

## Transforming Media

## The next chapter

By Nicola Holzapfel



The Leipzig Book Fair opens this week.  
Source: Leipziger Messe GmbH / Norman Rembarz

The Leipzig Book Fair opens in a few days, and the impact of digitalization on the publishing business will be a hot topic in the exhibition halls. But book historian Christine Haug is not expecting the imminent demise of the printed book.

"I scowl with frustration at myself in the mirror. Damn my hair – it just won't behave, and damn Katherine Kavanagh for being ill, and subjecting me to this ordeal." These are the opening lines of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, a global bestseller which only appeared in print thanks to the internet. By the end of 2012, no fewer than 70 million copies of the trilogy *Shades of Grey* had been sold. The German weekly *Die Zeit* characterized the novels, centering on a sado-masochistic relationship, as "crushingly boring".

The English author Erika Leonard, alias EL James, had the good fortune to write them at the right time. It has never been so easy to publish a book. Online self-publishing makes it possible for any author to turn a manuscript into an e-book that can be read on any sort of screen, directly and at no cost, and without having to convince a single editor that it is worth publishing. – This is how *Fifty Shades of Grey* made its debut.

In the topsy-turvy world of self-published e-books, the critical appraisal previously undertaken by the publisher takes place after the book has reached the market. Authors whose work finds enough enthusiastic readers on the internet can turn to the world of traditional publishing with high hopes. After

EL James had sold a quarter of a million copies of her novel on the web, Random House acquired the rights for over a million dollars.

"The idea of depending on the recommendation of ordinary readers works very effectively. Readers' reactions on the internet can set a trend, but do not guarantee that a book will sell well on the print market," says Professor Christine Haug, who heads the study program in Book Science at LMU. Haug has close contacts with several publishing firms, including Droemer Knauer, and is intimately acquainted with the challenges with which digitalization confronts the business.

Droemer Knauer started its own online platform several years ago in the hope of discovering work that had bestseller qualities like those of *Shades of Grey*. The platform, neobooks-de, systematically collects and analyzes readers' responses to books that appear there. The authors themselves publish their manuscripts there, and readers evaluate them online. Books that particularly impress the online community are passed on to the editorial department, and their authors may be offered a contract by the company. The online readers effectively have a say in what appears in the publisher's catalogs, and ultimately lands in

the bookshops. "Neobooks is a canny business model," says Haug, and the platform is now run by graduates of her course. Authors whose work does well there can get their careers off to flying start and are quickly signed up by the firm. Thanks to the platform, the publisher also profits from the fact that online readers report their reactions to books on the social media.

Authors too – especially those who self-publish online – are beginning to exploit the interactive nature of the internet. They enter into direct contact with their readers via social networks or on their own websites. Indeed, readers can now be involved in the process of production from the outset. They organize crowdfunding campaigns to finance projects, contribute to background research, follow "their" author's progress or even do some of the writing themselves.

All that may sound new, but we've been here before, as Christine Haug points out: "In the 19th century serialized pulp fiction became part of popular culture. The serial form enabled readers to influence the progress and development of the plot, as in the case of the famous Tom Shark detective series in Germany," she says. Even serious authors, like Charles Dickens, who published their novels in installments in the better

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magazines, sometimes bowed to their readers' wishes.

A look back at the history of book publishing provides a more nuanced perspective on the impact of digitalization, such as current debates on "internet addiction". "The arguments here – it poses a danger to health, encourages criminal behavior – are the same as those cited by critics who warned of the alleged addictiveness of reading in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The same fears in the face of new developments, which are always provoked by processes of change, are with us again," says Haug. She is also regards the contention that the internet will put an end to the age of reading with skepticism. "There is no evidence whatever that support such a notion," she says.

"I see digitalization as another transformation of the media landscape, the latest in a long line," she says. She believes the new media will supplement, but will not displace, the book. I am firmly convinced that the book as a printed product will survive. There will always be those who wish to read a particular printed text in book form. Others will always plump for an e-book, while others will happily switch between media, depending on the context, for example when they are travelling.

The numbers support Haug's thesis. At present e-books play a very minor role on the German market. According to a study carried out by the Association of German Publishers and Booksellers (*Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels*), they account for only 2.4% of sales. However, around 50% of publishers now offer e-books to their customers, and every second book now published is also available in that form. Science books and other specialist texts

make up a significant fraction of the texts published in electronic form, according to the study mentioned above.

"The technology will change rapidly in the coming years." The e-readers now on offer are made by different manufacturers. But there is no standardized data format, and not all e-books can be read on any given device. The best-selling e-reader in Germany is Amazon's Kindle. "But users want to be able to read everywhere, anytime, and not just on a certain type of reader. This problem remains unsolved," says Haug. In this context, she mentions a study done at Mainz University, which concluded that the format EPUB3 could best serve as such a standard. However, the demand for e-readers is rising less rapidly than expected, perhaps because many e-book fans now prefer to read on their tablet computers. After all, tablets allow users not only to read e-books but also to watch a film or surf the net. "It will be interesting to see how the e-book market develops, as tablets get smaller, cheaper and more powerful," says Haug.

The dominant position of Amazon's online shops (75% of all book orders online go to Amazon) is a matter of concern not only to publishers. For Haug, at least with respect to e-books, it also raises the issue of censorship. "Kindle users are forced to buy their e-books from Amazon, which gives the firm control over what they can read. Amazon decides which titles are available for the Kindle in the Amazon shops and Amazon retains access to every Kindle sold. And when a copyright dispute arose in 2009, the company simply deleted the e-book versions of George Orwell's 'Animal Farm' from all the Kindle devices out there.

The majority of e-books purchased in

Germany fall into the fiction category. Readers of e-books are especially fond of crime fiction, science fiction and fantasy, as a study carried out by the Society for Consumer Research reports. This also holds for platforms like wattpad.com, which have no connections with traditional publishers but allow budding authors to place their literary efforts at the mercy of their reader-reviewers. Wattpad is a Canadian firm and, according to their own figures, the platform has a readership over 10 million. "Love?" is a big hit with young readers on wattpad.com. Here's how it begins: "The alarm clock went off, I turned it off, and sighed. First day back at school after the summer holidays who needed that I thought and sighed again."

#### Outsourcing the editor

In 2012, traditional publishers brought out 80,000 new titles, causing the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* to warn that this deluge would stimulate a levelling of standards and bring the mediocre to the fore. But what about the countless works of would-be authors that are accessible only online? "It is difficult to evaluate arguments about quality, because they are bound up with what the better educated regard as worthwhile literature. As yet, there are no good grounds for the belief that digitalization is to blame for a trivialization of literature," Haug asserts.

She herself believes that digitalization has the potential to further the diversification of literature. "The traditional market for books is focused on best-sellers. That is tantamount to the destruction of books, because it reduces the ambit of literature," she says. "There are plenty of authors we'd know nothing about, if they hadn't emerged from obscurity via the internet," she adds.



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As part of this whole process, one prominent quality controller in traditional publishing seems destined to disappear: the professional editor. Publishers now employ very few full-time editors. The role is outsourced. "As far as fiction is concerned, only long-established and successful authors now enjoy the services of an expensive editorial department. Authors of science books and other non-fiction titles must do everything themselves."

However, she maintains that it is misleading to make digitalization, online platforms and self-publishing responsible for the crisis in traditional publishing. "Many other factors had begun to operate before the internet, and its arrival has simply accelerated them. And German publishers were slow to adapt to the digital world," says Haug. "Indeed some publishers have done their best to make themselves redundant. Many science publishers expect authors to deliver texts that are ready for typesetting, and then demand that they subsidize the printing costs. Who needs publishers like that?" says Haug.

During her own lectures, Haug has ample opportunity to observe another effect of digitalization: an increasing tendency to read only excerpts. The first thing students ask is: Is there no reader for the course? They are focused on summaries." They expect to get copies of sections of a book, so that they don't have to read the whole thing.

There are now online firms that will take on the task of making excerpts from specific books for their customers. "We are going through a very exciting stretch. Every new trend generates a business model in no time," says Haug. Take liviato.de, for example. Its motto is: "*Wir machen Bücher kurz und klein*"

("We make short work of books"). Its website states that, thanks to their summaries, "it is perfectly possible to read 30 books or more per day". – And these summaries are written by users of the platform. "For someone interested in the history of books, like myself, this is a very special time, because some much is happening," says Haug. And that is reflected in the topics of the senior theses written by her students, which deal with themes such as author-reader communication on the net, online communities and the challenges faced by product managers.

And Haug notes yet another straw in the wind: "The idea of building up a library of one's own at home is on the way out," she says. The e-book study cited above found that only 59% of those who buy e-books feel the need to have bookshelves at home.

In spite of all this, Christine Haug is confident that: "Creative publishers will find effective responses to the challenges posed by digitalization." And that holds for bookshops too, she adds. The general perception that online bookstores are responsible for the decline of the retail book trade is too categorical for her. "Indeed, without Amazon, many bookshops would no longer exist," she says, because they organize their own

online sales via Amazon. According to Haug, the problem to which the conventional book trade has yet to find an answer is e-books: Very few readers of e-books go to the bookshop in town to buy them, which is why e-books currently account for less than 1% of a bookseller's overall turnover, according to the Börsenverein study. "Bookstores will adapt and keep an eye out for the right niche," says Haug. Indeed attempts are now being made to solve the e-book problem by offering downloadable vouchers that can be used to buy e-books in bookstores.

Authors without the marketing resources of a large publisher behind them, who are betting on the internet to find readers for their books, will also have to seek out their specific niches. Shades of Grey sold like hot cakes around the world and earned its author and its publisher millions, but only after it was published by Random House. "There was a huge marketing campaign behind it, the size of which it is hard to imagine unless you are in the business. It certainly robs one of any illusion that books are somehow different from other categories of goods," says Haug. Now, that record-breaker, which began as an e-book, can be found, stacked up in towering piles, in second-hand bookshops in the UK. – Nobody will touch it.



Prof. Dr. Christine Haug  
Professor of Book Science and Head of the degree course in Book Science at LMU. Having begun in the bookselling trade, Haug (b. 1962) studied at Gießen University, where she earned her PhD with a thesis on the history of a publishing house. She continued to work there, before moving to the Institute for Book Science in Mainz. In 2004, she obtained her *Habilitation* with a study of the history of railway-station bookshops.