

Umeå Association of International Affairs

UTPOST

ATT JOBBA SOM
LEDARSKRIBENT

DEMOCRACY FOR
SALE

WHEN WARS GO
VIRAL

THE ROHINGYA
CRISIS

**FREE MEDIA.
all good or only an illusion?**

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear reader,

The topic of this semester's issue is free media and the impact it has on our society. First, one has to decide on what free media is. Is it accessibility? Is it independant media outlets? Is it the ability for everyone to create their own news and share their experience, or is it something else?

In this issue, I have tried put together a broad representation of what free media can be, hopefully widening your view of of the topic, but also making you start thinking about the importance of it, and hopefully challenge your own perception.

Here, you will be able to read about the importance of free media in a national crisis and about the financing of media distributors. You will also get the chance to read about what it is like to work as a political editor at a local newspaper. Finally an associate professor at Umeå university will share her findings on the rise of social media as a new, central news broadcaster.

The volcano on the cover of the magazine, I imagine symbolises the importance of the journalistic profession, and even more so the topic of this edition of UTPOST. An outlet of events, thoughts and human experiences, that has been melting and blending through society and human interaction, finally erupting in media and back out to the world.

I would like to thank every writer who have made this magazine possible by contributing with their mind-opening perspectives and I hope that their stories will teach you something new.

Happy reading,

Miriam Lundberg
EDITOR

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Editor
MIRIAM LUNDBERG
redaktor@upfu.org

Writers in this edition
JACOB LARSSON
HUGO BURÉN
MOA ERIKSSON KRUTRÖK
KIERAN JOHANSSON RYE

Photografers
JULIA REKAMIE
GIUSI BORRASI
ARLINGTON RESEARCH
MAX MUSELMANN
FLORE W
MAHESH PATEL
SJ OBIJO
REUTERS
KENNY HOLSTON
ELLIOT ANDERSSON

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UTPOST

Democracy for sale

Jakob Larsson

Let's start this article with an assumption: you, the reader, are probably in your twenties. It's highly likely that you use the internet daily, and if you were born in the 2000s, there's a 97% chance you're active on social media every day. Furthermore, it's quite probable that you use TikTok or platforms like YouTube, Reddit, or Facebook to stay updated on news.

THIS is hardly news to you. For those of us who have grown up in the digital age, the internet and social media are important parts of everyday life. Therefore, I won't dive too deep into how Swedes' internet habits have changed, but it's important to point out that the media landscape hasn't always looked like this.

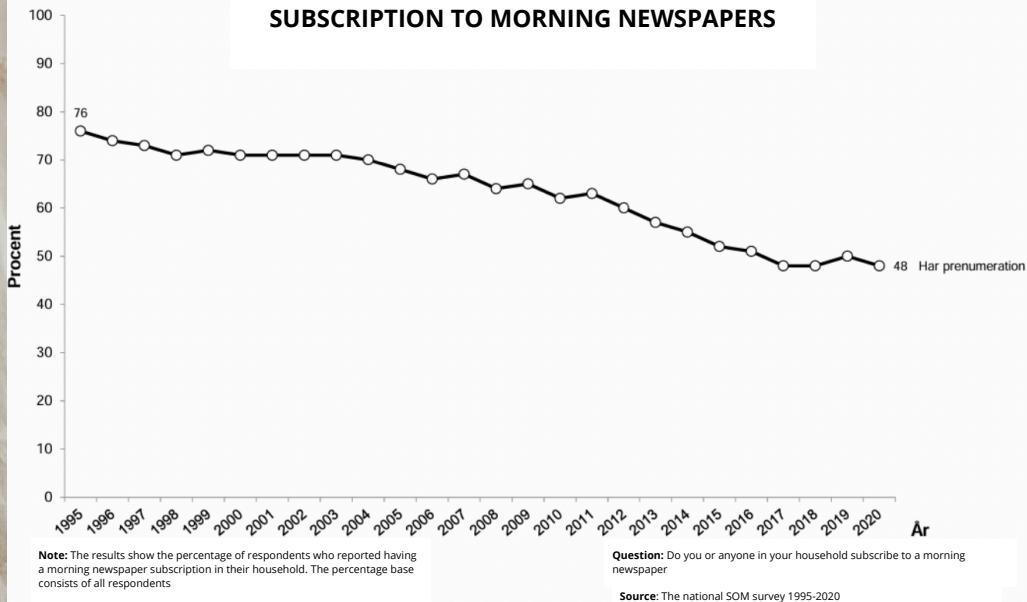
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From Subscriptions to Social Media

Historically, traditional news media have been financed through a combination of subscriptions and advertising. In the past, this was a sustainable model where companies paid to be visible in outlets that had a large and loyal readership. However, with the rise of the internet and social media, these revenue streams have decreased drastically. Advertisers choose to put their money where the audience's attention is, and today that audience is increasingly on social platforms instead of traditional news sites.

This has put enormous pressure on traditional media. In addition to declining revenues, consumers are becoming less inclined to pay for subscriptions, especially when so much content is available for free online. As a result, media companies have been forced to adapt

SUBSCRIPTION TO MORNING NEWSPAPERS



their business models, often increasing their focus on click-friendly headlines and sensational news to attract traffic—and thus advertising revenue.

Another hurdle for traditional media is tools like Brand Safety Floor and NewsGuard, which advertisers use to determine where it's safe to place ads. Media outlets that report on sensitive or controversial topics risk being classified as "unsafe" by these systems, leading to decreased advertising revenue. This problem is often driven by automated algorithms, meaning some news organizations may choose to avoid certain reporting to not lose advertisers. This creates a risk of self-censorship and limits journalistic diversity.

Competition and Consequences

In economics, competition is often seen as a positive. It lowers prices, increases quality, and weeds out inefficient companies—all for the consumer's benefit. But when it comes to news media, the issue is more complex. The competition isn't just between traditional media houses but also between them and the new digital and social media, which often don't adhere to the same journalistic standards.

The economic pressure on traditional media has led some to prioritize quick traffic over in-depth journalism. This has resulted in an increased focus on so-called "clickbait journalism," which may not always meet the quality standards previously considered



the norm in news reporting. This development risks undermining public trust in the media. In fact, only 25% of Swedes believe that the tabloids Expressen and Aftonbladet are independent. Meanwhile, public service broadcasters like Sveriges Television (SVT) and Sveriges Radio enjoy much higher trust levels, with 68% and 63% respectively viewing them as independent actors.

Media Independence and Democracy

The independence of the media is crucial for a functioning democracy. When funding weakens, media outlets can become dependent on external interests, whether they are advertisers, political actors, or owners with their own agendas. This can affect both which news is reported and how it is angled—a dangerous development. It risks damaging public trust in the media and weakening their role as impartial watchdogs of power.

Examples from other countries, such as Ukraine and Hungary, show how oligarchs have built vast media empires to influence political discourse. When private interests control the media, there's a risk that government-critical voices are silenced, and media diversity shrinks. Even in the United States, media consolidation has led to companies like Rupert Murdoch's

News Corporation being used to promote conservative political interests, which risks reducing journalistic independence.

Swedish Media Under Pressure

Although Sweden has long had a strong tradition of public service and independent media, our media landscape also faces significant challenges. Commercial newspapers, which traditionally received some state support, now operate in an increasingly competitive and digitalized world. In recent years, one in four journalism jobs has disappeared, and many newsrooms have been forced to make cuts. When finances are tight, it's difficult to maintain independent journalism.

This creates a dangerous situation where those who stand to gain the most from buying an economically struggling media company may be individuals with political ambitions or other hidden interests. If we're not careful, we could end up in a situation where our news reporting is controlled by those with the deepest pockets, and our democratic arena risks being influenced by the highest bidder.

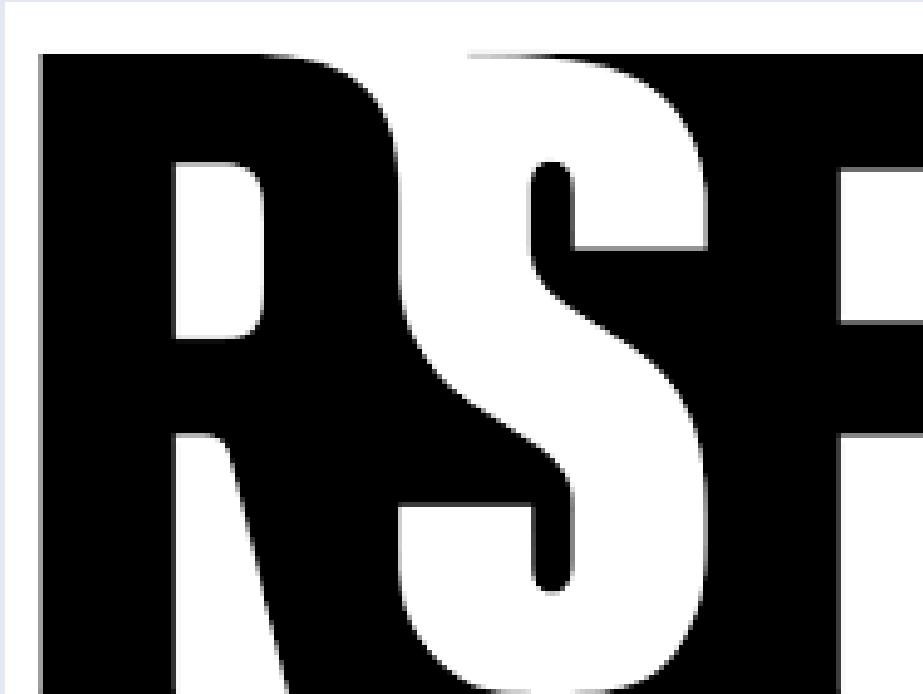
Conclusion

Traditional media are in a time of change. As social media and digital platforms claim an ever-larger share of the audience, legacy media houses are fighting for survival. It's a situation that could have far-reaching consequences for journalism, citizens' access to impartial information, and ultimately, democracy.



Photo: Mahesh Patel

This article doesn't present a ready solution, but it underscores an important point: the responsibility to protect media independence lies with all of us. If we value a free and fair democratic discourse, we must also value our media and their ability to continue working independently. It's a fight for the future of journalism and, by extension, for the future of our democracy.



Every year, Reporters Sans Frontières rank countries and regions based on the freedom of the press.

The numbers of 2024 show that the governments of the world os one of the biggest threats against the freedom of the press through failing to protect the freedom of speech and through actively silencing journalists.

According to Reporters sans frontières, in 36 of the countries the freedom of the press is threatened, and only 0,8% of the countries have good freedom of the press.

Source:Reporters Sans Frontières

Vad gör en politisk redaktör?

Hugo Burén

Erfarenheter och åsikter är skibentens egna

Som politisk redaktör för lokaltidningen Örnsköldsviks Allehanda har jag ansvar för tidningens ledarsida. Alltså den delen av tidningen där åsikter, tyckande och opinionsbildning får ta plats. Då till skillnad från övriga delen av tidningen där journalistiken ska präglas av neutralitet och objektivitet i rapporteringen.

Ledarsidan på Örnsköldsviks Allehanda är "oberoende liberal", det innebär att de texter som skrivs av mig och mina frilansskribenter bottnar i de liberala politiska idéerna. Den politiska stämpeln är helt frikopplat från partipolitiken och vad som är ett liberalt svar på dagsaktuella frågor är upp till redaktören själv att avgöra. När en politisk redaktör rekryteras, åtminstone på vissa mediehus i Sverige, får liberala stiftelser tycka till om vem som ska få jobbet.

Den vanligaste arbetsordningen på tidningen är att mina reporterkollegor skriver om nyheter som sker i kommunen eller regionen, som jag i sin tur kommenterar, analyserar och tycker till om.

För att kunna göra mitt jobb - för att granska och ifrågasätta beslut som rör örnsköldsviksbornas vardag och deras skattepengar - måste ett par grundplåtar finnas på plats. Vilket det lyckligtvis gör i Sverige, men som inte är självklarhet.

År 1766, som första landet i världen, infördes en lag i Sverige som skyddar det fria ordet, nämligen tryckfrihetsförordningen. Lagen, som alltså fortfarande gäller, står på två ben. Det ena handlar om att var och en har rätt att uttrycka sina åsikter och tankar i tryck.

Lagens andra del, offentlighetsprincipen, handlar om att svenska medborgare har rätt att ta del av myndigheternas handlingar, såsom beslut och protokoll.



Photo: Arlington Research



De här medborgerliga rättigheterna är en nyckel i det journalistiska arbetet. När ett politiskt beslut fattas i kommunfullmäktige eller i en nämnd, går det som reporter eller ledarskribent att ta del av hur respektive parti röstade, vilka beslutsunderlag och utredningar som fanns tillgängligt när beslutet togs, allt i enlighet med offentlighetsprincipen. Ofta gör den här insynen att det går att granska och ifrågasätta de beslut som politikerna fattar.

Den svenska offentlighetsprincipen är stark i en internationell jämförelse. Men hela tiden pågår en ”dragkamp” där makthavare alltid kommer ha incitament att exempelvis sekretessbelägga allt fler uppgifter för att minska sitt eget huvudbry.

En annan utmaning framåt handlar om hur man ska se på de här rättigheterna i en ny, och digital, tid. Det är en sak att journalister

och medborgare kan få insyn i beslut och handlingar som rör deras vardag. Men det kanske är en annan sak att hemsidor samlar in uppgifter om ens bostadsadress, vilka bilar man äger, telefonnummer eller inkomst och sprider dessa i stor skala på internet?

Den här konflikten hänger i sin tur samman med en annan förutsättning för all journalistisk verksamhet; förtroende. Vem som helst kan kalla sig journalist, yrket kräver ingen speciell legitimation som exempelvis förskollärare, auktoriserade revisorer eller veterinärer behöver.

Däremot finns det andra faktorer som gör att stora delar av befolkningen ändå i första hand lägger sin tilltro till de traditionella mediehusen och public service. Detta trots att utmanarna och alternativen, med internet och sociala medier, har blivit allt fler.

Förtroendet kommer i grunden av att man följer en rad etiska principer om vad man kan publicera och inte. Men det här förtroendet måste samtidigt, även av mediehusen själva, förtjänas. Inte minst genom att försöka ha örat mot marken och berätta om det människor faktiskt tycker är relevant. Journalistiken får aldrig bli ”för fin” för att berätta om det läsarna bryr sig om.

En annan inte helt oviktig förutsättning i det journalistiska arbetet, inte minst på en lokaltidning, är att makthavare och media har en respektfull och förstående relation sinsemellan. En professionalitet där politiker och höga tjänstemän är införstådda med att medias uppgift faktiskt är att granska dem för invånarnas bästa. För såväl den objektiva rapporteringen, som den tesdrivna ledarjournalistiken, finns det alltså ett par saker som möjliggör det dagliga arbetet.

En hel del av dessa förutsättningar handlar om juridiska fri- och rättigheter, men många handlar snarare om ett samspel mellan aktörer i samhället.

Alldeles oavsett kommer de alltid vara under omprövning - tillika alltid angelägna att försvara.

WHEN WARS GO VIRAL

SHARE SHARE SHARE SHARE SHARE
SHARE SHARE SHARE SHARE SHARE

Moa Eriksson Krutrökk

*Associate Professor in Media and
Communication Studies, Ph.D. and Docent
in Sociology, Umeå University*

In recent years, digital platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have transformed the way we experience and engage with global crises, especially wars. Social media has become central to how information spreads during conflicts like the ongoing war in Ukraine. Platforms such as Twitter and TikTok allow individuals to quickly reach millions with updates and analyses, challenging traditional news outlets. A key difference, however, is that social media algorithms prioritize engaging content, often favoring sensational or emotionally charged material. In this context, memes and viral posts become powerful tools to quickly capture attention and generate awareness around a particular issue or version of a story.

In my research with Tom Divon, a scholar at the Hebrew University who studies memory-making, activism, and crises, we focus on how these platforms have become



active agents in disseminating information and crisis management. One particularly intriguing area is how influencer culture and memes now play central roles in spreading information, and even misinformation, about wars.

In today's media landscape, understanding how social media platforms serve as channels of information and as active tools is increasingly essential. Through their visibility and reach, these platforms enable new actors to influence public perceptions of conflict. One of the most striking developments is the rise of influencers as key figures in war and crisis narratives, often called "war influencers." At the start of the war in Ukraine in 2022, reports emerged of Russian influencers allegedly spreading Kremlin propaganda. At the same time, we have seen numerous Ukrainian TikTok users achieve substantial reach with engaging posts that show their war-torn reality, sometimes set to popular, so-called "audio memes." Traditionally, war reporting and

crisis news have been the domain of journalists and news organizations. Today, however, influencers—with their strong connections to followers and capacity for engagement—are increasingly shaping how crises are

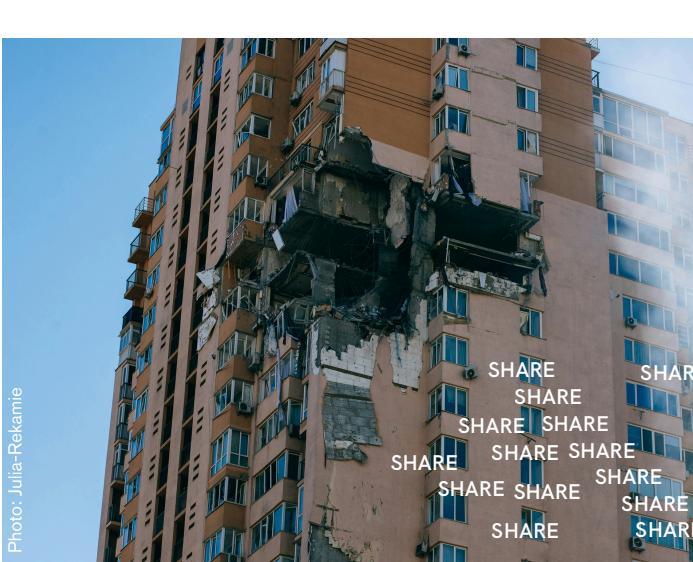


Photo: Julia-Rekamie

portrayed and understood. In the context of the Ukraine war, we have seen TikTok influencers contribute to the information flow in various ways—sometimes by spreading news or calling for help, but also by sharing subjective interpretations of the conflict. This has been a focal point in several of our studies.

One central aspect is influencers' ability to engage their followers on a level that traditional media might not reach. This means they can create personal, often emotional, narratives about crises that resonate differently than objective news reporting. However, this dynamic is not without challenges, as influencers often have their own agendas and can promote biased messages or, in the worst cases, misinformation.

Another significant component of my research is the role of memes, with their viral and accessible nature, as potent tools for promoting a particular version of reality. Memes are not simply humorous images or videos—they have also become powerful

instruments for opinion-shaping and information dissemination. In crisis situations, such as pandemics or wars, memes have been used to spread knowledge and as tools to reinforce specific interpretations of events, including disinformation.

Our research highlights how TikTok's algorithms shape the spread of humorous and dramatic representations of conflicts, which can have both positive and negative effects.

On the one hand, humor and memes can help people cope with the hardships of a crisis by providing an outlet for laughter and shared experiences.

On the other, they can distort serious situations or normalize particular perspectives.

In the case of the Ukraine war, memes have been widely used to strengthen national sentiment, mock the enemy, or foster a sense of solidarity. Memes can distill complex emotions and ideas into accessible, viral formats that, in turn, shape public interpretation of events. In our research, we explore how humor and satire through memes can function as a form of emotional and social crisis management but also as a vehicle for propaganda or one-sided interpretations of events. Platforms like TikTok offer content creators a space to process and express trauma through performative acts, a phenomenon we have referred to as "playful trauma" in our research.

This concept allows us to understand how TikTok creators convey their war experiences, blending humor, irony, and embodied performances to process and communicate trauma while making their suffering more visible—especially by incorporating popular meme-based templates for content creation.

At the same time, this form of content creation carries the risk of trivializing or aestheticizing the harsh realities of war. The pressure to make trauma visible may lead creators to emphasize the dramatic, performable aspects, potentially sidelining deeper emotional and psychological layers that are less algorithmically favorable. This focus on the performative risks fosters a superficial understanding of the actual trauma being portrayed.

SHARE SHARE
SHARE SHARE
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Social media platforms have thus evolved from social networks to active battlegrounds for information, where both traditional and new actors compete to control the narrative.

In a world where the information war runs parallel to the physical war, platforms, influencers and the prevalence of memes play a decisive role. Influencers can engage followers with their personal presence and spread emotionally charged messages, while memes act as quick, effective tools to disseminate and reinforce specific versions of the truth.

By understanding the sociotechnical role of social media in spreading messages during crises and how various actors employ these techniques, we can better grasp both the risks and opportunities of contemporary information dissemination. Our research aims to shed light on these mechanisms and understand how we might navigate a media landscape where the line between truth and disinformation is increasingly blurred and sociotechnically complex.

Photo: Max Muselmann

Holding Power to Account

The Rohingya Crisis and the Need for Investigative Journalism

Kieran Johansson Rye

Human rights. Democracy. Justice. These words hold immense power – yet they lose all meaning if not upheld by accountability. In an era where disinformation can be spread at a pace never seen before, the significance of investigative journalism is more important now than it ever has before.

This form of reporting often serves as a tool to hold those with power to account, holding a candle in the abyss into the inner workings of those who govern. Exposing the sometimes-ugly truths which would otherwise go unexposed. Very few recent events underline this necessity than the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar. The governing regime attempted to cloak its actions, however, through the sheer determination of risk-taking journalists, their plan proved not to be as successful. These journalists shined a spotlight on the atrocities being conducted towards the Rohingya and showed once again the sheer importance of investigative reporting in its' role in holding those with power to account.

The background for the crisis

The Rohingya are a minority Muslim ethnic group found within Myanmar. The ethnic group has been



Photo: Reuters

consistently subject to discrimination and repression. This has been systematically done through not being acknowledged as an official ethnic group, as well as being stripped of their citizenship ever since the passing of The Burma Citizenship Act in 1982. The discrimination against the Rohingya increased immensely in 2017 when reports of mass violence in the Rakhine State emerged. It was described officially as some form of counterterrorism, however, victims and reporters on the ground contradicted this reality. The massacre and burning of villages led approximately 700,000 Rohingya to flee to the neighbouring country of Bangladesh.

Investigative Journalists' Role in the Crisis

According to Reporters Without Borders, Myanmar is renowned for low press freedom, ranked 171st out of 180 countries. This only exacerbated risks to journalists trying to report on the crisis on top of the already occurring violence. Nonetheless, investigative journalists pieced together stories from survivor interviews and satellite imagery, unveiling the horrors the government desperately tried to hide. One of the most notable examples is the reporting conducted by Reuters journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, who risked their lives documenting the mass slaughter of Rohingya men by the army.

As a result of their journalistic work, they were arrested by the police and put on trial, displaying the true danger of their profession when reporting in countries which repress the media. Due to their work and many others, the international community picked up on the ongoing atrocities within Myanmar. This in turn would eventually lead to The Gambia bringing a

case against Myanmar to the International



Photo: Kenny Holston

Court of Justice in 2019, accusing the government of genocide.

The vital role of Investigative Journalism and its future

Although many reading this article would consider investigative reporting a fundamental good for society, the profession has been harder to sustain in recent years. Not only due to the possible risks involved such as violence and imprisonment, as shown in the reporting found in the Rohingya crisis, but also because of the increasing lack of funding.

Conducting investigative reporting demands lots of resources from media companies who choose to engage in investigative journalism. This is because of the sheer amount of time and funding needed in order to verify and conduct reporting to the degree needed. However, when compared to conventional articles it is harder for these media houses to cough up the money needed when the financial incentive is not always there.

The Rohingya crisis is just another harrowing example of the outright necessity of investigative journalism in holding those with power to account. It should be considered as a cornerstone for being able to uphold some of the most important values of society and the world risks falling into the darkness of oppression without it.

WORD FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear readers and members,

Free media's role is as important now as ever, with growing numbers of autocracies and conflicts around the world. The fast pace of news sharing of social media makes it harder to sort out the propaganda and the lies. It's important that we discuss the topics and are aware of the pillar that free media is to democracies, and I am delighted that our editor chose this particular topic to contribute to the discussion.

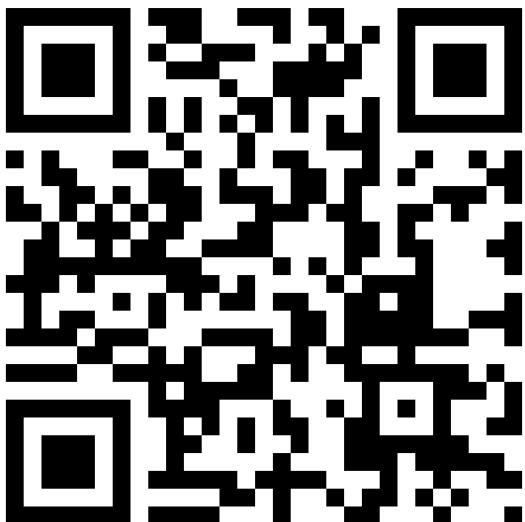
As the semester continues I am so excited and proud to be working with this year's UAIA board. The board is incredibly eager and active, and I know that we will create a lot of fun things throughout the year. I am honored to work with this incredible board and hope that our members will be able to feel it as well.

Please don't hesitate to take part in our events and get involved! Whether it is coming to an event, listening to a lecture, talking on our podcast or writing in Utpost, we appreciate you and your engagement!

With love,

Märta Göransson
your President of UAIA

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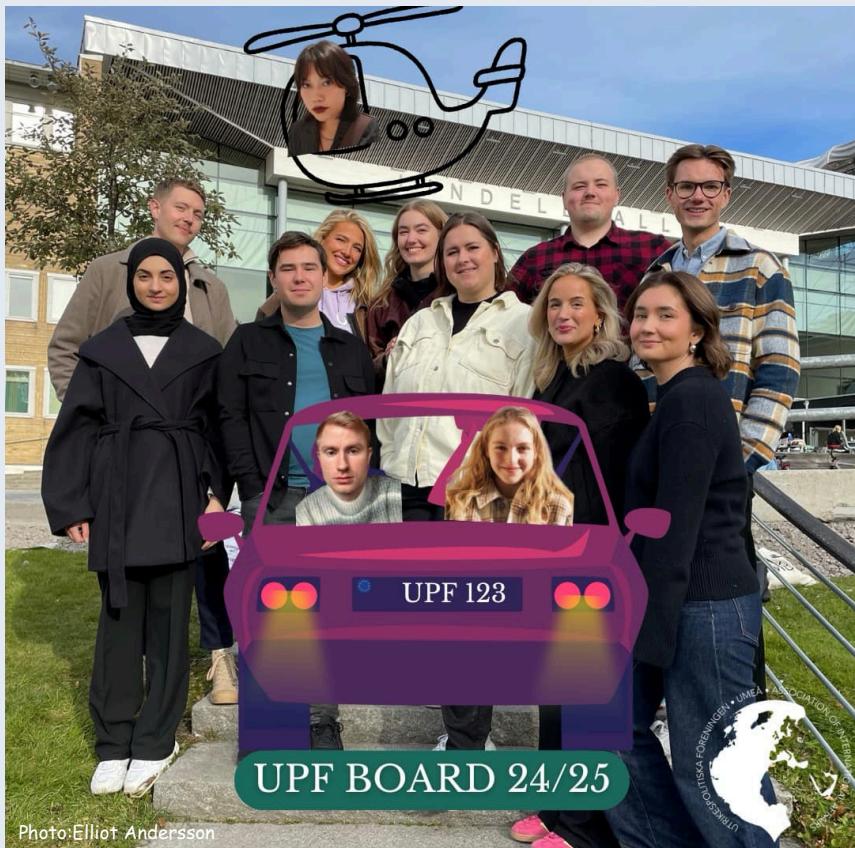
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ROOM B14333, BOX 7652
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