

# Human IT

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## **Busy Being Born or Busy Dying**

**The Internet and new combinations of traditional professional  
functions in the book trade**

by [Johan Svedjedal](#)

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## **Marketing Publishing - Traditional Publishers and the Internet**

Nearly all the major Swedish publishing houses have their own sites – or rather their own webs with information on authors and books, containing blurbs, pictures of covers and other kinds of marketing materials. Such homepages are also published by many

minor publishers, ranging from university department imprints to commercial publishers.

[54](#)

Sweden's leading literary publishers all have web sites: Albert Bonnier, Norstedt, and Wahlström & Widstrand, to mention a few. Other important sites are Natur och Kultur's (a publishing house specializing in non-fiction and textbooks, but also with important fiction authors), and Studentlitteratur's (a rapidly growing publishing house specializing in academic textbooks). Search engines help the customers to navigate these pages. Usually these search engines look for names of authors and words in titles, but nothing more.

The best search facilities so far are Studentlitteratur's. Among else, they cover the texts in blurbs and tables of contents, which are published for all of Studentlitteratur's books on the site. Such searches can be conducted for all titles, or restricted to certain subject categories. This, of course, is a convenient tool for the customer searching for books containing information on multidisciplinary subjects like Marx/Marxism, Freud, psychoanalysis or globalization.

Smaller publishers have their own sites. Some examples are Bakhåll (mainly underground and modernist classics), Ekelund's (mainly textbooks), Ekerlid's (mainly management), and Gidlund's (mainly scholarly). Dozens of others could be mentioned. Somewhat surprisingly, these smaller publishing houses generally seem reluctant to sell books directly to the customer via the Internet.

Nevertheless, one should note that Bakhåll provides an online order service – as well as a multimedia website advertising books, CDs, and cassettes from the firm. This is a site where you can hear Marinetti and Allen Ginsberg read from their own works, where you can read chapters of books published by Bakhåll, [55](#) where you can even play with hundreds of thousands of alternative computer-generated endings to a Swedish cyberspace thriller published by Bakhåll.

At present, the large Swedish publishing houses use the Internet mainly for marketing, not for selling books. Visits to their sites yield loads of information about books, but very seldom give even a slight chance of ordering them. Norstedt's and Wahlström & Widstrand's have no online opportunities whatsoever to buy books; Bonnier's and Natur och Kultur provide links to various Internet bookshops, while Liber and Studentlitteratur actually invite the customer to buy the books online from them – albeit the latter with the nervous disclaimer that these books usually are cheaper in bookshops! This rings true: generally, the prices listed at the publishers' sites are higher than those at Internet bookshops. In reality, the websites of the large publishing houses are nothing more than a new way of distributing an Internet version of the firms' catalogues. This may explain why the sites have had comparatively few visitors – in October 1998 Natur och Kultur's website had five hundred visitors per day and Bonnier's four hundred, while Rabén's had only five hundred hits per week. [56](#)

Since there are very few incentives – or even opportunities – to order books from publishers instead of from Internet bookshops, there is no real competition in direct selling between bookshops and publishers. One can easily imagine publishers setting up their own online sales departments in the near future, using more aggressive methods for selling books directly to the customer, bypassing bookshops altogether. But in

Sweden, no major publisher has taken advantage of this opportunity as of this writing (October 1998).

To have good relationships with the bookshops seems to be more important to publishers than any short-term earnings. As an editor at Natur och Kultur puts it: "Certainly we will sell directly via the Internet at some point. But it won't be in this century and it's not on our agenda. We value our relationships with the bookshops more highly than the opportunity to sell directly to anybody." [57](#) To buy Swedish books on the Internet, you still have to turn to the bookshops, not to the large publishing houses.

In fact, the major publishers use the Internet nearly exclusively for post-publication marketing. Most of all, it seems to be a cheap way to distribute a catalog. The Net is not used for literary creation, selection, editing, manufacturing, pre-publication marketing or publication, nor for archiving. Obviously, e-mail (with attachments) is used as a means of communication, but otherwise, the major Swedish publishers still have a long way to go before the Internet has anything much to do with the important functions in publishing.

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## Internet Bookshops

The prime example of Internet bookshops is Amazon.com, the best known of its species and also the most successful. Amazon.com has been a role model for many other virtual bookshops (including Swedish ones), and describing how Amazon.com works is a good way to find out about functions in a mature Internet bookshop.

Amazon.com offers three million titles, mainly books but also CDs and DVDs (*Digital Video Disc* or *Digital Versatile Disc*). Items are sold with discounts up to forty percent of the retail price. However, the usual discount is around twenty percent, plus shipping costs. To find books, the user performs searches in Amazon.com's databases, either using keywords or by browsing rather broad subject categories. The subject categories were as follows in September 1998: [58](#)

The Oprah Book Club®	Horror
Arts and Music	Independent Presses
Audiobooks	Internet
Bestsellers	Jewish and Christian Books
Biographies	Lesbian Studies
Black Studies	Literature and Fiction
Book Bargains	Mystery and Thrillers
Books for Writers	Occult and Metaphysics
Business and Investing	Parenting and Families
Children's Books	Philosophy
Classical Music Books and Scores	Politics and Current Events
Computer Games	Reference
Computer Graphics	Romance

Computer Programming  
Cooking  
Cyberculture  
Eastern Religion  
Entertainment  
Gay Studies  
General Computing  
Health, Mind, and Body History  
Home and Garden

Science and Nature  
Science Fiction and Fantasy  
Spirituality and Inspiration  
Sports and Outdoors  
Travel  
True Crime  
Women's Studies  
Young Adult

Searches in the database can be universal, or restricted to any of these subject categories. The results are presented as lists of clickable titles. When clicking through, the reader often finds a picture of the book cover and a blurb, and for many titles, there are links to reviews, extracts, and an author profile. The user is offered the chance to write a review of any title, by giving it a rating between one and five stars. For example, there are 374 comments on Nicholas Evans' *The Horse Whisperer* (average rating three and a half stars). Authors and publishers are also invited to comment on the titles they have published.

Two lists are generated for each title, both directing the customer to related titles. All are clickable. One is a list of three other titles that were chosen by customers who bought the title in question (for *The Horse Whisperer* these three titles are Monty Robert's, et al *The Man Who Listens to Horses*, Alice Hoffman's *Here on Earth* and Anna Quindlen's *Black and Blue*). The other list enumerates related subjects, each one possible to browse as a discrete subject category or by combining the different parameters. These subjects are not the same as the broad subject categories listed above. Instead, they are more key words given to each title, sometimes, it seems, by using an in-house thesaurus, and sometimes by improvising. For *The Horse Whisperer*, to stay with this example, these key words are "Man-Woman Relationships, Fiction, Healers, Horses, Montana, American First Novelists and Fiction – General."

Predictably, a search combining all these categories gives only one hit, a certain book by Nicholas Evans. But more surprisingly, no additional hits result from combining just Man-Woman Relationships and Horses. Fiction and Horses, however, yielded 1,115 hits – compared to a meager 1,550 for Man-Woman Relationships alone. Such results are a reminder that keyword searches stand or fall by the indexer's skills. In this case, I found that neither *Anna Karenina* nor *Romeo and Juliet* were included among the books on man-woman relationships!

All these lists at Amazon.com have one thing in common. They are marketing devices, created to give the customer ideas for new purchases. Amazon.com also provides other lists with the same purpose. There are several bestseller lists (updated regularly) and lists of authors (click the name and get a list of the author's books). Furthermore, there is a "Recommendation Center" with eight facilities. "Instant recommendations" are based on the customer's earlier purchases, while "BookMatcher" asks the user to fill in an online form concerning her or his reading preferences (genres and authors). A list of

suggested titles is then generated. "MoodMatcher" consists of lists of suggested reading, sorted by subjects and key words. Providing a challenge for the modern egghead, the subject "Serious Matters," for example, is subdivided into "Greek and Roman Literature, Heavy Hearts, History, History of Ideas, Leaders and Leadership, Modern Masterpieces, Philosophers, The Russians, Science and Discovery, and War and Peace."

At "Customer Buzz," customer reviews are found, sorted by genre or subject. Also, there are lists with information about authors, a series of "Reading Group Guides" (consisting of information about books and a series of questions readers can use to spark off discussions about them) and lists of Award Winners. Finally, the user can subscribe to receive information about new books from any or many of the subject categories.

Many sirens sing to the customer who visits the Amazon.com site. But the sweet song of Amazon.com marketing can also be heard outside of the site – in fact, all over the Internet. Amazon.com uses the large search engines to advertise itself in an innovative way. For example, searches performed on AltaVista generate a message and direct links to the Amazon.com site – under the caption *Amazon.com suggests* there are two links just to the right of the search question the user has typed in: "Books about [search question]" and "Amazon.com Bestsellers." Needless to say, these two prominently placed links give Amazon.com an enormous advantage, verging on a monopoly position, in comparison to other Internet bookshops.

But what is really found on clicking through? In the first instance, a search is performed automatically in Amazon.com's own database, and the result presented to the user on click-through. This automated first link is generated regardless of result or relevance. A search for the phrase "the literary net" gave me zero hits through AltaVista.

Amazon.com offered three hits.<sup>59</sup> But the titles suggested were found by combining the keywords "literary" and "net" from titles and blurbs, with rather haphazard results. More impressive outcomes, of course, are obtained by other search questions. "William Shakespeare" resulted in 38,746 hits through AltaVista and 5,239 at Amazon.com and "Shetland sheepdog" 3,590 and twenty-six respectively.

There is much of a bookshop feeling about Amazon.com. The presentational material mimics information in the real book (covers, etc), the search facilities mimic services provided by a trained bookshop assistant, and the various reviews and groups resemble a virtual "public sphere." However, such comments may be a nostalgic way of trying to describe new phenomena in old categories. You buy books from Amazon.com, but you do not see books. The whole concept is to use bits to simulate atoms. After all, browsed in your home computer, Amazon.com is a bookshop without books.

In short, Amazon.com is a combination of a number of things. It is a sophisticated, interactive system of databases, search engines, and lots of marketing material. It is also an online shop for selling cut-price books through mail order. This means that many traditional book trade functions are recombined at Amazon.com. The result is something of a cross between a wholesale bookseller, retail bookseller, book club, critic, and library (see [Table 1B](#)). By the same mode of analysis, the user mixes the

roles of the bookshop assistant, critic, reader, and librarian.

\*

In Sweden, bookselling on the Internet began on a larger scale in 1997. Several Internet bookshops were established, all trying to undercut and out-stock each other. At the present, there are several Internet bookshops, all more or less loosely modeled on Amazon.com. They have various interactive facilities; all have search engines; most of them sell by mail; most provide bestseller lists and lists of critics' choices; some offer readers the possibility to submit reviews, and one has its own online "magazine." Some of these Internet bookshops have links from important portals like "Torget," run by the Swedish Post Office. Most are owned by large chains of bookshops or media conglomerates. [60](#)

AdLibris, bokus.com and Internetbokhandeln began as independent Internet bookshops. Their business concept was to offer users a database, a search engine, and some marketing material and to sell by mail order, but to work without any stock of their own. Two publishers (Kajsa Leander and Ernst Malmsten) were behind bokus.com, while AdLibris was created by five people with no background in the book trade – rather, their degrees were in IT and accounting and they were interested in establishing themselves in Internet shopping. [61](#)

Simultaneously, other Internet bookshops were opened by long-established bookshops, such as Akademibokhandeln and Bokia (nationwide multistore chains), Hedengren's (Stockholm), and Wettergren's (Göteborg). These virtual bookshops went online with databases and search engines covering their own stock. Usually they charge the same prices as in the physical bookshops, plus extra for invoicing and postage if the customer wants the book sent by mail. Consequently, selling by the Internet provides only a fraction of their annual turnover – in 1997, less than one percent for Akademibokhandeln. [62](#)

Many Internet bookshops from both categories are linked to Swedish Post's "Torget," one of the busiest Swedish sites. Torget is a virtual shopping mall, with links to many online shops and service functions. It is used as a portal by many Swedish net surfers.

AdLibris Bokhandel has a standard mailing charge of SEK 39 per order, regardless of the number of books. There are no online reviews, very little other marketing material (a small recommendation list), and blurbs and pictures are few and far between. Internetbokhandeln's standard mailing charge is SEK 29. There are no online reviews; blurbs and covers are mainly linked to titles on the shop's bestseller list. There is also a secondhand department, meaning that orders for books out of print are passed on to a number of secondhand bookshops. Searches for old and new books are facilitated since Internetbokhandeln is linked to the large bibliographical database called Libris Websök (containing bibliographical references for about three million Swedish and foreign books, as well as an online version of the Swedish national bibliography). Internetbokhandeln is owned by a number of publishers and bookshops. [63](#)

Bokus.com is the largest and most renowned Swedish Internet bookshop. In 1998, bokus.com received three out of six SIME awards (Scandinavian Interactive Media



Event) for its marketing proficiency. It offers around 1.6 million titles, linking databases of books in print in Sweden, Great Britain and the US. There are no online customer reviews and few blurbs or pictures of covers. However, bokus.com ran its own e-zine for nearly two years (discontinued in December 1998). It was a rather trashy publication written in the style of tabloid journalism that contained reviews and articles on books, but no serious criticism. In the beginning, bokus.com's marketing strategy was aggressive price-cutting, often with discounts around thirty percent and no extra charge for invoicing and shipping, but after a few months, prices were gradually raised and extra charges added for orders under SEK500 .

All these Swedish Internet bookshops could be described as primitive versions of Amazon.com. For example, books are not indexed by subjects or key words (search engines only give hits for words in author and title fields). There are no customer profiles, no comparisons with other customers' choices. Consequently, the customer only finds what he or she actively seeks. As mentioned above, blurbs and covers are sparse. Marketing functions are distinctly weak in these bookshops (see [Table 1B](#)).

During 1998, Swedish Internet bookshops gradually lost their independence. Bokus.com was founded in August 1997 by two publishers on the fringes of the Swedish book trade and backed by financiers interested in the Internet's commercial possibilities. But within seven months, in March 1998, nearly half of bokus.com was bought by the media conglomerate KF Media. This conglomerate is an expanding force in the Swedish book trade. In the early nineties, it began to purchase companies from all components in the trade, buying the Akademibokhandeln chain (including their Internet version), the leading wholesale bookseller Seeligs, and the publishing house Norstedts, Sweden's second most important literary publisher. In February 1999, KF Media bought more shares in bokus.com, finally owning ninety-five percent of the company. [64](#)

KF Media's purchase was, of course, an injection of capital, giving possibilities for new enterprises (bokus.com later established similar Internet services in Denmark and Finland). From KF Media's point of view, it is a way of buying market shares in retail selling. KF Media's executive Börje Fors stated this quite plainly when the first deal was announced: "The alternative was to start a [an Internet bookshop] business of our own, which would have cost us several tens of millions. And we would still trail more than one year behind bokus.com, which today is the largest [Swedish] vendor of consumer goods on the Net." [65](#)

Inevitably, there is a leveling out between Internet bookshops and physical bookshops. Traditional bookshops are interested in controlling new retail channels, ideally selling books from their own stock through the mail. But they are less interested in price wars that, at least in the short run, would threaten profitability in the physical bookshops. As a result, prices in the Internet bookshops have been quietly raised.

A comparison made between book prices in several Internet bookshops in September 1997 showed that bokus.com was by far the cheapest and the best stocked. (See [Table 2](#).) For ten randomly chosen new books by Swedish authors, bokus.com charged sixty-nine percent of that charged by Akademibokhandeln and Bokhandeln.com, and ninety-eight percent of AdLibris's prices. One year later,

AdLibris was by far the cheapest, while bokus.com's prices had increased by five percent (not counting the new mailing charges). Since not all books were in stock, the comparison must be limited to nine titles. (See [Table 3.](#)) On these titles, AdLibris had lowered the prices by about seven percent during the year. For the seven titles in stock at all the major Swedish Internet bookshops, AdLibris charged seventy-three percent of Internetbokhandeln's prices, seventy-five percent of BoktjänstDirekt's, and ninety percent of bokus.com's – a result which is more or less confirmed by other studies. <sup>66</sup> One should note that bokus.com still was the best-stocked, offering a broad selection of foreign books.

Table 2: Consumer prices in Swedish Internet bookshops, september 1997

Author/Title	AdLibris	Bokhandeln.com	Bokus.com	Akademibokhandeln
<b>Swedish Fiction</b>				
Carina Burman, Den tionde sånggudinnan	204.00	289.00	200.00	332.00
Kerstin Ekman, Gör mig levande igen	228.00	319.00	221.00	259.00
Gabriella Håkansson, Operation B	134.00	195.00	137.00	204.00
Ola Larsmo, Maroonberget	163.00	239.00	165.00	264.00
Carina Rydberg, Den högsta kasten	196.00	275.00	193.00	239.00
<i>Total:</i>	<i>925.00</i>	<i>1,317.00</i>	<i>916.00</i>	<i>1,298.00</i>
<b>Swedish Non-fiction</b>				
Per I. Gedin, Litteraturen i verkligheten	179.00	255.00	179.00	269.00
Peter Gärdenfors, Fängslande information	146.00	215.00	148.00	239.00
Maja Hagerman, Spåren av alla kungens män	244.00	345.00	237.00	261.00
Göran Hägg, Den svenska litteraturhistorien	317.00	449.00	300.00	492.00
Toril Moi, Simone de Beauvoi	229.00	325.00	222.00	362.00
<i>Total:</i>	<i>1,115.00</i>	<i>1,589.00</i>	<i>1,086.00</i>	<i>1,623.00</i>
<b>Foreign Books</b>				
Stanley Fish,				



Professional correctness (1995)	---	---	268.00	---
Tom Hiney, Raymond Chandler. A biography	---	289.00	251.00	---
Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism (repr. 1992)	---	---	197.00	---
Simon Singh, Fermat's last theorem	---	---	164.00	---
Dava Sobel, Longitude (repr. 1995)	---	---	119.00	124.00
<b>Total:</b>				
			<b>999.00</b>	

(Note: if not stated otherwise, all titles are printed in 1996 or 1997 and bound in hardcover.)

Table 3: Consumer prices in Swedish Internet bookshops, september 1998

Author/Title	AdLibris	Boktjänst Direkt	Bokus.com	Internet-bokhandeln
<b>Swedish Fiction</b>				
Carina Burman, Den tionde sånggudinnan	188.00	237.00	209.00	261.00
Kerstin Ekman, Gör mig levande igen	211.00	265.00	232.00	293.00
Gabriella Håkansson, Operation B	124.00	182.00	143.00	172.00
Ola Larsson, Maroonberget	151.00	195.00	172.00	209.00
Carina Rydberg, Den högsta kasten	181.00	262.00	202.00	252.00
<b>Total:</b>				
	<b>855.00</b>	<b>1,141.00</b>	<b>958.00</b>	<b>1,187.00</b>
<b>Swedish Non-fiction</b>				
Per I. Gedin, Litteraturen i verkligheten	166.00	---	187.00	---
Peter Gärdenfors, Fängslade information	---	206.00	159.00	194.00
Maja Hagerman, Spåren av alla kungens män	226.00	---	248.00	314.00
Göran Hägg, Den svenska litteraturhistorien	293.00	406.00	315.00	389.00
Toril Moi, Simone de Beauvoir	212.00	265.00	233.00	296.00
<b>Total:</b>				
			<b>1,142.00</b>	

<b>Foreign Books</b>				
Stanley Fish, Professional correctness (1995)	---	---	351.00	---
Tom Hiney, Raymond Chandler. A biography	---	---	294.00	254.00
Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism (repr. 1992)	---	---	206.00	---
Simon Singh, Fermat's last theorem	---	---	229.00	194.00
Dava Sobel, Longitude (repr.1995)	---	---	198.00	180.00 [1996]
<b>Total:</b>				
			<b>1,278.00</b>	

*(Note: if not stated otherwise, all titles are printed in 1996 or 1997 and bound in hardcover.)*

Returning to the question of professional functions in the book trade, it seems evident that Amazon.com has successfully combined several of these functions into a new entity, while Swedish Internet bookshops still leave a lot to be desired with respect to marketing strategies. Such strategies, however, require long-term investments, covering costs for scanning pictures of covers, scanning or typing blurbs, indexing books by subjects, and monitoring reviews by readers. As of now (September 1998), these Swedish Internet bookshops are rather good at price-cutting and selling by mail-order, adequate at information retrieval, but worse at displaying, advertising, and consecration.

As of this writing, the Swedish Internet bookshops are still engaged in a struggle for market shares. Jonas Sjögren at Akademibokhandeln estimates that selling via the Internet will double its share of the company's sales in the upcoming years, and hopes that it will rise to between five and fifteen percent by the beginning of the twenty-first century. Like Therése Nyström at AdLibris, he wants to provide added value by expanding the service on the Web site with sales figures for individual books or the opportunity for readers to publish their own reviews.<sup>67</sup> This is a step in the direction of Amazon.com and a way of using automation and interactive possibilities to enhance the Internet bookshop. However, one should note that Amazon.com also makes substantial investments unheard of in Swedish Internet bookshops – for example by having around forty full-time salaried reviewers of their own.<sup>68</sup>

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## Networking the Net – Links and Conferences

The eternal problem for Internet sites is getting noticed.<sup>69</sup> Many of them provide links to each other, some are linked to portals like Swedish Post's "Torget" or Telia's

"Passagen," and some to various kinds of "link trees," covering different aspects of the Internet. One of these link trees is "Kulturnät Sverige" [Culture Net Sweden]. This link tree contains 2,500 links to sites concerned with the arts and has around five hundred visitors per day (November 1998). Focus is on noncommercial and publicly funded sites and there is some quality control. There are links to various kinds of sites – magazines, institutions, literary sites, and so on – but a severe limitation is that all listings are based on voluntary reporting of sites. That is, virtually only sites which are reported to Kulturnät Sverige are included – which means that many of the most important cultural sites are omitted. This kind of passive acquisition (as opposed to active acquisition, where one diligently searches for new material) has made Kulturnät Sverige a good advertising channel for the most active site builders, but hardly a gatekeeper or a reliable guide if one wants to locate Swedish sites dealing with the arts. Kulturnät Sverige is still more or less a digital catalog, publishing addresses supplied by the site-builders themselves. [70](#)

Reviews of sites are rather to be found in printed newspapers and magazines, which largely constitute the public sphere of criticism. Many of these printed periodicals and dailies are published on the Net – Sweden's largest newspapers, for example, all have their own sites and digital archives. This means that it is perfectly possible to read reviews of new books online. But on the margin of this old public sphere – albeit transferred to cyberspace – there are budding new forms of critical discussions of literature, using the opportunities for collective conversations inherent in the structure of the Internet.

Usenet is the part of the Internet where people meet in "news groups." Answers can be publicly e-mailed back to a news group for all to read, but may also be sent directly to the author of the original message, resulting in a private correspondence. These news groups are what the participants make them – they can resemble academic seminars on high theoretical level, they can be convivial places to meet and exchange ideas, corners for gossip, or even simply mudslinging contests. Sometimes the news groups provoke sound thinking, other times they just provide junk-food for thought. In many ways, they resemble new kinds of public spheres, i.e. the invisible realm for public, democratic discussions and debates. In some ways, they also form virtual communities, i.e. computer-mediated social groups of people who interact, help, and learn from each other. [71](#)

As of this writing, there is still only one single Swedish Usenet news group concerned exclusively with books and literature. It is called `swnet.kultur.litteratur`. Of course, literature is discussed on other Swedish news groups and by Swedes in various international news groups. Nevertheless, `swnet.kultur.litteratur` is the center of attention for Swedish Usenetters who are interested in literature, and it seems worthwhile to look into this news group. How lively is it? What subjects are discussed? Who is participating?

The following survey comprises the total of 113 messages sent to the news group between November 8 and December 10, 1998, roughly five weeks. [72](#) Obviously, this can only give a taste of what life is like on this news group, but since the total amount of messages is so large (around 2,800 over the last two years), sampling will have to do. As everyone knows who has followed a news group on the Usenet, the groups evolve,

change focus, have their territorial disputes, their ups and downs. Such processes cannot be seen through this sample; however, it is my contention that it gives a fair representation of the subjects usually discussed in the news group. Yet, it should be observed that the study can only concern messages e-mailed to the group. There is no way of knowing what private e-mail discussions have been bred from the news group.

In many ways, swnet.kultur.litteratur resembles a busy day at the library. Many messages contain inquiries of the type that librarians answer at the information desk. Where can I find information about this or that on the Net (Dostoyevsky, classical Greek literature, classical French literature, Lisa Bruce's *Lambs to the Slaughter*)? Where in France is Combray – from Proust's novel sequence – situated? Can anybody characterize the Age of Enlightenment? Where can I find books by Evert Lundström, a certain book by Isabel Allende, the German propaganda sheet *Signal* from the Second World War, erotica, books by Thomas Bernhard, a TV or radio program on Swedish author Bengt Anderberg? Two people asked for help on university assignments (on German author Christoph Hein and Spanish author Ramon Sender), two needed assistance for school assignments (on Swedish authors Viktor Rydberg and Per Anders Fogelström).

Some of these questions receive replies. Others are rebutted or flamed, with the comment that it might be a good idea to visit a local library instead of surfing the Net more or less aimlessly. Which means that some people are happy to share their expertise or even do some Net-research for others, while most of the participants are more happy to ask than to answer.

Quite naturally, a love of reading and books permeates most of the letters. There are spontaneous recommendations of books, also requests for suggestions for good reading. Some news groupers share their favorite quotations (chosen from Douglas Adam's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and August Strindberg's play *Gustav Vasa*), and there is an exchange of suggestions for the best first lines ever in a book. The titles proposed are quality fiction classics exclusively: August Strindberg's *The People of Hemsö*, Selma Lagerlöf's *The Story of Gösta Berling*, Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and *Metamorphosis*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* and *The Song of Roland*.

The heaviest thread during the chosen period involved answers to the question "who is your favorite author /what is the best book you have ever read?" Although polls of this kind only give partial truths about people's reading habits, the responses yield some information as to the literary taste of the news groupers. Consequently, the variety of answers are reported here in full, providing a cross section of the news group at the end of 1998.

Suggestions include Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, J.G. Ballard's *Crash*, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, William Burroughs's *Cities of the Red Night* and *Junky*, Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, Louis-Ferdinand Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night*, Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Club*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*,

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Dean R. Koontz's *Phantoms*, Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone*, Comte De Lautreamont's *Maldoror*, Jack London's *The People of the Abyss*, Octave Mirbeau's *The Torture Garden*, Thomas More's *Utopia*, Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, and Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdotter*. Also mentioned are books by Douglas Adams, Isaac Asimov, Margaret Atwood, Michael Crichton, Ken Follett, Knut Hamsun, Tristan Jones, Stephen King, H.P. Lovecraft, Klaus Mann, George Orwell, Sara Paretsky, Erich Segal and Mika Waltari. Swedish authors mentioned are novelists Karin Boye, Sven Delblanc, Albert Engström, Jan Guillou, Eyvind Johnson, Pär Lagerkvist, Selma Lagerlöf, Harry Martinson and Peter Nilsson, and Swedish nonfiction writers physicist Hans-Uno Bengtsson and philosopher Ingemar Hedenius.

These choices are a mixture of quality fiction (with several classics and Nobel Laureates) with some science fiction and recent successes from the mass market thrown in. It is notable that the suggestions mention very little nonfiction and no non-occidental literature, and that most of the authors listed are male. As the list shows, the majority of works are English or North American. This probably reflects a general interest in Sweden for foreign culture in general and Anglo-American culture in particular (usually, more than half the yearly output of books of fiction in Sweden are translations). Also, the dominance presumably stems from a particular tendency towards Americanization among Internet users.

I would suspect that users of the news group are relatively young, as well as more educated in the field of literature than the population in general – both on and off the Net. The comparatively high literary standard of the choices must, however, be viewed with a skeptical eye. In polls of this kind, people tend to answer more culturally correctly than truthfully, showing off to each other or to the investigator. Nevertheless, the answers say something about cultural norms on the news group. Even if it is doubtful whether most of the news groupers really prefer to curl up with books by Camus, Dostoyevsky or Kafka on a cold winter's night, enough of them know that this is the kind of answer to give – meaning that they have internalized the norms of good literary taste.

The traffic of messages concerning writing is more restricted than the one dealing with reading. There is one request for criticism on a literary work in progress, one message points to a homepage with a short literary history of the western world (twenty-one pages, written as a school essay by the sender), and one message invites people to contribute to a collective poem on love, with one stanza written by each person. In practice, however, there is scarcely any discussion concerning these items.

Other producers and vendors of literature are given greater precedence than the authors on the news groups. There are advertisements for several Internet bookshops, and aspiring authors get information on the Internet publishing sites Boksidan, Författarhuset and Omea, as well as on the Print On Demand project, Podium. In some cases, this information on publishing may have been prompted by a question on how to get a short story published.



The most elaborate marketing ploy comes from the Internet bookshop Psykedeliska bokhandeln [The Psychedelic Bookshop], which has posted a short story in five installments, containing a "fragment of a fictitious autobiography of Swedish doctor Nils Bejerot." In real life, Bejerot committed his life to the fight against narcotics and the social ills caused by drugs. In the short story, a manuscript found in the Swedish Royal Library tells a somewhat different story. There, "Bejerot" remembers how he once in his youth smoked marijuana and during one rapturous night experienced the bliss of ecstatic jazz music, cosmic visions, and great sex – only to reject it all in the cold daylight, struck by fear of freedom, deciding instead to settle for Leninism, law and order. This spoof, which has also been posted to three other news groups, ends with a link to the bookshop's site. <sup>73</sup> All is, of course, an ideological satire on Swedish policy concerning narcotics, but at the same time a pointer towards a bookshop wanting to sell its merchandise.

Speaking from the viewpoint of the print-based book culture, a news group like [swnet.kultur.litteratur](#) seems to mix several functions (see [Table 1B](#)). Is this buying, selling, writing, criticism or gossip? Is this a place for Internet junkies, for authors, publishers, readers or people who are too lazy to go to the library? The evident answer is that it is all of these at once – that the Net provides new opportunities for discussions, meetings, and the exchange of ideas. As Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben have recently remarked, the Internet provides an "expansion of what it means to be a social animal" – the democratic, helpful human being Michael Hauben has labeled the Netizen. <sup>74</sup>

However, Netizens may organize their communication in different ways, and it seems that [swnet.kultur.litteratur](#) is still a far cry from the specialization in the global news groups on the Usenet (i.e., news groups in English). For example, the Usenet group [alt.books](#) had thirty-two different branches in December 1998, with sub-conferences on subjects like electronic books, Jean M. Auel, Mysteries, George Orwell, and Tom Clancy. Besides this, there are numerous other news groups on writing, publishing, and bookselling, as well as on other authors.

Metaphorically speaking, the Swedish news group is still just one large room where everyone meets, while the global literary groups on the Usenet are as functionally diversified as houses, blocks or even whole neighborhoods. It seems inevitable that [swnet.kultur.litteratur](#) will branch out in similar ways in the future, fostering its own subgroups – although the virtual public sphere in Sweden can hardly support as many news groups as its global counterpart.

Literature is the focus of this sample, but not of the participants in [swnet.kultur.litteratur](#). It is possible to investigate the "author profile" on members of each group, by using the DejaNews system to generate lists of other news groups to which the author has made postings. The complete archive of messages comprises the two last years (in this case 1998 and 1997) and author profiles are depicted as a list of group names and number of messages to each group. The names of the news groups are hyperlinked, producing clickable lists of the authors' postings to this conference.

Statistics on this material is far from an exact science. Several persons may use the same e-mail address, one person may change his or her address or signature, thus



being treated by the system as two different people, and so on. With these reservations, however, some observations can be made.

The 113 messages in `swnet.kultur.litteratur` were posted from fifty-six different e-mail accounts. Of these "e-people," twenty-seven have posted only one message to this conference, while only five have posted more than ten messages to `swnet.kultur.litteratur` (the number ranging from eleven to seventeen). The total number of messages posted by the e-people was 173, an average of just over three messages per author. The majority of them seem to be male – only thirteen of them give female names (although there may be more women hidden behind signatures or male names in order to avoid "virtual harassment").

The low number of messages per e-person might be construed as an indication that these people are not very active Netizens. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. Instead, it just shows that `swnet.kultur.litteratur` is a relatively tame news group. Most participants have it as more or less of a side interest, making their heaviest contributions to other locations. In fact, many of the contributors to `swnet.kultur.litteratur` are accomplished Netizens. The most industrious of them, Alexander Backlund, has an astounding total of 5,952 messages (with only four of them on `swnet.kultur.litteratur`), and next on the list are authors with respectively 1,113; 533; 523, and 484 messages – none of them with more than seventeen messages on this conference. Only fifteen out of the fifty-six authors have posted fewer than five messages on the Usenet. The median number of messages is thirty from each participant.

It is interesting but exhausting to track these multiple news groupers on the Web. Many of them are busy on news groups like `se.humaniora.svenska` (discussions on the Swedish language and grammatical correctness, often bordering on joyous verbal abuse and flaming), to `swnet.politik` (Swedish politics and many other more or less related subjects), or to `swnet.filosofi` and `swnet.diverse` (general discussions). Many e-people have special interests that occupy most of their time on the Net and reduce `swnet.kultur.litteratur` to a marginal position. Some of them are interested in music, quite a few in films, many, predictably, in computing and programming. Other recurring subjects are sailing, genealogy, cartoons, and TV (especially soap operas).

Just one example, randomly chosen, will have to suffice to demonstrate the activities of individuals. "Millan," a seventeen year-old high school student, has posted a total of fifteen messages. Three of them are on `swnet.kultur.litteratur`, the rest on eight different conferences. On `swnet.musik`, she helps one person to identify a couple of hits by the group ERA, assures another that she also loves show tunes, and answers a letter asking if there are any girls aged fifteen to eighteen around on the news group. On `alt.flute` she comments expertly on the sound of the C from the Emerson Alto Flute, as well as on books with flute scales, and on `rec.music.makers.guitar` she answers a question asking for recommendations of a certain music notation program for pianos. On `no.it.tjenester.www.html` she asks for help in downloading a program for creating homepages, on `no.alt.god.jul` she wishes everyone a Merry Christmas, on `se.prat.humor`, she asks for good jokes about driving instructors, and on `alt.animals` and `swnet.mail` she asks for help to find information about iguanas. And on `swnet.kultur.litteratur`? There Millan asks for some help in the form of a plot summary

of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, is flamed by a Netizen who considers her lazy, answers politely, and a few months later warns off another person asking a similar question.

This is a typical slice of life on the Net for most of the participants in `swnet.kultur.litteratur`: a wide range of interests, often resulting in discussions with people in several countries. Millan visits news groups based in Sweden, Norway, and the US, some of her messages are in English, and the nature of her participation indicates that she monitors several groups.

In short, literature and books is just one interest among others for the participants in `swnet.kultur.litteratur`, blending with subjects like media, other art forms, leisure, politics, and other general discussions. This is a powerful reminder of the importance of Raymond Williams's observation that intellectual and imaginative products should not be isolated as "culture," a separate superstructure mirroring the base. Instead, Williams argued, the proper use of the word "culture" should be "a whole way of life." <sup>75</sup> In this usage of "culture," the arts are included, not isolated.

Tracking the participants of `swnet.kultur.litteratur` over the Usenet gives a rare opportunity to glimpse literature's role in culture in real life, not just in theory. Rarely can historical archives, however good, demonstrate these aspects of reading as just one activity among others. As the examples have shown, reading does not seem to have a culturally privileged position for many of the participants.

Another point to be made about `swnet.kultur.litteratur` is that it scarcely can be called a "virtual community" in the sense that Howard Rheingold has defined the concept. This is not because of any hostility or coldness in the group – on the contrary, the atmosphere is warm and friendly. But there is no real stability and little sociable gathering around certain subjects. People come and go, talking about – well, not Michelangelo, but about different subjects all the time. There is very little permanence or stability.

In many ways, the news group resembles an institution (it is set up to achieve certain goals, i.e. the discussions of literature and books), but as such an institution, it lacks a governing body or any long-term goals, apart from perpetuating the group itself. Therefore, this institution has to reinvent itself every day, accepting new members and seeing old ones slip away. There is precious little of memory and gathering of experience, and not much in the way of cumulating knowledge – viewed over a longer period, the same kinds of questions are asked over and over again, newcomers not bothering to search the message archives for the answers.

Paradoxically, this slight amnesia might be the reason Usenet groups are such strong structures, surviving where communities may petrify or perish. Since no rulers are accepted by way of their institutional standing, the very concept of daily reinvention is the main ethos in such news groups.

Like the other Internet-based projects examined in this article, these conferences represent new ways of doing things in the book world, new combinations of old functions. They are not revolutionary or necessarily better than the old structures, but worth our attention while they evolve, sharpening our senses of how intricate the old systems of functions really are. Maybe these kind of projects are not making history.

Yet they are part of what history is made of: stability reinventing itself with change.

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## Fotnoter

54. This section was written in October 1998. [Åter till texten](#)
55. The book in question is Dekius Lack, *Biljard klockan noll i cyber-cyber* (Lund: Bakhåll, 1998). Alternative endings at: <http://www.novapress.se/cyber> [Åter till texten](#)
56. Hans Arby, "Läroboksförlagen utnyttjar Internet bäst," *Svensk bokhandel* 146:20, 1998 (Oct. 30), 32-33, p. 33. [Åter till texten](#)
57. "Vi hamnar säkert där någon gång att vi säljer själva. Men det blir inte under detta århundrade och står inte på dagordningen. Vi värderar våra relationer till bokhandlarna högre än möjligheten att sälja till vem som helst direkt." Quoted from Arby 1998, pp. 32f. [Åter till texten](#)
58. All information concerning Amazon.com is from September 1998. The subject categories have since been extensively changed. [Åter till texten](#)
59. The books were an anthology about role-playing on the Internet, *Being on Line Net Subjectivity* (1997), ed. Martin Avillez et. al.; a collection of short stories, Blair Fuller's *A Butterfly Net and a Kingdom and Other Stories*; and Louis Littlecoon Oliver's *Caught in a Willow Net: Poems and Stories*. Search performed September 10, 1998. All other information concerning Amazon.com retrieved the same day. [Åter till texten](#)
60. This section was mainly written in September 1998. [Åter till texten](#)
61. Lennart Forsebäck, *Cybershoppare, intermediärer & digitala handelsmän. Elektronisk handel i ett hushållsperspektiv*, KFB-rapport 1998:22 / TELDOK Rapport 120 (Stockholm: Kommunikationsforskningsberedningen (KFB) : Teldok : Fritze, 1998), pp. 50-52. [Åter till texten](#)
62. Forsebäck 1998, p. 55. [Åter till texten](#)
63. Owners are: Alfabeta Media, Bokcentrum AB, Bokhuset AB, Förlagssystem AB, Kungsholmens Bokhandel AB, and Stockholms Enskilda Bokhandel AB. [Åter till texten](#)
64. See "KF Media tar över nätbokhandel," *Svenska Dagbladet*, February 9, 1999, p. 26. [Åter till texten](#)
65. "KF Media köper in sig i bokus.com," *Svensk bokhandel* 1998:6, p. 4. "Alternativet hade varit att starta en egen verksamhet, vilket skulle ha kostat ett antal tiotal miljoner. Och då skulle vi ändå ligga över ett år efter bokus.com som i dag är den största handelsplatsen för varor på nätet [...]." [Åter till texten](#)
66. See e.g. Sara Lind, "Enklast köpa av svensk näthandel," *Dagens Nyheter* September 18, 1998, A 24. Seven titles were sampled at AdLibris, Akademibokhandeln, Bokia Kungsholmen, bokus.com, and Internetbokhandeln. AdLibris was cheapest, with prices at ninety percent of bokus.com's and seventy-six percent of Internetbokhandeln's. [Åter till texten](#)
67. Forsebäck 1998, p. 53, 57. [Åter till texten](#)
68. Forsebäck 1998, p. 46. [Åter till texten](#)
69. This section was written in December 1998 and January 1999. [Åter till texten](#)
70. See Hans Arby, "Kultursverige är skeptiska till Internet," *Svensk bokhandel* 146:22, 1998 (Nov. 27, 1998), 33-35. [Åter till texten](#)
71. See Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community. Finding Connection in a Computerized*

*World* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1994). [Åter till texten](#)

72. All messages were found retrospectively on December 10, 1998, through the DejaNews search engine and printed out the same day. The research on participation in other news groups was performed during the following days. [Åter till texten](#)
73. They are: swnet.filosofi, se.politik.droger, swnet.sci.medicin. [Åter till texten](#)
74. Michael Hauben & Ronda Hauben, "Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet," *Firstmonday*, 3:7 (July 6, 1998),  
[http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3\\_7/chapter1/index.html](http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_7/chapter1/index.html) [Åter till texten](#)
75. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, Pelican Books (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984 [originally published 1958]), p. 273. [Åter till texten](#)

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