebok the so-called Owl-edition. My parents used them and I remember that as a child of 6-7 years old I looked up the volume with the human body in cross-section and, with mixed emotions, studied the coloured illustrations. [---] The set consisted of 38 volumes including supplements and was published 1904-1926. The encyclopaedia had been bought by my grandfather and remained on the farm when my grandfather and grandmother moved." (M26642, female, b. 1931)

It has not always been appreciated that contributors have passed encyclopaedias on to their children. One contributor writes about how differently the recipients use the encyclopaedias:

"My two daughters each got a set of NE, when it was new. I seem to remember that a set cost 10 000 kr. My income was nothing to boast about, but I wanted to give them something that I considered important. One daughter has used it often, the other one probably never..." (M 26651, female, b. 1935)

Reflections on whether or not children consult their encyclopaedias show that the print encyclopaedia is regarded a resource that, if used, contributes to something beneficial, something the children will miss if they do not use it. Parents expected their children to use the encyclopaedias if they were physically available to them in their homes. However, in the example above, physical presence did not bring with it the desired type of use. In this sense, no agential cut (Barad, 2003) was performed. This difference on how generations understand the value of print encyclopaedias can be interpreted as a negotiation of what an encyclopaedia is in the first place. The boundary between what is a valuable knowledge resource and what is not is renegotiated and the print encyclopaedias' position changes or rather it is degraded in significance. Another contributor who inherited an encyclopaedia did not consider this in appreciative terms.

"Encyclopaedias I remember!!! Well, that would be that Fat [sic] set of books that my Granddad insisted I should have. Nordic family Something. A lot of Books, about 20 I think about 5 cm thick. Are Stored in Boxes in the cellar." (M 26659, male, b. 1954)

The negative picture of the encyclopaedia in this response stands out from the rest. This contributor presents encyclopaedias in pejorative wordings only. This stands in stark contrasts to highlighting the changed significance of encyclopaedias that otherwise comes forth in most responses. There is not only a difference between generations in the responses but the contributors have changed their understanding of what an encyclopaedia is during the course of their lives.

Several responses mention door-to-door salesmen and their offers. The big encyclopaedias were bought in instalments or by subscription. One respondent tells about how salesmen could be persuasive in an offensive way: "I lived in a fairly rowdy area and it was a problem for addicts and others who were socially vulnerable who signed contracts that they could not follow through" (M 26624, female, b. 1966). Another contributor tells that a door salesman had to "turn around and leave" because she had answered that she sought information on *Google* and that it was for free (M 26621, female, b. 1984). The position of the print encyclopaedia has here turned into that of an unnecessary expense.

### **Housewives householding decisions**

We return to the response above where one contributor considered the purchase of an encyclopaedia for his childhood home to be a middleclass symbol, but now focus on another aspect related to the financial decision of buying an encyclopaedia. The contributor writes that it was a decision made by his father. Yet there could be differences of opinion between husband and wife regarding the value of buying and owning encyclopaedias. One woman writes that there were no encyclopaedias in her childhood home because it was considered "unnecessary/to put on airs" (M 26661, female, b. 1945). Later she writes that she owns a small encyclopaedia today: "I took it over from my mother when she died in 2007. My father had been gone since a long time by then, and she could buy an 'unnecessary' encyclopaedia." (M

26661, female, b. 1945). Another contributor tells about how her interest in books developed in primary school as she borrowed books from the school library. There were no books in her childhood home. Later on in her life, when she was employed at a factory, a colleague of hers, who was a direct seller of books, offered her a cookery book to buy. It cost more than one week's earnings, but she bought it nonetheless. In her response to our questionnaire she describes the good use she has had of it "even though it is enormously cumbersome (M 26592, female, b. 1926). She also recounts how, later as a married housewife, she got a visit from a salesman of *Svenskt husmoderslexikon* [*Swedish Housewife Lexicon*]. She was interested in it but could not afford it. The salesman offered her to pay in instalments:

"I deliberated feverishly, maybe I can use the housekeeping money, it could work. I signed the contract, the deal was made. The books would be sent by mail. Later on when I told my husband what I had done, he was furious and scolded me, you cannot do that, to shop and put yourself in debt, from where will you get the money? I said that I can take the money from the housekeeping money, I will be stingy. It was tough, but I made it and the books were paid. Since then I never bought anything "on tick"." (M 26592, female, b. 1926).

The spouse did not share the view that a reference book specifically dealing with running a home was a wise investment. As a housewife she had made a decision that on the one hand was a sacrifice, but that on the other hand, at least in her mind, was good for the family. The investment in the reference books contributed to her duty to uphold – or in another word to enact - the home. Later on in life she won some money in a lottery allowing her to buy the encyclopaedia *Focus*. She describes the rainy day of the purchase when she took her bicycle to the book store in a "raincoat and with a kerchief on the head, not at all appropriately dressed" (M 26592, female, b. 1926). She asked to buy the encyclopaedia and was told the price for the entire set on instalments. The contributor answered that she wanted to pay in cash. The manager was sent for and she got a discount of 150 Swedish Crowns for the set that at the time cost 1350 Swedish Crowns:

"Yes please, that will do. Wrap the books in a parcel so that I can put them on the luggage carrier on my bike. I will go to the bank and get the money. When I got back to pay the whole shop was involved in the purchase, the cash register could only register 900 crowns, had to divide the amount in two and register with two receipts. I took my parcel, which I barely managed to lift. Got help to tie it to the bike. It was such a joy to be able to make a purchase like that, I knew I had the money. No one could imagine that a woman dressed like I was at the time, could make such a large purchase at one go." (M 26592, female, b. 1926)

In the story the contributor puts into words how she, by purchasing a prestigious and expensive set of books, saw herself violating expectations of how an ordinary woman should behave, and in cash; a situation in which not only the role of the shop assistant but also the cash register did not function as usual.

The two responses above form parallel stories: The economic conditions for a married woman in Sweden have changed during the 20th century. Today, a woman is supposed to have access to financial resources of her own and thus the ability to make financial decisions. Incomes have increased and book prices have decreased, changes that made it possible for more people to buy books. Nevertheless, the purchase of encyclopaedias was a large financial investment that demanded the agreement of spouses. In the two stories we find examples of husbands and wives who had different views on books' worth and the need for encyclopaedias in a home. They had different opinions on whether an investment in books should play a part in the enactment of a good home or whether it was a risky undertaking. The spouses seem to have agreed on the fact that the keeping of the house was the wife's responsibility, a feminine-gendered activity. Yet they disagreed on whether books were useful in these tasks. In a post-humanistic tradition, Judy Wajcman (2010) discusses how gender relations are materialised in technology, not in a fixed way but through constant negotiations. "Such a mutual shaping approach recognises that the gendering of technology affects the entire life trajectory of an artefact [---] The gendering of technologies can then be understood as not only shaped in design, but also shaped or reconfigured at the multiple points of consumption and use" (Wajcman, 2010, p. 149). Considering books as a form of technology,



the disagreement can in part be understood as differences in valuing the feminine housework and considering the role of books in this, that is whether they should be included as suitable and appropriate tools for the tasks or not. This way, books concerning housekeeping, can be analysed as specifically aiming at transgressing a divide, as changing masculine-gendered books into feminine-gendered ones.

In both these stories the couples did not share an understanding of encyclopaedias as valuable. Yet the disagreement is solved differently in either case. In one case the contributors' mother waited for her husband to die to buy an encyclopaedia. In the other case the contributor decided to buy an encyclopaedia in instalments. As a consequence she had to cover the cost from within the household budget. In these two examples husband and wife had different views on the worth and importance of encyclopaedias. This background is important since it turns the story above where one contributor is able to purchase a set of encyclopaedias into a triumphant one; not only was it bought by a woman. She was also dressed in ordinary clothes and paid the entire set in cash in one go. In the story the contributor takes possession of her set of *Focus* and at the same time she destabilises – with her kerchief and her raincoat – the boundary of who may buy and own such a set. The intra-actions in this story involves several bodies, including among others clothing, the bicycle, choice of payment, cash register, the book store manager, the book parcel and the contributor. According to Barad (2003, p. 827) agency is not something that is attributed to someone but it is the activity of intra-actions where it is always possible for the boundary to change. "The future is radically open in every turn" (ibid., p. 826). We argue that depending on how the different bodies, human or non-human, involved in intra-actions are shaped influences how the agential cut is placed. Gender and class strongly shaped the possibilities for the contributor to act, something that she was well aware of. Yet, she trod a new path, it was possible for her to go against her own and others expectations and thereby she reconfigured the set of books.

### **Placing the reference books**

Differences between households are visible in the responses. Some responses are short and mention few or no encyclopaedias in their childhood and

their present homes. Some of those who did not have encyclopaedias write about the libraries they used instead. However, many have experiences of having encyclopaedias at home and their physical location is described in the responses. We asked for photographs in the questionnaire and got photos of encyclopaedias in bookshelves, series of numbered volumes. That those book spines mean something important to the contributor comes forth in stories like this one about *Kunskapens bok*: "They enthroned in the otherwise very sparse shelf in my childhood home where books hardly were read..." (M 26634, female, b. 1938). The volumes of the encyclopaedia stood on bookshelves in the house's best room, often the living room. In the responses encyclopaedias are often portrayed as books that nowadays collect dust, but which are beautiful to look at. The materiality of full leather binding, cloth binding, colours, and gold-print are described in detail.

In order to be more accessible lesser reference books are often located elsewhere and not necessarily in the most representative room. They are kept by the bed or by an easy chair that is used for reading or for solving crossword puzzles. There is agreement on how much contributors cherish doing crosswords and today most print reference books are described as being used for solving crosswords. Many write that they have crossword-dictionaries and that they keep print reference books because they are useful for solving crosswords. Solving crossword puzzles is viewed as an enjoyable pastime and as an exercise for the mind that demands time, space and equipment.

Reference books aimed at housewives are specifically mentioned by a couple of female contributors as having provided them with advice and instructions on how to run a home and raise children, information that has been important for how they have taken on their tasks as housekeepers. One contributor writes: "I only have one encyclopaedia. It is called svenskt husmorslexikon [Swedish Housewife Lexicon]." (M 26658, female, b. 1933) She continues by describing the contents and covers of each one of the six volumes, when they were published (1954), and that she purchased it herself, before she tells about where she keeps it: "Is kept in a cupboard and primarily used for cooking" (M 26658, female, b. 1933). The response does not include any information on where the cupboard is placed, but in many other responses

the cookery books are described as being kept in the kitchen.

The responses convey a story about how surfaces change during the life course: how the contributors left their childhood homes, started their own families and in many cases lived in houses that eventually became too large. Stories about how books among other things moved along with them or were left behind, depending on perceived need and use. One contributor writes that sizable encyclopaedias are bulky, have become outdated and that today computers replace them. Therefore she has thrown away both an inherited, prized set of the *Owl* and an encyclopaedia about animals. Yet from the response we also learn that she herself does not own any computer, which means that she no longer has any of those resources at hand in her home. She mourns the discarded books. By adopting a current understanding that print encyclopaedias belong to bygone times and discarding her printed books without having access to digital alternatives this contributor now is deprived of both of them. Encyclopaedias are here understood as printed books only. Katharine Schopflin (2014) describes in a similar way that encyclopaedias are identified with print encyclopaedias, despite the transition to the digital medium. This close association of encyclopaedias and print is also prominent in Haider and Sundin's (2015) study on people's memories of encyclopaedias as expressed in comments on articles reporting on *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* decision to discontinue its print edition.

For many people an encyclopaedia signals something belonging to the past, a period over and done with. In the stories a shift in the meaning of encyclopaedias emerges, from a form that signalled a highly significant and valued content, that would bring dividends, to a form that signals an out-dated content of little use as text but with a strong emotional value as a thing. The books have been part of enacting situations of community and belonging and today, when the eyes fall on the spines of the books, the relationships are re-enacted: "Granddad and I used to read the *Owl* from about the time when I was 5-6 years old. The content was like an exciting storybook." (M 26655, female, b. 1947) For many it is impossible to throw away the books.

The materiality of the books is of huge importance for many contributors even though the size of the

often very large sets of books becomes a challenge. Some contributors report that they have moved the print encyclopaedias to summer and country houses. By doing that, the books have been given a new physical placement and the contributors have avoided throwing away books that they have strong emotional ties to. As summerhouses often are secluded, Internet connections can be patchy or even absent, the print encyclopaedias then still guarantee access to an exterior source of knowledge with acknowledged authority. That they are antiquated and have passed their best-before date for use in the ordinary home becomes less important. During the summer a simpler life with lower demands is led:

"For the summerhouse an entire set of the same encyclopaedia was purchased, at a flea market. During the summer we live isolated there and then we often look up things in these books." (M 26660, female, b. 1980)

In the above examples the print encyclopaedias do not carry a promise of future prosperous times. Instead, the agential cut (Barad, 2003) can be formulated as cutting through time, thereby giving the encyclopaedias a new weight as they enact relations to times passed.

### **From the security of leather spines to "God bless Google!"**

What encyclopaedias are and what they become in relation to the life that is lived can be viewed in the responses. As we have seen above, relationships change and develop over the course of a life. In one example a contributor, who experienced great difficulties in school, found an encyclopaedia in school to be:

"A place of refuge, my oasis in the miserable desert called school. In the encyclopaedias I could dream myself away to ancient Egypt, get to know Winston Churchill, immerse myself in ancient Greek inventions or read about royal families." (M 26608, male, b. 1986)

In this response a great affection is expressed to the content in a "wonderful encyclopaedia of about thirty parts [---] beautiful, light brown bindings with gilded letters." (ibid.) In this contributors' story the encyclopaedia was regarded as a friend, an example of an

anthropomorphic understanding of encyclopaedias where the set of books assumes human forms (cf. Haider & Sundin, 2015). Later on, the same contributor bought a general encyclopaedia, but it is now stored in the cellar: "It feels like this form of collected facts has gone out of fashion in recent years, as the Internet has gained ground and *Wikipedia* has grown bigger." (M 26608, male, b. 1986) Once again, we can see how digital encyclopaedias not are understood as encyclopaedias in the sense that print encyclopaedias are.

From the questions in the questionnaire the contributors get some guidelines of how to define an encyclopaedia. Nevertheless there are differences among the responses. In one response the contributor writes:

"Since I got this questionnaire I have been thinking a lot about the concept reference books<sup>8</sup> –what it IS! To me all my cookery books and a number of files with well-tested recipes are reference books. Just this week my sister in law from Kalmar called and asked about a recipe on SALMON. 3 files could come into question, I took a short while, and said to my sister in law that the recipe was first in my little binder. She then said, I could have told you so! She had actually once before copied the recipe from this file." (M 26601, female, b. 1943)

This contributor defines encyclopaedia as a series of analogue collections of files that is of use to her to manage information, a collection that is also known to her relatives and consulted by them. This quote is one of the few responses that in a concrete manner describes how encyclopaedias or reference books are used for finding information, except for those describing their use to solve crossword puzzles. Like Haider and Sundin (2015) we can observe a separation between instrumental and symbolic use. In most responses the instrumental use is described in a more general way and it comes through in some stories where encyclopaedias are frequently used to find information and in others where encyclopaedias were used earlier, but less and less as time had moved on. Then they are often replaced with searches on the Internet.

Few of the contributors report not having a computer. The vast majority mention that it is on the Internet that they search for information, indicating that they have computers connected to the Internet in

their homes. There you can find "all this in one fast and easy to grasp version" (M 26664, male, b. 1931), as one respondent put it. Some have reservations and would "rather look in a book but use the net" (M 26602, male, b. 1963) or "[are] and will remain a book-nerd" (M 26617, female, b. 1943). There are also those who respond that they use the Internet to search for information but "very seldom for knowledge" (M 26634, female, b. 1938). Yet most report that the Internet is used more and more, that it is here to stay and that they use the computer every day.

The vocabulary for using an encyclopaedia, as a book for looking something up (*slå upp, uppslagsverk*), has been taken along online. Literally the Swedish terms translate into "striking something up". One contributor writes that "nowadays it is mostly on the net that I 'strike'." (M 26605, female, b. 1933). On the Internet *Google* is frequently used. Someone writes that *Google* is used more and more (M 26606, female, b. 32), someone else that she looks up everything on *Google* (M 26621, female, b. 84) and still another person that he uses *Google* to some extent, but has not gotten used to it (M 26622, male, b. 28). Even though *Google* was not mentioned specifically in the questionnaire it is referred to in many of the answers. One of the older contributors writes: "God bless Google" (M 26664, male, b. 1931). Interestingly, a contributor's age was not indicative of a person's attitudes towards digitally available resources.

Experiences of using and contributing to the digital encyclopaedia *Wikipedia* were requested in the questionnaire. *Wikipedia* is frequently used and appreciated by many of the contributors. Objections exist, for example that you should not trust it completely, that it is "used quite a lot, but I would never use it as a source for an assignment. It feels a bit embarrassing to refer to a Wikipedia article; in academic writing and essays you probably get the death penalty if you do that" (M 26608, male, b. 1986). Once again the understanding of an encyclopaedia as a printed, expert-controlled reference book in many volumes on a bookshelf and the actual use of encyclopaedias in everyday life do not match. This contributor uses *Wikipedia*, but he also writes that it is not appropriate in situations where trustworthiness is crucial. Some of the contributors also have contributed to *Wikipedia*. This might be partially explained by their general interest in writing (that also has led them to be contributors to the questionnaires from LUF) but also

as showing that many people contribute to this encyclopaedic project. They mention making changes and additions to already existing articles, but a couple had also written new articles.

Most of the contributors thus talk about how they use digital sources but intra-actions with the material manifestations of the digital sources are not visible in the responses. Clearly, the physical expressions of digital encyclopaedias do not have the same patina and symbolic function as a print encyclopaedia. A couple of computers are mentioned, some CD-ROMs, that for the most part was a short and a somewhat troublesome experience, and smart phones. Smart phones are on the one hand pictured as creating a tiresome, constant use of an external memory during conversations and on the other hand, they are seen as resources to easily access various services in addition to enabling making a call.

## Conclusion

We have analysed how reference books in general and encyclopaedias in particular have been meaningful in the lives of our contributors, both in the past and in the present, and how this meaningfulness have changed throughout the years. In a way, reference books have been analysed as struts or coat hooks, for people's stories about their daily lives (cf. Löfgren, 1992). Their stories are told with the use of retrospective understandings that are available to them today, what Barad (2003, p. 822) describes as material-discursive practices. In the stories different agential cuts are enacted: The meetings between the contributors and the encyclopaedias that they recall in their responses have changed over time and the meaning of printed encyclopaedias has shifted. In every intra-action a particular boundary is stabilised (ibid., p. 821). Agency is not something residing in an object, but it happens in the enactment of an agential cut. For Barad this opens up for analytical possibilities as well as for responsibilities to change and "rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (ibid., p. 827). Yet the possibility to act varies between bodies, human or non-human, and we found that this imbalance is not sufficiently stressed when using Barad's analytical tools. In our analysis the imbalance was visible specifically in the second theme concerning disagreeing spouses; a housewife with no income of her own had limited possibilities for purchasing a reference book. The story about being a

woman buying an encyclopaedia, in cash and in ordinary clothes, that one contributor tells, is a carefully rendered picture of that situation. The analysis of this story, and the boundaries that were transgressed by the contributor that day, was sharpened by framing the encyclopaedia as a gendered technology (Wajcman, 2010, p. 149).

In the responses we can follow this shift from beautiful, awe-inspiring material symbols of knowledge and status to dust-gathering, heavy, bulky and unwieldy things. In retrospect, the meaning has changed from a form that signalled a content of great symbolic and cultural importance, a substantial and current value that would pave the way for future dividends by means of a well paid job, to a form that signals an out-dated content, but with a strong emotional value as a thing. Print encyclopaedias have shifted from being a vehicle on the journey towards the future to a carrier of nostalgia; this can be described as reminiscence. In most people's everyday life it is instead the web, mostly *Google* and *Wikipedia*, that is used for seeking encyclopaedic knowledge. Even though for example the Swedish *Nationalencyklopedin* since many years is available online as a subscription-based service, private customers' subscriptions make up only a small part of the publisher's income (Sundin & Haider, 2013). For the same reason, many professionally produced encyclopaedias now available online try out different ways of finding a working business model. It seems as if the online edition of the professionally produced encyclopaedias have left the homes to mainly be found in libraries and other institutions, back to where they once primarily were found. Instead Google rules in the homes and in everyday life. That brings us back to a situation - for professionally produced encyclopaedias - that existed before print encyclopaedias became affordable for members of the middle class. One reason might be that the symbolic function of encyclopaedias does not travel along with the media shift from print to digital (Haider & Sundin, 2015).

Several contributors report that the printed encyclopaedias mostly collect dust, a deeply rooted cultural expression of stagnation (Willim, 2006). But the contributors' experience of the books' dustiness makes them potentially relevant again. Encyclopaedias have physically moved from accommodations in town to summer places where nostalgia, simplicity and the uncomplicated life of passed times should be lived.

Difficulties with access to the Internet in a remotely located country house turn print encyclopaedias into a functioning alternative. Thus, the print encyclopaedias' inalterability may in some cases contribute to still making them a part in many families' enactment of their daily lives. Many print encyclopaedias have moved physically and now enact an agential cut where they have a both symbolic and practical meaning. With a glance at the book spines of the *Owl* and her relatives a relation to past times as well as a realisation of a present moment aiming at simplicity is enacted.

## Notes

1. The study was funded by the Erik Philip-Sörensen Foundation and carried out in the project "Encyclopaedias' Trustworthiness in the Digital Media Landscape."
2. In December 2014 did the Swedish Nationalencyklopedin make an agreement with the German Brockhaus. Nationalencyklopedin has now access to the trademark, content and technical platform of Brockhaus. In what way Brockhaus will continue as an encyclopaedia is out of scope of this article.
3. Qualitative questionnaires is a method originating in early ethnological research on popular culture and which has been developed over time, for further reading, in Swedish, se *Frågelist och berättartarglädje* (2003) and *Frågelistan som källa och metod* (2005).
4. Charlotte Hagström, former employed at Folklivsarkivet, personal communication.
5. The word *encyklopedi* is used in Swedish for example in the name *Nationalencyklopedin*, but the more commonly used word is *uppslagsverk* and that is the name given to the Qualitative questionnaire in this study. However the word *uppslagsverk* differs from *encyklopedi* as it also includes dictionaries. The contributors have therefore also included memories of and experiences of dictionaries in their answers.
6. Swedish reference books, encyclopaedias and newspapers mentioned in the article:

Bra Böckers Lexikon	Swedish general encyclopaedia published 1973-1996 (four editions) consisting of 25 volumes.
Focus	Swedish general encyclopaedia published 1958-1990 (several editions) consisting of one index volume, thematic volumes and an alphabetical set of four volumes.
Kunskapens bok	Swedish general encyclopaedia published 1937-1965 (six editions) consisting of one or two index volumes and seven volumes with articles.
Nationalencyklopedin	Swedish general encyclopaedia published since 1989. The print edition was published 1989-1996 and consisted of 20 volumes. Nationalencyklopedin (NE) is published online since 2000 on <a href="http://www.ne.se">www.ne.se</a>
Nordisk familjebok	Swedish general encyclopaedia published 1876-1955 (four editions). The first edition consisted of 18 volumes and the fourth of 22.
Ugglan	"The Owl", short for the second edition of Nordisk familjebok (as the book spine was decorated with an owl). This edition consisted of 38 volumes.
Svensk uppslagsbok	Swedish general encyclopaedia published 1929-1955 (two editions) consisting of 30 or 32 volumes.
Svenskt husmoderslexikon	Swedish encyclopaedia on house keeping including recipes, published 1949-1966 (thirteen editions) consisting of four alphabetical volumes and two thematic volumes.
Handelstidningen	Short for Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning. A Swedish newspaper published 1832-1984.
Göteborgsposten	Swedish newspaper published since 1858, mainly covering the Gothenburg region.

7. The quotes from the answers of the qualitative questionnaires have been translated to English by

the authors. Each contributors answer to a questionnaire are given a number when archived at the Folk life Archive, this number is presented after each quote together with the contributors gender and year of birth.

8. The contributor uses the swedish word *uppslagsverk* which also is the name of the questionnaire. See note 5.

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