

Fiesole Retreat 2026: May You Live in Interesting Times

April 13–15, 2026 | Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen, Germany

Sarah Schnitzler

The 26th event in the Fiesole Collection Development Retreat Series was hosted by Eberhard Karls University in Tübingen under the motto “May you live in interesting times: Access and sustainability: developing strategies to deal with uncertainties”. Although the event took place in the city’s oldest university building which has a history stretching back over 500 years, the discussions and presentations covered many current concerns and innovative approaches, typical of the Retreat’s distinctive blend of tradition and innovation.



Tübingen’s “Alte Aula” (old auditorium), the university’s oldest building, provided a beautiful, atmospheric setting for the conference.

At the conference, participants explored ways of reconciling the conflicting demands of the library and information sector: Ensuring resilience, inclusivity, and long-term stewardship in times of rapid transformation and uncertainty without losing the dynamic infrastructures and flexibility of collections; allowing for equitable access while also promoting sustainable practices; balancing openness to change and technological innovation on the one hand, and protection of collections, policies, and individuals on the other. Rather than pro-

viding clear-cut, easy answers, the event aimed to stimulate discussions that would result in exchanges and cooperations with a lasting impact. The Tübingen event started with a pre-conference on Monday morning, followed by altogether four panel sessions over the next two days.

Pre-Conference

During the pre-conference on Monday, April 13, the University of Tübingen welcomed all participants and offered



Pre-conference, opened by Angelika Zirker

them varied and colourful insights into the ways in which university projects address change and uncertainty. Through brief introductions to a total of eleven projects, participants of the pre-conference were able to witness how the “spirit of the conference” was brought to life as the opening speaker Prof. Angelika Zirker (Associate Professor of English Literatures and Cultures at the University of Tübingen and Dean of the Faculty of Humanities) put it: In research and provenance infrastructures, digital archives and collections and in the incorporation of video game elements as well as the affordances of artificial intelligence, Large Language Models and virtual reality

technology. The poster presentations on these projects provided examples of how uncertain times can be managed and overcome through cross-departmental cooperation and shared growth. It was this cross-departmental networking that University of Tübingen’s Chief Library Director, Regine Tobias, highlighted in her opening remarks on the role of the library at the university. Sibylle Meissner, the Managing Director of the Tübingen School of Education, also highlighted the role of collections in ensuring continuity and providing access to a broader and more diverse audience as key instruments for equity and order in view of vast amounts of information. All three introductory talks demonstrated, from their respective perspectives, how these proverbial “interesting times” can present an opportunity, provided one does not view them in isolation, but remains open to connection and - as the University’s President said the following day - embraces them with determination.

Opening Remarks and Keynote

The conference was opened by Michele Casalini and Rebecca Lenzini and featured a video message from Leah Hinds (Charleston Hub, USA), who was unfortunately unable to attend the event in person. As co-founder Ward Shaw had passed away last summer, a moment’s silence was observed before the official opening of the conference to pay tribute to him. The official opening was then conducted by the Vice President of the University of Tübingen, Prof. Samuel Wagner, who expressed his wish that the event might “lead to new collaborations and new ways of thinking”.



In his following keynote speech, Richard Ovenden (Bodleian's Librarian, Oxford) drew on a concept originally coined by the US-army to describe the extent to which the world had become more complex in the post-Cold War era: VUCA – an acronym of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity, to which he added a fifth term: Complacency. Worries and concerns should centre less on readers, Ovenden stressed, but more on literacy in general. The discussions that followed his presentation raised apprehensions whose relevance was evident from the fact that they came up time and again in all conversations throughout the three-day retreat: How does one not only maintain a sense of optimism and a spirit of innovation within one's work, but also incorporate them even more strongly into the day-to-day tasks in a library? How should the libraries of the future deal with the possibilities, but also the dangers of artificial intelligences? How do we balance between preservation and the limits and practical considerations arising from funding, as well as from the needs and interests of the public? During these discussions, Ovenden appealed to librarians present and those absent saying "We have to keep making the case" (for the many essential aspects of library work). He further called for the focus to be shifted back on preservation, which may have been lost by the emphasis on access.

Session 1: Does Reading Matter (Anymore?)

Following directly from Ovenden's considerations on literacy, the first conference session was entitled "Does Reading Matter (Anymore?)". Chaired by Ann Okerson (Director, Offline Internet Consortium, USA), the aim of the panel was to explore the present situation and outline future prospects for academic reading.

Again, cooperation and alliances were emphasised strongly: Joy Connolly, from the American Council of Learned Societies, stressed the need for scholars and librarians alike to come together: "We have work to do in alliance with one another". To create and maintain a strong position in an innovation landscape shaped by artificial intelligence, Connolly emphasised how important it is to play a part in shaping these AI technologies. In addition, she advocated increased visibility and valuing human thought processes, interaction and knowledge creation.

Lukas Griessler, post-doctoral researcher at the University of Tübingen, enriched the discussion on AI, literacy and scholarly work by using practical examples to illustrate how (and why) university students make use of large language models in their day-to-day university work. By presenting his research results, Griessler not only provided a concrete insight into the current forms of students' academic work but also suggested ways in which reading can be understood in the digital age.



Attendee badges and gift bags

In light of these current academic challenges, Marjorie Levine-Clark (Professor of History and Associate Dean, University of Colorado) presented a tried and tested teaching concept designed to meet students – who are accustomed to AI-mitigated text reception – on equal terms. Levine-Clark's goal: "make them read less so that they read more", (re)introducing students to meaningful academic reading and fostering scholarly curiosity and joy through literacy.

The first conference day ended with a special talk by Andrea Bonaccorsi, (Professor of Economics and Management at the University of Pisa) who called for a (new) epistemic credo for the humanities. He drew comparisons with the sciences and cited the example of bibliographies to outline a broader picture of productivity, citation obsolescence and publication distribution for the humanities – a science of the science.

Day 2: Welcome

The second day of the retreat was opened by Karla Pollmann, President of the University of Tübingen, who welcomed all participants and speakers. Describing the Fiesole Retreat as a distinctive format, "informal, rigorous, innovative, far-reaching, relaxed but thoughtful," Pollmann, too, highlighted the importance of exchange and collaboration: "Your work matters," she stated, "your ideas matter, and the conversations you have will resonate far beyond this retreat".

Session 2: Collection as Data

Whilst the first conference session the previous day had focused primarily on issues relating to literacy and reading, the second session examined the topic of "Collection as Data". Chaired by Angelika Zirker and Natalie Maag



(Head of the Library of the German Literature Archive, Marbach), the panel addressed unique collections and ways of making them accessible, as well as utilising them in innovative ways.

Hanna Fischer (Research Center Deutscher Sprachatlas, Marburg University) opened the session with a detailed overview of the Wenker Collection, a lexical resource that catalogues German Dialects. Through the use of a citizen science tool and repositories, the formerly analogue collection was converted into accessible linguistic data. By making collections available as training data for artificial intelligences, Fischer presented a possible approach to addressing the unclear positioning of scholarship, libraries and collections alike within the “AI-universe”.

Gaetan Rappo, Professor of Religious Studies and Japanese History at Dōshisha University, Kyoto, provided a detailed insight into another collection - namely that of medieval Buddhist texts - to illustrate how metadata has to be (or can be) enriched so that centuries of cataloguing work remain a useful resource for future scholarship. In his work with Japanese Buddhist texts Rappo focused on transforming a variety of sources and formats - which often lacked metadata, whose reference collections were

available in printed form and which contained annotations in different languages - into a unified, metadata-enriched collection.

A third collection was presented by Sarah Schnitzler (University of Tübingen & DLA Marbach), being a collection of fanfiction texts at the library of the German Literature Archive. Fanfiction, commonly archived and made accessible by the community which creates it, is usually embedded within an existing metadata infrastructure. Such fanfiction information structures show how current developments, potential strategies and trends, whilst lying outside the library and information sector, can nevertheless broaden and expand the repertoire of archival institutions.

The final presentation within the panel, held by Megan Bushnell (Oxford Text Archive), focused on the collections of the Oxford Text Archive (OTA). The OTA is one of the oldest repositories of digital literary and linguistic data, with a history dating back to the early days of text encoding. In line with one of the conference’s common threads, Bushnell presented the measures that have been undertaken to bridge the gap between older, established collection elements and new, emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence. Lessons learned within the OTA’s work with AI are doubtlessly true for a wider field of application – such as the importance of updating metadata and rebranding and, on the flip side, the need to create pipelines for accessing and processing legacy data.

Artificial intelligence technologies, whether viewed as a chance for the library and information sector or as a threat to its status and significance, remained a dominant and recurrent concern throughout the entire conference. Common tenor was the importance of, as Megan Bushnell put it, “keeping the human in the loop”.

Session 3: Preserving Integrity: Collective Actions for Trust and Impact

In the third session, “Preserving Integrity: Collective Actions for Trust and Impact”, it was argued that the exponential growth in the volume of information (brought about partially by the aforementioned rise in artificial intelligence technologies) is accompanied by a decline in stewardship and trust. To mitigate this development, libraries and publishers must tackle challenges such as managing diverse digital content, combating misinformation, and rebuilding trust through innovative preservation strategies. Chaired by Michael Levine-Clark (Dean of Libraries, University of Denver Libraries), the panel brought together four such approaches. Emilie Hardman presented a field study of JSTOR’s Digital Stewardship Services, stressing the importance of discoverability and accessibility for collec-

tions at scale. Stewardship remained an essential concept throughout the panel in which all presentations – from their respective perspectives – called for structured, curated, sustainable metadata, transparency when it comes to the application of AI systems, and (in line with the previous session’s concluding remarks) human contextualisation and evaluation. In her presentation on how infrastructure, metadata and analytics build trust from Clarivate’s perspective, Cristina Blanca-Sancho (Senior Director of Product Management, Academic AI, Clarivate, USA) succinctly summarised the core issue with the words “No structure. No trust”. AI-methods and their use in assessing the trustworthiness of a source were the focus of Stephen Rhind-Tutt’s (Coherent Digital) presentation, who together with Blanca-Sancho illustrated the relevance of considering scientific impact and citation links. In a sense, the final talk of the session, given by Teri Oaks Gallaway (Executive Director SCEL), served as a conclusion to the preceding three case studies: By showing how the consortium deals with the issue of trust, she pinpointed areas of tension which give rise to mistrust, namely instances of intransparency. Instead of the libraries’ previous focus on facilitating access, she saw the need for librarians to become stewards of content that is reliable, contextualised, preserved and used in an ethical sound manner – a task requiring transparency both by and for the librarians fulfilling it. Following a free guided tour of the Mohr Siebeck publishing house, the second day of the conference drew to a close with a Conference Dinner (sponsored by EBSCO). Taking the day’s new impulses with them into the historic backdrop of the Tübingen Restaurant 1821, participants enjoyed varied, international dishes in a centuries-old banquet hall.

Session 4: Collection Development under Constraint: Coordination, Collaboration, and Partnership in a ‘Coopetitive’ World

While artificial intelligence technologies and the challenges they pose for library work were given due consideration, the retreat was not blind to other challenges librarians and publishers face. The last session of the conference, chaired by Julien Roche (University Librarian and Director of the Libraries at University Lille, France, as well as LIBER President) was dedicated to the question how cooperations and partnerships can help master hurdles caused by competition and funding constraints. To the topic “Collection Development under Constraint: Coordination, Collaboration, and Partnership in a ‘Coopetitive’ World” four case studies were presented. Stephanie Chancy, the Director of Operations Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC), illustrated how the library approached international

partnerships and shared governance. Grégory Miura, Executive Director of the CollEx-Persée Consortium, presented specific solutions which the consortium is working on as part of a federated infrastructure. Jérémie Roche, Director of Institutional Relations at Cairn.info, took the participants on a journey through milestones of the platform’s history and showed, what coopetition can look like in practise. In a conference where most of the talks were more strongly related to libraries, Brian Hole (CEO of Dromologics, London, UK, and founder of Ubiquity Press) focused more on ongoing changes in (scholarly) publishing. He outlined clearly and precisely practical possibilities and needs he saw within the field, thereby contributing to a series of actionable responses to the sense of uncertainty referred to in the title which underpinned many of the discussions throughout the conference.

Closing Remarks and Forward Momentum

Closing remarks were given by James O’Donnell (University Librarian, Arizona State University, USA), who described the Tübingen Retreat as “a rich banquet of provocation” for the participants. Nevertheless, it was he who posed the most provocative question of the conference: At a time when we are unable to fully envisage the changes that lie in our immediate future, will the library ultimately become obsolete? And if so, in what respect? And what will take its place?

Despite the undeniable volatility of the phenomena underlying these questions, participants may have felt encouraged by the end of the conference. The Fiesole Retreat 2026 combined theoretical reflections with practical applications, as well as a respect for history with a proactive outlook towards the future – and in doing so hopefully provided the very tools needed to counteract the complacency that Richard Ovenden regarded as the final, and possibly the most dangerous, characteristic of our changing times. **I**



Sarah Schnitzler

M.A. ist Doktorandin an der Universität Tübingen im Fach Literatur- und Kulturtheorie und seit 2024 wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin in der Bibliothek des Deutschen Literaturarchivs Marbach, wo sie unter anderem am Aufbau einer Fanfiction- und einer Science Fiction Sammlung mitwirkte, sowie einen Workshop zu ersterem organisierte und betreute. Eigene wissenschaftliche Arbeitsschwerpunkte liegen im Bereich Fanfiction-Forschung und Literatursoziologie.
sarah.schnitzler@dla-marbach.de.