

## On the Digital Future of Our Literature

*In Spring 2013, Fiktion and the Haus der Kulturen der Welt hosted several workshops in which authors consulted publishing industry experts and the Humboldt Internet Law Clinic about opportunities the digital age holds for literature that demands a special level of concentration. The following declaration opens this discussion to the public.*

Never has there been as much reading and writing as today. Less than 20 percent of the world's population is illiterate, half of what it was twenty years ago—and the number continues to drop. Children from every social background maintain lively personal correspondence, a pastime once reserved for the elite. Just two decades ago, the telephone seemed to threaten the very existence of this type of communication; now what continues to be called a telephone is mostly used for writing and reading.

Day-to-day writing lowers the threshold for composing one's own poems, stories, and novels. Almost anyone can make their texts available to the public and receive feedback from all over the world. Those successful in this arena might then be acknowledged by traditional publishers as well.

Wonderful as this is, our literary texts—which demand more in terms of concentration—are falling increasingly behind in competing for audiences with an overall limited attention span. This process began even before the introduction of e-books. Denying it is no solution; we have to develop new methods for communicating our literature to readers using digital technology.

Until now, we were content to have trade publishers attend to our work on a comprehensive level: they edited our books, placed, printed, distributed, and promoted them, acquired subsidiary rights, and granted us a share of the profits. In the best situation they did this book after book, until eventually the time came for a critical, complete edition. The less our literature contribute to company accounts, the less effort is put into our books, and in many bookstores they never hit the shelves in the first place. Many older titles are not even available as e-books. Commercial publishers have, for the most part, reacted defensively to the challenges of the digital age: shrinking their program, merging, axing employees, and concentrating on bestsellers. Smaller publishing houses that have sacrificed themselves for our literature have found it increasingly difficult to compete on the book market.

The idea that publishing books that do not immediately sell well is tantamount to an act of charity has compromised our writing. We can no longer stand by and watch as conditions deteriorate for our literature. It is time to consider these conditions ourselves and test the opportunities that the digital holds for the dissemination of our work:

- Because e-books can be made available anywhere in the world, irrespective of their commercial success, the success or failure of a title no longer needs to be determined within the first few weeks of its release. Attention can be garnered slowly and without the service of the mass media.
- Distributing e-books does not necessarily mean selling them. Indeed, as writers, we prefer living from the valorization of our works rather than hiring ourselves out in a

way that keeps us from writing. But we want the freedom to decide for each of our books if and when we were to give them away. The idea that it's a necessary evil for reading to cost money needs to be proved over and over again.

- Standard e-book formats mimic the printed book and expand it with added functions that may be beneficial for nonfiction, but that are rather distracting for those reading our literature. There has yet to be a digital reading format that uses the technical possibilities to facilitate concentration on our literature.

Existing Internet portals and forums might suffice for self-publishing genre literature, but our work requires intensive individual attention and an environment that stimulates curiosity. It is because of this that we have to join together—be it as a cooperative, foundation, association, or initiative, whether by means of investments, donations, contributions, sponsorship, or subsidies. Our literature, on the whole, can regain importance only if we collectively redefine our role as writers.

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