

Fiesole Retreat 2026 Wrap-up

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Reflecting on this remarkable retreat has made me think of other conferences over the last decades as we have all lived through the transformations of libraries and publishing. What have we learned in that time?

In the 1990s, in the first age of universal digital information, we were in gatherings like this to conspire together in favor of a new age. The integrated library system (ILS) had come into being in the 1980s and 1990s, digital networked journals and books became real presences around 1990, and the invention of the World Wide Web detonated an explosion of developments. At a conference in 1992, the remarkable Willard McCarty, visionary pioneer of the digital humanities, said to me that he thought academics had about five years to shape the future before the corporate powers began to take over. In 1996, I bought my first book from Amazon.com.

But we were ready for that transformation. We could see what was happening in the great age of automation. I'll take August 28, 1995, as the day the world changed: Windows 95 was released that day and in a great rush, the networked personal computer with an email account and a web browser became the standard information infrastructure of the next age.

Libraries in those days made out like bandits. Our integrated library systems matured, we offered our users an ocean of newly accessible digital resources, and we digitized our library catalogs. We knew our jobs and we did them well. And libraries still had collections and users in the traditional way. The reader remained at the center of the information economy: the person who harvested information more powerfully than ever and used it to transform their work and world.

And then the exhilarating became routine. I used to say in the early 2000s, provokingly, that we were living in a technologically stagnant age. I meant that the new paradigm had matured, stabilized, and become routine. We had enjoyed about a decade of relatively modest technology progress.

And when the next revolution happened, I at least, missed it. On a street corner in San Francisco in 2007, I marveled at all the people who had slept on the sidewalk to be ready to buy the new iPhone as soon as the Apple store opened. Gosh, I thought, how silly. After all, we had cell phones already and what was this? A new cell phone with a web browser. How big could that be?

I was wrong. The revolution of the smart phone began at that moment almost 20 years ago, and it has been playing out ever since. The vagaries of airline service had led, during this Fiesole retreat, to an epidemic of text messages arriving in our phones at midnight, 1, 2, and 3 a.m. – to such an extent we are all now enslaved to the empowerment of our phones!

Now what? That proved to be the theme of our retreat. The revolution of augmented, or artificial, intelligence is upon us. This time around, the new tools are too powerful – and we know they are – to stay consistent with our old metaphors of catalogs and collections and readers. Something's happening here, but what it is isn't exactly clear. There's a man with an LLM over there and he's telling us we've got to beware.

What will happen when an agent does my reading for me? We explored that in the retreat particularly in the presentations of Lukas and Marjorie, who walked us through the real-world experience of working hard to reinvent readers, even while the reading-bots are invading our classrooms. In our session on ways and means and tactics of changing how to create and process metadata, we were asking carefully how human beings can make things easy for machines – a reversal of the last generation’s focus on machines making *our* lives easier. In our session on the evolution of trust, we were brought face to face with unsettling questions of knowing what we can and cannot trust – and how far it really matters.

Richard Ovenden, in his opening keynote, had spoken of the military abbreviation VUCA – vulnerability, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, four things that good planning in an unstable environment needs to keep in mind. And he added one more category: complacency, the disease that creeps in undetected all too readily. Sobering but wise words, I thought.

So, what is happening here? Do we face doom or utopia? Or are we looking at a revolution like the one brought by the Segway? Remember the Segway? The universal transportation device heralded around 2000 as literally (in one well-known pundit’s words) “bigger than the internet”. The last Segways were manufactured in 2020 and what we have left are a lot of irritating battery-powered scooters cluttering our streets.

Bearing that radical uncertainty in mind, I would like to suggest two tools for thinking, based on the long history of reading and writing.

First, it is always useful to face a disruptive innovation with recognition that human beings conceive size, scale, and big numbers very imperfectly. The power of artificial intelligence is such that many things that were difficult and managed mainly on a small scale will be able to be addressed very differently.

Here’s an example from the past: One of the criticisms leveled in the 15th century against the newfangled technology of movable type was that the products of print were all exactly alike. All the copies of a given book would be the same. Why was this a problem? Because the habit of readers in manuscript culture was to check a given copy of a book against another copy and therefore often to make useful corrections, because no two copies were identical. Not so with print books: a true and trenchant criticism, as far as it went. But what that criticism did not recognize was that printing would create a publishing business operating on a different scale, and with a very much larger amount of money, time, and investment, from what manuscript culture had known. In manuscript culture, “proofreading” was slow, painful, and minimally effective, but in print culture, it was worth a publisher’s time and effort to make copies as exact and correct as possible, and we now know that print did mark real progress in correctness of text. My point is that the error in the initial correct criticism lay in failing to imagine the difference in scale that was looming.

The same, I suspect, is true now. Enhanced systems will process so much more information so much more rapidly, that much of what we fear can be corrected. Right now we are preoccupied with the horror of AI hallucinations – “proofreading errors” of a very different kind. Those are real and important, and we do not yet know what difference the systems themselves will be able to make as their capacity and, yes, speed increase.

The second observation I offer is in a way the reverse of what I just said. We already live in an information world that has grown, in our lifetimes, unimaginably larger than anything ever known before. But at least the internet's riches are in principle all out there in public, and there are ways and means of convincing ourselves that we are capturing and keeping the important material. But does that now change utterly and forever? The most interesting things I now read on the web are custom answers to my prompts from ChatGPT or Claude, often running pages and pages. I keep the useful ones for myself, but they have no public or archivable existence. Since the earliest days of writing, formally recorded information has been scarce and we have developed a culture of accumulation and preservation, frustrated at its limitations and imperfections. Is that great age of the library – the place of accumulation and preservation of everything 'published' – now coming to an end? That, I think, is a very large and important question that we are only just beginning to conceive much less answer. But are we indeed now just getting to the moment of having to ask – what will replace the library?

I am sufficiently daunted myself by thinking in that direction, that I will close here, expressing my gratitude to the Fiesole organizers for asking for my comments: especially for providing such a rich banquet of provocation in Tübingen. My thanks as well to the many learned and innovative presenters.