

Grußwort

Conference By the Book 11

“Minds, Myths and Machines-Rewiring the Publishing Industry”

24-25 June 2026, Akademie der Wissenschaften, Geschwister-Scholl-Straße 2

On behalf of the Faculty of Philosophy and Philology I take great pleasure in welcoming you to this year's "By the Book", the annual conference of the European Association of Publishing Studies. I am particularly pleased to welcome Peter Kraus vom Cleff, managing director of the Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels, and Angus Phillips, President of the Association. I would also like to welcome your keynote speakers:

- Michael Bhaskar, who leads the Microsoft AI Futures team.
- Moritz Schaeffer, a research associate in the TRA&CO (Center for Translation & Cognition) team at the Faculty of Translation Studies, Linguistics and Cultural Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University.
- Jessica Gedamu, Vice-President for Global Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Springer Nature.
- As well as the organisers of the program committee of EUROPUB, and the local organisers Anke Vogel, Gerhard Lauer and Christoph Bläsi.

You are industry experts, educators, and researchers who are coming together for two days to explore key aspects of book publishing and to advance the discipline of publishing studies. As your conference announcement states, By the Book 11 will explore how the digital transformation, in particular artificial intelligence, and new business models are reshaping editorial processes, content creation, book marketing and reader engagement.

Your conference theme, "Minds, Myths and Machines - Rewiring the Publishing Industry" is an apposite one and makes your conference part of a larger conversation in the fields of critical publishing studies, book history, reading research, education, and digital humanities. Indeed, a brief look at the

program confronts the uninitiated with a myriad of new terms and concepts: Audio books, interactive ebooks, webnovels, accessible book, self-publishing, digital publishing, inclusive publishing, embodied literacy.

Talking about new terms: I must confess I stumbled over the abbreviation “Europub.” My first thought was that “Europub” sounds like a naively optimistic name for a British watering hole in the age of Brexit. Indeed, the organization closest to my heart in my own profession, Historians of the Twentieth-Century United States, has an even more dubious name. It is called HOTCUS, which sounds more like the name for a raunchy website than a respectable professional organization....

But be that as it may... returning to your conference: Much has been written about whether AI and the digital revolution are a threat or an opportunity, or both. What these debates focus on are, among other themes, how the digital revolution challenges cultures of communication, reading habits and readership milieus, democratic governance, and the natural environment. For example, Oliver Vogel, publishing director at S. Fischer Verlag, argued a few days ago in an interview with the FAZ on the company’s decision to relocate to Berlin that “the book market is dominated by an extreme concentration of power and a purely algorithm-driven narrowing of the range of titles. The traditional middle-class system—comprising the arts and culture sections with their leading critics, classic publishing houses... and the advisory book trade—is inexorably crumbling,” which in his view leads to a “digital monoculture.” (FAZ, 17 June 2026, p. 9, my translation)

The debates about the digital turn are wide-ranging. They include discussions about whether it ushers in a new age of illiteracy or makes knowledge and information more accessible; whether social media corrupts the minds of the young, turns them into zombies glued to their cell phones and seeking constant stimulation through a world of ever more titillating imagery, or opens up new modes of social interaction, community organizing and social ethics.

Another set of questions revolves around whether AI is a tool that replaces the drudgery of stultifying labor or whether it makes us into dependent, brainwashed addicts of the machine.

Similarly prominent are issues of democratic discourse and decision-making. As economist Francesca Bria puts it, “What does democracy mean in the face of entirely new power dynamics, where algorithmic authorities are taking over the traditional space of dialogue and information?” And are these technological quantum leaps inevitable and unstoppable, or can they be channeled, directed, controlled, and shaped?

Another debate centers on whether the deep structure of algorithms, technoligarchic organization and data computing is the zenith of anthropocentric hubris or the beginning of a new relationship with the natural world in the post-fossil, postindustrial, and post-modern age that, highlighting global connectivity and web structures, alert us to our nature as interdependent beings? In these discussions we encounter transhumanist dreams of self-optimization, as well as technophilic visions of mankind liberated by machinery for a more sustainable, meaningful, sociable, ethical, participatory future.

These are just a few of the questions emanating from discussions in your field that are keeping us busy, though not out of trouble. Mainz is indeed a good place to talk about these issues related to books and publishing. None of you need to be reminded of the media revolution of the early modern period, with which Mainz and Gutenberg’s printing technology and industry are, of course, closely associated, and that paved the way for the modern book market and modern mass publishing.

Crucially, media revolutions generate their own political structures. The pamphlet literature and tracts of the Reformation era and the religious wars were linked to the emancipatory questioning of authority—expressed in the

priesthood of all believers, the authority of direct inspiration, and the direct access of the believing self to God. At the same time (as historian Thomas Kaufmann writes) the print revolution served as the communicative precursor to the Peasants' War, the first major event fueled by mass media. Printed materials, produced by the hundreds or thousands and read aloud in markets, brought together the scattered peasant uprisings, and led them to a shared programmatic understanding. In the process, demands for the abolition of serfdom, the reduction of taxes, and an end to arbitrary justice, however, were combined with the most vile abuse, the most obscene insults, invective and hatred.

In the long run, the print revolution of the early modern period paved the way for new economic forms and new political constructs. It is closely connected to the rise of territoriality, modern statehood, the dissolution of feudal structures and bonds, and the idea of the nation-state—in both its totalitarian and democratic forms.

The digital revolution of our own time is no less radical, bringing together technological space-age enthusiasm and the counterculture. On the one hand, the cybernetic liberation theology of the 1960s was shaped by the tech pioneers' libertarian, technophilic mindset, underpinned by neoliberal game theory and rational-choice theory. On the other hand, the spirit of the counterculture promised transparency, participation, the dismantling of hierarchies, democratization, and new forms of solidarity. Personal computers—in contrast to the IBM mainframes integrated into the military-industrial complex—were supposed to enable free access to knowledge through decentralized networking. This was to give rise to a collective ethic based on self-regulated, authentic user communities beyond state control, the power of big industry, and repressive social norms.

Yet the digital revolution, which began with the claim of democratization, once again gave rise to new authoritarian control structures. It provides surveillance

tools that cement commercial monopolies and authoritarian regimes, undermining the capacity of the democratic constitutional state to shape its own future. As Evgeny Morozov, author of *The Net Delusion*, observes, “the internet has failed as a liberating force, not because it is inherently flawed, but because the data and algorithms were already in the wrong hands.” And Jürgen Habermas feared that a “culture-debating” public sphere is being turned into a “culture-consuming” sphere controlled by corporate capitalism and shored up by the nation-state.

Whether the print and the digital “revolutions” are truly comparable remains to be seen. Some people have argued that we are not just talking about a quantitative change -- in the form of a massive increase in computing facilities, communicative access, and global reach -- but a qualitative one. They predict radically different social structures, senses of self, and forms of governance that we cannot even imagine at this point. In particular, they locate the power of the new media in the fact that the expansion of invasive control and surveillance capabilities goes hand in hand with the pretence of a sense of freedom and self-determination. Managing this combination of authoritarianism and libertarianism, the chimera of self-realization generated by an ever more intrusive control apparatus, is, in their view, what constitutes a key power of the digital economy, and increasingly shapes the emerging political structures.

Others have been more cautious, pointing to the way previous transformations on this scale have played themselves out in history. Historians (my own tribe), for good reasons, tend to be conservative in their outlooks. They are not given to utopian flights of fancy, and are rather sceptical about the potential of humanity to engineer its own redemption. They are more the “plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose” types. They emphasize the power of set ways, traditions, structures, powers that be, while at times dreaming of a better world. And they recognize history is not a particularly useful guide when asking about the future.

Like most of us, I have no answer to all these questions. However, I am confident that your conference will be an opportunity to contribute to these broader public debates about technological change, economic transformation, environmental challenges, cultural iconoclasm and social realignments. And for us as academics it is important to remember that many of you are the professionals whose expertise in editing, publishing, marketing is key to our visibility and recognition, who provide us with the avenues to voice our questions, reflections, findings, and critiques. In this spirit I wish you all the very best for your proceedings and thank you for coming to Mainz.