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Cocq, Coppélie

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ARTICLES/ARTÍCULOS

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**DIGITAL FOOTPRINTS AND NARRATIVE TRACEABILITY/NARRATIVE  
FOOTPRINTS AND DIGITAL TRACEABILITY**

**HUELLA DIGITAL Y TRAZABILIDAD NARRATIVA/HUELLA NARRATIVA  
Y TRAZABILIDAD DIGITAL**

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**ABSTRACT:** The stories we tell and are told, the images we see and share, the ways we communicate find new paths and come to expression in new forms of networks, other agoras (to borrow Foley's terminology) and at a faster pace. Nonetheless, we ought to examine what the novelty of contemporary storytelling consists in when it conquers digital forms and environments. Likewise, the digital brings us new tools and possibilities of access to data – but how much have our disciplines, methods, approaches and concepts actually transformed and changed? And how much have we assessed the capacity of adaptation of our disciplines for embracing the study of what takes place online and in relation to the digital? From this vantage point, this paper gives particular attention to the footprints and the traceability of our doings and our data in order to highlight the flows, continuity and ruptures of what we do and tell. Based on examples from a variety of contexts, I illustrate how our quest for renewal, novelty and innovation is strongly anchored in, subjected to and depends upon our habits, old-fashioned ways and ability to observe the world around us. Further, I argue that in research like in storytelling, the value of vintage equals the value of novelty and originality.

**KEYWORDS:** Digital Storytelling; Research Practices; Activism; Research Communication; Internet Cats.

**RESUMEN:** Las historias que contamos y nos cuentan, las imágenes que vemos y compartimos, las formas en que nos comunicamos, encuentran nuevos caminos y se expresan en nuevas formas de redes, otras ágoras (para tomar prestada la terminología de Foley) y a un ritmo más rápido. No obstante, conviene examinar en qué consiste la novedad de la narración contemporánea cuando conquista formas y entornos digitales. Del mismo modo, lo digital nos brinda nuevas herramientas y posibilidades de acceso a los datos, pero ¿cuánto se han transformado y cambiado realmente nuestras disciplinas, métodos, enfoques y conceptos? Y ¿cuánto hemos valorado la capacidad de adaptación de nuestras disciplinas para emprender el estudio de lo que ocurre en línea y en relación con lo digital? Desde este punto de vista, este trabajo presta especial atención a las huellas y la trazabilidad de nuestra actividad y de nuestros datos, para resaltar los flujos, la continuidad y los cambios en lo que hacemos y contamos. Basándome en ejemplos procedentes de una gran variedad de contextos, ilustro cómo nuestra búsqueda de renovación, novedad e innovación está fuertemente anclada, sujeta y

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depende de nuestros hábitos, costumbres y de la capacidad de observar el mundo que nos rodea. Además, sostengo que tanto en la investigación como en la narración de historias, el valor de lo antiguo es igual al valor de la novedad y la originalidad.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Narración digital; Prácticas de investigación; Activismo; Comunicación de investigación; Gatos de Internet.

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## INTRODUCTION

The “digital”... It is here. We see it, we feel it, we use it, we love it, we hate it. We see the fascination for beautiful digital visualizations. We see the fantastic ease-of-use of technologies that were accessible to professionals when we were growing up. Now it seems the easiest thing on Earth for a nine-year-old to record, cut and publish a video via a global streaming service. We see the incredible rapidity with which resources are shared with colleagues and students. We also see the impressive limitlessness of online resources - funny, cute, meaningless, interesting, less interesting, bad and sometimes extremely bad videos, photos, websites, games, and so on. We see the ubiquity: in our homes, our schools, our workplaces, our pockets, our hands – it is there to be used, to document a nice meal, a pair of shoes, the weather, our joy and our despair, or maybe to take a selfie or send a tweet at a conference.

It is here, but what is it? Definitions of “the digital” are debated in scholarly discussions. It can refer to information encoded in binary symbols (for instance Livingstone 2015) but, specifically with reference to our devices (smartphones, tablets, computers), it is also about how we communicate through them, how we produce and consume through them. “The digital” as a term is so commonplace and trivialized nowadays that some claim it is no longer serviceable. Indeed, after over two decades of revisiting terms such as cyber and virtual, which have been criticized for neglecting the analog, some say that we no longer live in a “digital age”, and that it is rather a question of the post-digital age (Davies 2009; Lindgren 2017; Stocchetti 2016). This post-digital qualifier implies a term that grasps the complex interconnections between the offline and the online, and what some would call “onlife”.

How necessary is it to institute a debate about whether we live in a digital age or a post-digital age, or whether we should find another term? Of course,

definitions and applications of the theoretical and analytical concepts should be intended, balanced and adequate, but as ethnologists and folklorists we can also choose to stop for a while and spend time reflecting upon the practices – whatever people choose to call them – in their cultural contexts (for instance in relation to the use of technology for communication, among many other things). As much as I agree about the need to engage with social scientists and internet researchers in the debate about “the digital”, here and now I would rather discuss changes in the digital era from the perspective of a practitioner rather than from a meta-perspective of research.

I am convinced of the vital necessity to “recognize the continuities” (Livingstone 2015) in what takes place around us, how it has been and how it is, as much as to focus on changes and transformations. Indeed, people have always used multiple technologies, side by side, integrated to some degree in their everyday lives. I propose to expand on this idea of continuity to emphasize the importance and the value of the “vintage”: something of quality, of lasting value, “showing the best and most typical characteristics of a particular type of thing, especially from the past”<sup>2</sup>. Given that this aspect of research is seldom appreciated or graded in funding evaluations, for instance, which places more value on and encourages novelty and innovative ideas to a greater extent, I call for a greater appreciation of the vintage in research efforts.

The SIEF Conference call poses the question: “What changes are produced in the digital era and how can we track them?”. There are numerous examples that could be used to discuss this, but I have chosen to focus on two, which may appear to be disparate, but

2 I apply here the concept of “vintage” according to its primary meaning (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/vintage>) and do not address the problematic applications it might have in other contexts in relation to commodification or fetishism of the past.

which I perceive as closely related: storytelling and research practices.

### TELLING AND SHARING STORIES IN A DIGITAL AGE

The stories we tell and are told, the images we see and share, and the ways we communicate find new paths and come to expression in new forms of networks and other agoras (to borrow John Miles Foley's terminology (2010)) and at a faster pace. Storytelling traditions have naturally found their place on the internet, a channel through which they can continue, alongside oral storytelling, reading books, watching television and listening to the radio, for example. Legends about heroes and villains, ghosts and the supernatural, and tales from far and near emerge in different formats, mediated in various ways.

The Easter tradition in Sweden, for instance, with witches flying to Blåkulla on their broomsticks, the equivalent of Brockenberg in German legends, continues on Facebook, as I have discussed elsewhere and written about with my colleague Fredrik Skott (Cocq and Skott 2017). Our study of the digital Easter celebration, with the witches' Sabbath playing out on Facebook, shows how traditional legends persist and adapt through different media. There are social and aesthetic aspects in this storytelling event: in the textual and visual modes of expression, in the interactivity between the "narrators" – in this case members of the Facebook group – that create a sense of community. There is an interweaving of multiple influences, inspired by popular culture, for instance, or by witches from outside the Nordic Easter tradition. However, all elements come together and are integrated into the specific storytelling event. The story is somehow a modern counterpart of older legends, confirming the place of storytelling in our contemporary media landscape and exemplifying the emergence of new digital practices. In addition, online performance sites are meeting points where users can find a sense of belonging and of community.

The internet has also proved to be a perfect channel for the dissemination of urban legends, with all the consequences that might entail. These legends, and the closely related genre of fake news, are stories of another kind (Frank 2015; Hill 2018). This is nothing new: one just needs to think about hoaxes (since the 19th century) (see for instance Miller 2015) and practices meant to fool someone into believing that something untrue is true, for instance.

Since 2016, in the aftermath of the US presidential elections, the term *fake news* has become part of everyday vocabulary in many languages – a form of disinformation in order to mislead the public (with a political purpose, for example). Ironically, having been used by the US president to question the national media it has been applied on many occasions to his own declarations and statements. Fake news, like urban legends and urban myths, are passed on in the belief that they are true or partly true, which could have severe implications.

It is not always simply a matter of passive consumption, however. There are many instances of so-called fake news, and here I intend to focus on agency in reaction to disinformation. My first example concerns the vernacular responses to the US president's reference to "what happened last night in Sweden" in February 2017. In a speech, he declared:

You look at what's happening last night in Sweden. Sweden. Who would believe this? Sweden. They took in large numbers. They're having problems like they never thought possible.

He goes on, mentioning places such as Brussels, Nice, and Paris where terror attacks had recently taken place. No major event had been reported in Sweden however, and many people wondered what he was referring to. In fact, it was a non-existent event.

Responses came quickly from Swedish officials, journalists, and artists wanting to share their stories about this particular night in Sweden. A photo book (Karlsson 2017)<sup>3</sup> was issued, with snapshots of everyday life in Sweden, including an evening in a retirement home, someone fishing on an icy lake, and other images of a street and a hospital. There were also responses on Twitter and other social media – several making references to the Swedish home and furniture chain IKEA, or using items associated with Sweden such as the candies called "Swedish fish". Intertextual references with reactions to attacks that did occur were widespread, including the *Je Suis Charlie* slogan, used as a sign of solidarity after the attack against the French newspaper Charlie Hebdo, and the *Never forget* slogan used in association with national tragedies, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

3 Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2017/sep/14/anti-trump-campaigners-launch-last-night-in-sweden-in-pictures>> Accessed: 7 June 2021.



America First - The Netherlands Second. YouTube, 23 January 2017.

Another example of reaction through online humor is the “Who wants to be second” campaign, a response to yet another provocative declaration from the above-mentioned US president in his inauguration speech: he declared that his motto would be “America first”. Satirical videos with a competitive theme quickly emerged: “Who wants to be second? Every Second Counts”, accessed multiple times on the video-sharing platform YouTube. Various countries contributed, explaining why they should be second after America.

The Netherlands were the first to enter the contest<sup>4</sup>, publishing a short video with a list of selling points about the country based on the expectations and the interests of the US president. It replicates the presidential rhetoric in its presentation, referring to the importance of a wall (in this case the ocean), making racist jokes (referring to the contested Dutch tradition of Black Peter), boasting of a generous tax system and making fun of enemies and neighbors.

4 Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EL-D2AwFN9Nc>>. Accessed: 7 June 2021.

The video concludes: “We understand it is gonna be America First, but can we say, The Netherlands second?”. A bitter sense of irony runs throughout, with the recurring use of stereotypes and a high degree of self-criticism. Many countries contributed to the contest with their own videos. One that I find of particular interest in the context of this presentation was contributed by the Sámi – the Indigenous people of the Nordic countries - specifically by Suohpanterror, a collective of artists and activists.

Following the Dutch model, the three-minute satirical video made by Suohpanterror, “America first, Saami second” (February 2017)<sup>5</sup>, introduces the traditional Sámi area building on similar rhetoric. References to popular culture, a recurring element in Suohpanterror’s art, emerge throughout the video: “we know how to survive when winter is coming”<sup>6</sup> thanks to Indigenous knowledge, “the best knowledge”, for instance. Ideo-

5 Available at: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0F\\_glWF0Oic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0F_glWF0Oic)>. Accessed: 7 June 2021.

6 From the TV show Game of Thrones, an expression widely used outside the series, such as in internet memes.

logical/political claims are also interwoven in the video, such as using the hashtag #DoNotAlterNativeFacts, a play on words involving Alternative Facts and Native. On another occasion, a question briefly appears. “BTW, what happened in Sweden?” referring to the president’s statement in February 2017, mentioned above.

The Suohpanterror video differs from those of the other “competing” countries in the way it ends, however. Whereas the other countries conclude with the phrase, “America first. The Netherlands/Finland/and so on second”, Suohpanterror use a serious tone: “We just want you and the other countries to put Mother nature first”, the humoristic genre shifting to an activist stance. This example contrasts with the ones from the Netherlands and other contributing countries in that it could be interpreted as a form of resilience that brings to light voices that comment, annotate and strive to wake people up in a fast-changing world. Suohpanterror shifts the focus of the contest to the environment and climate change. With its references and associations, the video conveys a message that not only criticizes the US president but also, and even more strongly, stresses the need to take greater care of the environment and of Mother Earth.

The final image in the video is that of a cute kitten – a strategic vehicle of communication emphasizing the importance of caring about the environment and Mother Earth. The cuteness and innocence of the image contrasts with the severe tone and the seriousness of the message. This is a well-calculated way of conveying an activist stance. Cats, indeed, attract attention on the internet: they are part of the digital culture and a recurring element in many of the stories we tell.

There are several examples of internet cat celebrities. Grumpy cat, for instance, had (in 2019) 8.3 million followers on Facebook, 2.4 million followers on Instagram and 1.5 million followers on Twitter. With a particularly “grumpy” facial expression, this US cat became a celebrity through memes containing pessimistic and cynical messages and comments (such as “I had fun once. It was awful.”) The news about its death in 2019 made headlines on many news and social media platforms internationally.

Cats as an internet phenomenon have become so omnipresent that they have been the topic of a specific festival, the Internet Cat Video Festival (2012–2015) (Hasselgren 2018). Internet cats are not only for entertainment, however. Such phenomena can

also be about coping and group cohesion, as illustrated by reactions to the Brussels lock down (#brussels-lockdown) that followed a series of events in 2015. Shortly after the attacks in Paris there was a lock down in Brussels due to potential terrorist attacks and the suspicion that one of the alleged perpetrators was hiding in the city. While many people were doing what people usually do when they see something interesting or surprising, when the everyday is disrupted, i.e. pick up their smartphones, take pictures and share them on social media, the police were becoming concerned. Given the high level of security and the state of emergency in place in the hope of finding the suspects behind the attacks, the police did not appreciate this circulation of information about their whereabouts. They called for silence on social media and asked the public to avoid revealing their actions and locations. Users reacted by posting another kind of image under the hashtag #brusselslockdown: cats!<sup>7</sup> They chose not to be silent, and instead made use of other visuals as a way of keeping their presence and concerns in the spotlight.

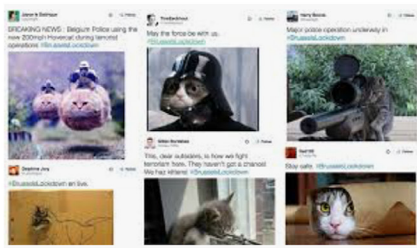
Internet cats have also been used to make highly political and ideological statements. British street-art activist Banksy exemplified this in his attempts to attract public attention to the destruction in Gaza. A painting on the remains of a wall depicting a white kitten with a pink bow was shared on the internet. Banksy declared (2015): “I wanted to highlight the destruction in Gaza by posting photos on my website – but on the internet people only look at pictures of kittens”<sup>8</sup>. Given that cats interest most people, the artist used a kitten as a means of raising awareness and making a political statement. Banksy wanted his “story”<sup>9</sup> to be about Gaza. He chose a cat as the main character to make sure that the story spread on the internet.

Memes and visuals operate as narrative elements referring to and generating stories. Internet cats are thus one example of such narratives that cross different media, carry various messages, reach a

7 See, for example: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/24/world/europe/twitter-cats-to-the-rescue-in-brussels-lockdown.html>>. Accessed: 7 June 2021.

8 Available at: <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/banksy/11436286/Banksy-in-Gaza-Street-artist-goes-undercover-in-the-Strip.html>>. Accessed: 7 June 2021.

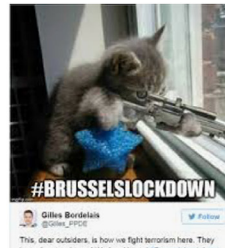
9 I have consciously applied a broad and generous approach to storytelling in this paper.



Twitter Responds to #BrusselsLockdown With... Cats  
nbcnews.com



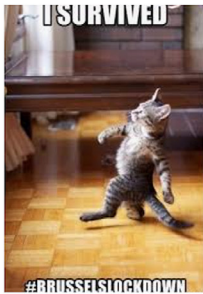
brusselslockdown hash...  
twitter.com



Belgians tweet cat picture...  
bbc.com



BrusselsLockdown: Image Gall...  
knowyourmeme.com



I survived #BrusselsLo...  
memegenerator.net



Belgians React to Brussels Loc...  
sonic1029.com



Feline surreal: Belgians tweet cat photos for ...  
asiaone.com



Lore Vonck on Twitter: "You c...  
twitter.com



Belgians React Brilliant...  
unilad.co.uk



BrusselsLockdown - Home...  
facebook.com



Twitter cats to the rescue in #Brussel...  
whatsnextblog.com



BrusselsLockdown: Belgium Twitter user...  
english.astroawani.com

Search results on 24 February 2020. (Google images) #brusselslockdown

broad audience, and link together a variety of (narrative) genres. They could, to some extent, be seen as pathfinders pointing the research community in new directions, revealing patterns of sharing and the dissemination of fake news, for instance, exposing societal challenges extending beyond the net, affecting us directly and challenging our communities. It is vital for researchers in these disciplines to understand these patterns and challenges.

## DIGITAL RESEARCH PRACTICES

The SIEF conference call pertinently invites us to reflect upon “the role of transformation in our own work”. The second example I have chosen to illustrate the changes produced in the digital concerns our research practices.

The question of how to adjust research methods to (digital) transformation has been under consideration since the 1990s. At that time we had access to webpages, largely consisting of static material on the net, discussion forums and definable groups that could easily be identified as specific “communities”. Then came participatory media (web 2.0), mobile technology, and a higher degree of networking (which came to be called network societies (Castells 2011)), as well as complex interaction between what happens online and what happens offline. Looking forward, there are several challenges ahead (both methodological and ethical), specifically related to the internet of things—the devices we carry with us, which are linked to us and to our homes—and the field of Artificial Intelligence.

The genres of academic teaching, writing and research are—obviously and naturally— influenced by

the technologies that are accessible. What about the new tools and possibilities? How much have disciplines, methods, approaches and concepts transformed and changed in practice? What about the vintage aspect of research practices? How much have disciplines assessed their capacity for adaptation and for embracing the study of what takes place online or in relation to the digital?

It is claimed in ethnographic and ethnological approaches to fieldwork and elsewhere that the very idea or concept of data collection may well be misleading. From a reflexive perspective we have learned that it is rather about the creation and co-creation of data with those we interview or those who contribute to the documentation of a phenomenon or an event, for example. This is highly relevant in digital settings. The digital brings new tools and new ways of accessing data -which we share about the places we visit, the restaurants we like, the beer we drink at any specific moment, the words we google and the articles we read online. This helps advertisers and others to select the best offer for us as consumers, sometimes just too accurately for us to feel good about it.

As teachers and researchers, we are currently aware of the intricate ethical questions that digital practices raise. The idea of “public” data no longer makes sense, and accessibility does not guarantee the right to use the data unconditionally (cf. Markham & Buchanan 2012). We have also had to revise our modes of observation and to be conscious about the risk of voyeurism in interactions with the so-called communities that live (part of) their lives online. This further implies the need to redefine one’s sense and modes of presence and co-presence -when entering the field is just a click away. This also applies to the presence of participants or informants. Online visibility is a scale, with its advantages but also its ethical and methodological dilemmas.

Concepts such as “communities” need to be adjusted and revised. This particular concept has been through a revival since the advent of “the digital”, which has given rise to the new dimension, “imagined communities” – not directly as Benedict Anderson (Anderson 1991) understood it, but here “communities” as a research product. The degrees and modes of participation in such communities are complex in that people’s lives run their course in multiple settings simultaneously. Nevertheless, “community” is still a convenient term to categorize a collective with

a shared interest or shared characteristics and a sense of “togetherness”, also referring to social formations. Even though it is far from being perfect, it is useful (Pink *et al.* 2016). Concepts when revised can still be fruitful. In fact, after some revisions they facilitate reflection upon how one relates to the field.

Another set of tools that the digital provides –or rather that researchers have created or contributed to creating in this so-called digital age– are new modes of collaboration and communication. Collaborative research methods are not new, but information and communication technologies have facilitated their application more broadly. Digitally supported tools for holding meetings, and for co-authoring and organizing research are integral to current research practices. They overcome distances and enable asynchronous working with colleagues from other parts of the world, meaning that one can participate in meetings almost regardless of where one is, and in a more sustainable way<sup>10</sup>.

Moreover, the list of reasons for collaborative research involving a broader public is getting longer. The field of Indigenous research, for instance, is promoting methods and modes of collaboration based on matters such as ethics, respect for research subjects and participants, and the maximization of the benefits of the research among those it concerns. It is, of course, no surprise that this comes from scholars and allies in the field -in which research has been misused, and in which scholars have had to deal with and compensate for past practices that today run counter to accepted key values and principles in the conducting of research. This might not be the case in all areas, and the degree of involvement of study subjects might vary -but given that most of the research concerns human subjects, community groundedness and a determination to maximize the benefits of the research can never really be wrong. The digital enables the co-production of materials, and crowd-sourcing methods via applications on smartphones allow the public to contribute in terms of offering materials and their own perspectives, for instance. It is also easy to maintain relations with research participants through websites, blogs, and

10 Less than a year after this keynote lecture, many of us were thrown into the pros and cons of teleworking due to a global pandemic. Many more examples and experiences could thus be added to this text today (February 2021).



other forms of digital communication –rapidly, continuously, regardless of distance, and in addition to more direct communicative tactics.

Further, it is easier to share data and results. We make use of technology when it is relevant, such as in documenting fieldwork, communicating our research through the production of films and other visuals, and in our teaching methods. Nowadays we can share our knowledge with stakeholders through alternative forms of publication –other than reports and various text-based media. Digital maps, an example of such a mode of visualization, help to make data understandable, graspable, and readable. Maps have been used previously, in the study of folk traditions and narratives based on early historic-geographic method, for instance: this was then criticized for the loss of subjective and local variation in mapping the origin and diffusion of a story or narrative motif (Christiansen 1945; Cocq 2008). The limitations of cartography and the implicit risk of freezing events in time and place they imply do not arise from new technologies or their use, however. In a similar way, one could investigate how databases –continuing the practice of building repositories of materials, archiving, and curating– may be enhanced by web-based systems on the one hand, but on the other hand may also bring challenges when it comes to the contextualization of the materials and their coming into being, the ethics of sharing, and the blind spots inherent in them (Christie 2008; Kral & Schwab 2012).

Social media comprises another set of tools that influence the research process: as a means of communicating and sharing, finding information, curating and archiving, or (possibly) of procrastination. It has also become part of academic folklore, as illustrated by the website PhD Comics, for instance, which shares comic strips on social media that, in a humorous way, reflect on the practices of academics and how they relate to technology. Another example is the “Shit academics say”, a humorous Twitter account initiated in 2013 by a Canadian professor as an experiment, and as a way of coping with everyday academic life and sharing his thoughts with other like-minded people. There are other examples of academic folklore concerning the use of social media that, in combination, give some indication of how integrated these practices are in academic work.

Indeed, social media has clearly assumed an increasing role in academic work in recent years. Re-

searchers become connected for sharing information and for self-promotion through specific networking platforms. The use of social media is increasingly being perceived of as a means by which researchers can communicate their work. Having a web presence is encouraged and highly valued in many academic contexts, and it is more or less explicitly expected among funding agencies and employers. Universities (and their departments and faculties) have their own Twitter accounts and FB pages, and some organize courses for project leaders on how to make the best use of social media.

As a member of a project entitled The Social Dimensions of Sámi Research, together with colleagues at Tromsø University and Tromsø museum in Norway, I conducted interviews with peers and followed projects from the perspective of their media use (among other things). In the project we address issues such as how societal changes interact and influence knowledge – in this case in Sámi research (Cocq 2021). I am particularly interested in the role of the media in the communication of research, and in the consequences of the media landscape (and our interaction with it) for Sámi research (in this particular project). On a more general level, this is also about the varying degrees of communication and dialog between academia and society/a broader public.

There is a general belief, or at least an expectation, about how digital media can make research “easier” (in the sense of faster to collect and/or analyze data), provide more data, and be visible to anyone who is interested. The colleagues I interviewed within the aforementioned project are expected to have a web presence, but there is tension between the potential and the perceived benefits, and the conditions for making use of social media in an efficient way. On the one hand, all of them emphasized the importance of communicating research beyond academic settings, but on the other hand a lack of support (technical and in media strategies) and of resources (time and personnel) makes it difficult successfully to establish and keep a presence online. Conflicting temporalities were also mentioned: whereas research takes time and academic publication processes are slow, a media presence requires rapid, continuous updating with a focus on findings and results, which is not always easy or successful in practice. As one of my interviewees said: “It is just foolish to have lots of clumsy researchers on social media”, as a comment about the use of Twitter in his research project, after having seen some

awkward statements and having attracted no interest from the general public. There is a wide variety of strategies for making the best use of relevant tools and channels in an informed manner, some of which point to the choice not to use social media. As I mentioned earlier, there is a certain pressure on academic researchers to have a web presence, and although there are many discussions about how to do this, we too seldom discuss *if* social media is necessary for our research, or even suitable.

This brief account of and reflection on changes and transformations in research practices illustrate different facets of the internet and of technology: academic humor, as well as tools for seriously engaging with research subjects and maximizing the benefits of research.

## CONCLUSION

Stories of many kinds are told in this digital era, including legends that re-emerge online, political stories through the medium of cats, and accounts of academic work. All of these, together with the use and application of digital tools and methods, contribute to “the digital”, to internet content, to re-establishing, maintaining or shaping new genres –and they leave traces.

Digital footprints or digital shadows, the traces we leave behind us, give others the opportunity to track us –our travels, the places we visit and the paths we cross, our patterns of consumption, our most intimate conversations, the major changes in our lives. The digital age is about both tracking and being tracked. Not only do the footprints we leave behind through the research process and the ease of digital traceability make our research more transparent –which is a good thing- they also make us more vulnerable –which is not good. This raises questions of research safety, for example, which is addressed in the latest version of the Ethical Guidelines developed by the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke *et al.* 2019). It emphasizes the need to protect ourselves, our colleagues, and our students from the dark side of the digital, because we do not want to limit our research to cute cats, and because cats can be highly political.

Narrative traceability provides tools for understanding and criticizing the internet. Let us continue to track changes, and also forms of expression that need scrutiny such as fake news. Let us reflect on the footprints we leave on social media when sharing, linking

and liking dubious so-called news articles. Let us trace narratives through the contexts, in terms of how cats and urban legends secure online revival, for instance. Narrative traceability is also about the stories written about us and by us and raises ethical questions concerning aspects such as data management (see for instance SIEF Statement on Data Management in Ethnology and Folklore<sup>11</sup>). Will our drafts, correspondence with peers, and fieldnotes be available to future researchers in archives? Will future generations of ethnologists and folklorists have access to our materials as we have access to those of our academic ancestors and predecessors? It is not for no reason that data archeology –meaning the retrieval of data from broken or discarded devices, as well as data in obsolete formats– is an expanding field. Will our notes, thoughts, and email exchanges make sense and be of any value to others in 40, 60 years or more? At the same time, libraries and archives around the world are struggling to establish long-term data-management plans concerning the collecting and archiving of an amount of data that could not be imagined 20 years ago.

I realize that, having raised many questions in this keynote lecture, I am leaving you with no clear answers. There are no “one-size-fits-all” solutions when it comes to digital methods and digital ethics. However, I am confident that, with our concepts and approaches, we are well-equipped for studying cultural phenomena in a (post?-)digital age, regardless of their density and complexity.

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