

4th Frankfurt Scientific Symposium, October 4–5, 2004

Opening Remarks

by Jeffrey Garrett

Good morning everyone. First of all, let me extend on the behalf of all participants sincere thanks to our hosts—Herr Direktor Dugall, Lindsey Fairhurst, and Dr. Andreas Werner, all of the City and University Library of Frankfurt—for their manifold efforts to make us feel welcome here in Frankfurt. It is truly delightful to be here.

A founding principle of these meetings in Frankfurt—of which this is now the fourth—has been to conduct transatlantic exchange. In the years since the first Frankfurt Scientific Symposium in 2000, this principle has been conceptually and geographically expanded somewhat to include transoceanic—Australians have been represented from the beginning—and, yes, even trans-Channel exchange. The Frankfurt symposium has also always been from the beginning a *translinguistic* exchange, with English and German dominating. This is somehow appropriate in the context of the Frankfurt Book Fair which begins tomorrow, considering that English and German constitute the 2nd and 3rd most frequently published languages in the world today, after Chinese.

Although all papers will be presented in English, the conference *theme* has been formulated in both English and in German. Implicit is the presumed equivalency of the English term “information literacy” with the German word “Medienkompetenz.” Yet does this hold? Before beginning our discussions, it would be useful to resolve this question, since after all we may otherwise discover that we are not talking about the same things.

In English, “information literacy” was coined in analogy to *literacy*, the ability to read and write. In *information* literacy, the computer—or information technology more generally—replaces the written word as a complex vessel of content. Being “information literate” means being able to locate and extract desired information from a computerized system with the same facility that a book reader reads or uses a book. In both instances, grappling with technology is important. It is easy to forget just how complex the work of the reader is, who must not only decipher written language, but also use print-based random-access features like tables of contents and indexes, combined with page numbers, to “navigate,” as we say today, to desired information. As Walter J. Ong frequently observed, human beings have used communications technology to deal with the epistemological demands of survival ever since the invention of language—the ur-technology which is at the root of both information literacy and *Medienkompetenz*.¹

¹ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen, 1982.

The origins and indeed the scope of the proposed German equivalent are entirely different. The problems start with the absence in German of a direct translation of the word “literacy,” which is usually rendered with the circumlocution “Fähigkeit, lesen und schreiben zu können”—the ability to read and write. Ironically perhaps, the English word *illiteracy* does exist in German, namely “Analphabetismus” or “Analphabetentum.” But a hoped-for word “Alphabetismus,” which one might think would mean “literacy,” does not mean that. In fact, it doesn’t exist.

Thus it is that we find the word *Medienkompetenz* often used in contexts where in English we encounter “information literacy.” Where does the word come from? In an essay entitled “Medienkompetenz als Schlüsselqualifikation” (2001),² Peter Glotz, the former SPD politician who is now a professor of media and communications management at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland, traces the term back to the 1970s, to the education and media theorist Dieter Baacke. In books such as *Kommunikation und Kompetenz* (1973), Baacke defined *Medienkompetenz* as the ability to integrate the primary experiences of our environment, i.e. the world as directly experienced, with secondary experiences, by which he meant the processing of mediated impressions of world—pictures, text, tables, radio, TV—, into a total cognitive amalgam which then forms the basis of action in the real world. We are therefore all cyborgs in this new media environment.³

So we see one difference between the two terms already: whereas in English, “information literacy” applies to information-gathering behavior primarily in a computerized and above all in an online environment, *Medienkompetenz* applies to these, but also to all traditional media as well. The Internet is simply the most recent form of media requiring adept use.

But there is a second difference separating these two words. In contexts of actual use, the German word has a decidedly normative thrust. Consider this sentence in an important German encyclopedia: “For there to be responsible use of the new media by all citizens, comprehensive media competence must be conveyed in all areas of society.”⁴ Where information literacy tends to be limited to a skill set, *Medienkompetenz* includes an awareness of potential risks and dangers.

So information literacy and *Medienkompetenz* may be used as equivalents, but we need to know that they conjure up markedly different associations in the minds of the

² Peter Glotz, “Medienkompetenz als Schlüsselqualifikation,” in Ingrid Hamm, ed. *Medienkompetenz: Wirtschaft, Wissen, Wandel*. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2001.

³ Dieter Baacke, *Kommunikation und Kompetenz: Grundlegung einer Didaktik der Kommunikation und ihrer Medien*. Munich: Juventa Verlag, 1973.

⁴ “Für einen verantwortungsbewussten Umgang aller Bürger mit den neuen Medien bedarf es der umfassenden Vermittlung von Medienkompetenz in allen Bereichen der Gesellschaft,” in the article “Telekommunikation,” *Brockhaus - Die Enzyklopädie: in 24 Bänden*. 20th rev. ed. Leipzig, Mannheim: F.A. Brockhaus, 1996-99. Accessed online via xipolis.net on December 13, 2004.

reader/listener—and probably, too, in the minds of those of us in this room. We should be aware of these divergences as we embark on our discussions today.

Before introducing our first speaker this morning, I want to direct a few words in German to the German speakers present today. On the face of it, it is simply absurd and grossly unfair to conduct a conference here, in your country, solely in English. Wir bringen sozusagen das Ausland zu Ihnen. Es ist aber für viele von Ihnen ein bekanntes sprachliches Ausland, wenn Sie diesen Konferenzraum betreten. Alle Referate werden heute und morgen in englischer Sprache gehalten. Aber in der Diskussion sind auch, sofern Sie von diesem Angebot Gebrauch machen wollen, Beiträge in deutscher Sprache willkommen. Herr Dugall und ich sind übereingekommen, uns in die Aufgabe des Übersetzens zu teilen. Fragen bzw. Antworten übersetzen wir gerne! Sie können sich aber auch punktuell an uns wenden, wenn Ihnen ein Wort nicht einfällt. Wir bemühen uns dann gemeinsam mit Ihnen, dass keine einzige sprachliche Nuance verlorenght!

I wish us all now a productive meeting.