

Cracking the Astrid Lindgren Code

A Showcase of a Librarian-Researcher-Crowdsourcing Collaboration

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The Astrid Lindgren Code

The writing process of Astrid Lindgren has for many years been hidden in her original drafts and manuscripts written in shorthand. 670 shorthand notepads are in the possession of the Astrid Lindgren Archive at the National Library of Sweden and the Swedish Institute for Children's Books. The Astrid Lindgren Code project utilises the joint competences of literary scholars, librarians, computer scientists, and stenographers to decipher Astrid Lindgren's original drafts.

The Library's Role in the Project

In Spring 2021, the project librarian facilitated a crowdsourcing process in which stenographers could find, read, transliterate, and submit text and comments on the shorthand manuscripts. We set up the online platform Omeka (with Scripto) and put emphasis on easy navigation and usability for stenographers who were unfamiliar with or not used to web 2.0 platforms.

Hackathons: Crowdsourcing Meetups

The crowdsourcing process was accompanied by six meetings we named hackathons. Hackathon (portmanteau of hack 'explorative programming' and marathon 'a long distance foot race') usually refers to a group of people doing joint programming for a limited period of time. In this project the term was given a broader definition: gathering a group of people for a limited period of time to work on a digital task together. The participants appreciated attending hackathons, saying it made them feel cool and tech-savvy (which they are!).

In the hackathons we collaborated on transliteration, solved problems, and socialised. Through these events amendments were made to the transliteration guide, difficult passages in the notepads were transliterated through joint efforts, and the socialising was an important part of community building, as well as a motivational factor for many participants since it meant continuous support and feedback on their work.

Typical Hackathon Conversation

Stenographer: Lindgren has made an addition here which replaces the striked out line below. It's difficult to decipher the shorthand, but I think it says something like [...]

Researcher: Interesting! It shows how important the sound of the sentence is – the change may have been made to create a better flow when read aloud. Lindgren's stories are basically "written audiobooks".

Librarian: Transliterate it between original lines in Omeka following the syntax we've agreed on, "+" on each end of the sentence, and make sure to press "save" afterwards!

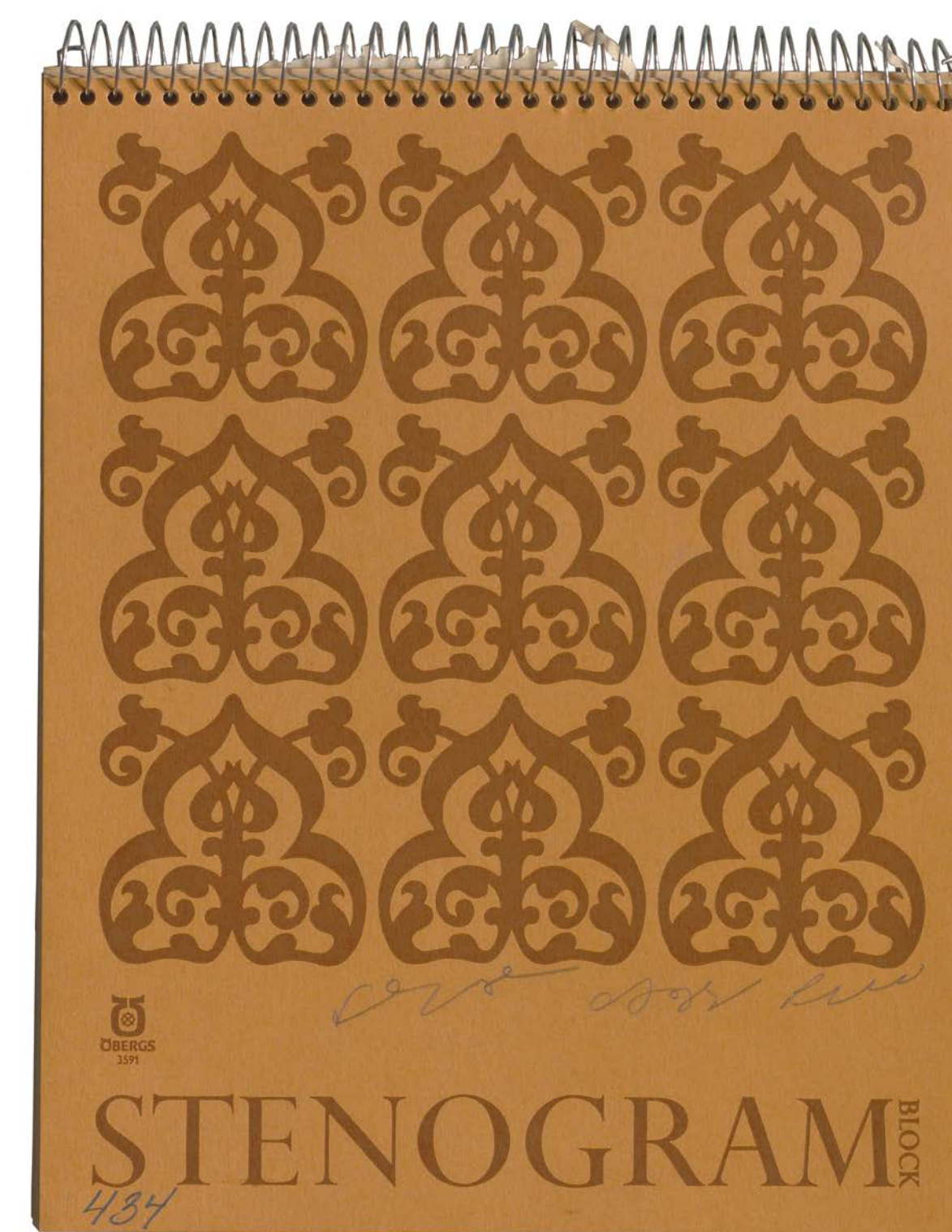
"A Ray of Light in Dreary Times"

Because of Covid-19, the hackathons took place online. Since our crowd mainly consisted of senior citizens (70+) with varying levels of digital literacy it was a challenge to get them all online and to teach them how to use video conferencing software, how to collaborate in a digital setting, etc.

One of our main (and unintended!) research results was how we managed to make elderly citizens more confident in a digital social setting and also being able to provide a social space for them when the government had recommended citizens who were 70+ years old to stay at home.

Outcomes for the Library

By facilitating the crowdsourcing process, the library supports research by enabling a successful transliteration of the material the researcher wants to study. The library also teaches information literacy to users by introducing new tools for exploring and working with cultural heritage collections. Overall, there is also increased accessibility to cultural heritage collections as the transliterations are useful metadata to the digitised objects and the research outputs boost the general knowledge about the collections.



170 stenographers signed up for crowdsourcing

52 notepads transliterated in five weeks

6 hackathons organised

Look inside the notepad here: <https://www.barnboksinstitutet.se/forskning/astrid-lindgren-koden/manus/>

Glossary

Crowdsourcing: the practice of engaging a group of people (crowd) for a common goal, e.g. contributing data through transcription, tagging, etc.

Expert crowdsourcing: the same practice as crowdsourcing, but the crowd consists of people with special expertise (e.g. shorthand skills).

Omeka and Scripto: Omeka is a web-publishing platform for collections. Scripto is a plugin which allows for crowdsourcing of the Omeka content.

Shorthand: a writing method to take notes quickly ("to catch the thought midflight" as Astrid Lindgren put it) often used by secretaries before recording devices were readily available. The method is also called stenography.

Illustration by Jenny Jansson

