When the 'Messiah' went to 'Mecca': envisioning and reporting the digital future at the CeBIT tech fair (1986–2018)

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CONVERGENCE

When the 'Messiah' went to 'Mecca': Envisioning and reporting the digital future at the CeBIT tech fair (1986–2018)

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Abstract
At consumer and tech fairs, the future of digital technologies has always been imagined. In this study, we investigate how the annual CeBIT tech fair (held in Hanover, Germany, from 1986 to 2018) and a keynote speech given there by Bill Gates in 1995 have been constructed, framed, and substantiated through media coverage and in mediated memory. Thanks to a qualitative content analysis, based on more than 500 articles published in general interest media and technology magazines, the ways the future of digitization was, and partially still is, imagined and narrated at tech fairs emerge. It is a quasi-religious future, predicted in quasi-religious gatherings (the 'Mecca' of digital futures), where gurus (Messiahs) and new ideas emerged, are celebrated, criticized, or rejected. During fairs, there is also a political and strategic use of the future because the ways digitization is forecast can shape and drive its future through investments and obliged visions.

Keywords
Bill Gates, CeBIT, digital history, digitization, future in the past, media history, Microsoft, tech fairs, digital media

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Introduction

How digital media's future is perceived, narrated, and remembered is in constant flux. Forecasts on how we will communicate and interact in the future have been made up of predictions, mandatory paths, and resounding fiascos. For example, very few people predicted the rise of personal computers in the 1960s; as late as the early 1980s, nobody envisaged what the World Wide Web would look like in the 1990s, and even mobile phones were not considered promising in the 1980s. Like many past technologies, the digital media were forecast to change users' lives in the future. Forecasts of the future are also indicative of the times when these are made and visions of the future are thus bound up with past experiences and project current desires and visions. Digital technologies can either be imagined as facilitators of these futures or a normalized account of future lives.

There are certain key places at which the future of digital technologies has always been imagined and consumer fairs are one of these. Fairs form 'temporary clusters' (Bathelt and Schuldt, 2008), at which the future is imagined materializing and can sometimes quite literally come to pass. In this study, we will thus investigate how this image of fairs as places at which futures are shaped over time was constructed, framed, and substantiated through media coverage and in mediated memory. Digital corporations attend consumer technology fairs to launch their latest or next technological innovations globally, presenting new products to other companies, tech experts, and potential users and enthusiasts (Fickers, 2008). At fairs, experts often make predictions and share competing narratives and 'latent fictions' (Lopez-Galviz et al., 2017) about the near future and how the digital media might affect the ways people will soon live.

This article focuses on the annual CeBIT tech fair (in Hanover, Germany, 1986–2018) and how it slowly rose to prominence, or better was reported as 'Mecca', the place at which future digital technologies were presented, discussed, and later remembered. In particular, the article will analyze how a keynote speech was reported at the time and remembered by media later as *a critical moment* in the unveiling of the digitization future: Microsoft CEO Bill Gates's 1995 speech. This speech, in which Gates shared his vision of what life with digital technologies would look like 10 years on, was retrospectively considered a significant event in CeBIT's history by the press, a crucial phase in the fair's engagement with the future. Indeed, what makes the fair a 'window to the future' is not only the new technologies and devices exhibited there but also the way the fair was publicly imagined, debated, and discursively framed as such. In this article, and through our analysis, we will consider these debates and examine not only *what* the significance of the fair was for the making of digital futures in its reporting over time but also *how* this was expressed over time and what means were used to introduce future promises and the impact of technology. We will show that fairs were depicted by the media as quasi-religious gatherings bringing communities of believers and their prophets or messiahs together at pilgrimage sites at specific times. The future as it is seen at tech fairs is as specific as the fairs themselves: it seems imminent but also proposes new ways of living with digitization. It is shaped by corporations but also by the imaginations of users and reporters. It is made up of many mistaken and dead-end predictions, which have little effect on the faith of those present that they are in the right place to hear about the future. Lastly, the future spoken of must be dazzling, unlikely and disruptive, because evangelists and pilgrims at tech fairs want their belief in the salvation brought by digitization to be confirmed. In other words, this article is about a popular speech given at CeBIT by one of digitization's heroes, but it is also about the future of digitization itself, how it must be narrated, and why tech fairs are the places to discuss it.

This article is made up of four sections. The first is a theoretical study regarding the way the future of digital technologies was seen in the past, the role tech fairs played in shaping this future, and the relevance of media coverage in framing fairs as *the* places at which futures become tangible. The second part focuses on methodologies and sources, describing the empirical materials on which the article is based: internal CeBIT sources and especially contemporary and later press reports portraying CeBIT as the place the future is built and Bill Gates's speech. The third part presents our findings. We focus specifically on the future as it was imagined at CeBIT, how CeBIT was described as *the* place to be for those wanting to see into the future, and the exemplary case of Bill Gates's 1995 speech, which was later considered emblematic in CeBIT's history. We zoom in on this particular event to complement the analysis of the general reporting about the fair over time. How the speech was reported and how it was remembered later can provide a more detailed understanding of the general lines and patterns of reporting we identified for CeBIT at large. In our conclusion, we will, finally, link up theoretical and empirical dimensions.

Digitization, the future in the past and consumer fairs: A theoretical reflection

Tech fairs are peculiar places where technologies about to be launched are presented and can be admired by those attending and later by everyone else thanks to press and media coverage. In such places, the future is revealed and forecasts made on how we will communicate and interact in this future. This article adopts a novel angle on tech fairs, studying how the future of digital technologies was perceived and imagined in the past. Consequently, from a theoretical perspective, we will incorporate at least three dimensions: thoughts on the future of communications, the future as seen in the past and tech fairs as crucial places at which the future is revealed.

Why study past visions of the future (of digitization)?

In media scholarship, studying the past is frequently limited to the fields of media history, media archeology, and memory studies: the future was not considered an academic topic for some time but rather a matter for magicians, astrologists, or religious seekers (Koselleck, 2004).

Why study the future as seen in the past then? Is it simply a bit of unproductive historical fun or can it help us to understand digitization, for example? We would argue that studying visions of the future in the past is not only useful but also essential for three main reasons. First of all, reconstructing the history of the future – for Carey and Quirk (2009), the future has a specific history – can help us to understand past societies' and cultures' *expectation horizons* (for a definition of expectation horizons, see Jedlowski, 2017). In the past, like today, various future visions and narratives competed for primacy: for example, yesterday and today people have viewed media forecasts for the coming decades in different but coexisting ways.[1] Reconstructing these options not only helps rediscovering how people built their visions and made crucial choices but also generates 'a more comprehensive and informed cultural analysis of claims about the future than contemporary predictions do' (Natale, 2014).

Thus visions of the future are based on contemporary expectations, present media landscapes, and even past narratives. This is a second reason to study the media future as seen in the past. The future of the media, like any other futures, has a historical dimension and the past influences the ways the future is envisaged (Adam, 2004, 2011; Adam and Groves, 2007; Brown and Michael,

2003; Urry, 2008). It is hard to imagine future digital media as totally different from present or past media and, in general, the future is seen as a combination of the potential of past and present in use and function terms. In other words, it is hard to imagine a future separated off from the present and the past and, more importantly, it is difficult to imagine political, economic, technical, and sociocultural realities, which are entirely different from those we know and experience today.

However, imagined futures frequently do not come to pass and, consequently, the past is full of failed ideas and discarded options. So, why study past visions of the future if these visions are often fallacious? For a third and stimulating reason: the future's so-called performative character. Future expectations are inherently performative (Adam, 2009; Adam and Groves, 2007; Mische, 2009) and how digitization was envisaged in the past has shaped political, business, and social actions and decisions, for example. The future is political and the way we imagine tomorrow's digital technologies is neither innocent and neutral nor unbiased. Political expectation horizons are translated into political actions and investments, as well as private companies keen to find out what their customers want to use in the future invest money accordingly. These *actions* shape the present in the name of the future. Consequently, the third reason to study the future of digitization from a historical perspective is the fact that imagining the future has affected and shaped how digitization was considered, funded, and built. The history of the digitization future is the history of what the digital future might have looked like and, to some extent, how it really looks today.

Futures, time frames, and secular religions at tech fairs

When we discuss the media future, we should use the plural, because multiple media *future* time frames exist. David Nye (2004) has identified three forms of technological prognoses. Predictions, the first type, are linked to an early phase of technological invention, have a long-term frame, and those predicting were, in general, people who took part in the birth of the technology. Forecasts, by contrast, are of greater relevance when we focus on innovation itself and thus when new technology is already here, and leading forecasters are in general engineers and entrepreneurs working at firms selling innovations. Finally, projections deal with new models and versions of technology, are short-term and primarily made by designers and marketing experts. According to Nye, these forms are crude divisions and the three might also be thought of as points on a continuum.

What are tech fair time frames? These are periodic and follow fixed time frames, a legacy of medieval fairs. Unlike markets, which are weekly, or tech malls which are permanent exhibitions of digital products or specific shops like Apple stores which are brand temples, tech fairs are organized *once a year* (Moeran, 2011). On one hand, this contributes to creating a stable network because, for example, if one of the big tech fairs changes date, this affects the time frames of the others, which will have to move as well or face fierce competition for sector exhibitors and critical players. On the other hand, it is also relevant in media coverage terms. As Pentzold and Fechner (2019) put it, news narratives also provide templates for interpreting, classifying, and evaluating events and experiences to be made in the future. So, the recurrent annual character of fairs allows events to be looked forward to with anticipation, event representation, and between-event thinking to take place, often combining retrospective experience with arguments for the relevance of anticipated new developments.

The yearly cadence of fairs echoes religious festivities, further evidence of such fairs being replete with quasi-religious symbolism and spiritual importance. 'The tight relationship between fairs and sacred places and religious days', the archeologist Paul Arthur (2000: 419) states, 'is indeed commonplace and appears to have an ancestry stretching back far before the Middle Ages'.

The combination of fairs and religious sites has been found all over the world (De Light and De Neeve, 1988). Actually, even the etymology of fair derives from Latin *feriea*, which translates as holiday or Holy Day (Arthur, 2000). Since the link between fairs and spiritual gatherings is well established as a cultural trope, it is not a giant leap for journalism to use religious metaphoric to think and speak of fairs to express their relevance. In such analogy, it is at fairs, that mystical new devices are presented, audiences of tech-enthusiasts queue for hours to hang on the words of the digital gods (read famous CEOs of digital corporations), and several minor events and a few major events take place, with attendees travelling far and wide to be there to worship at the tech altar. Tech fairs also resemble ritualistic and periodic news cycles and media routine and are a delicate moment for digital products. Newly launched or about to be launched devices are revealed to tech customers and enthusiasts prior to takeoff (if takeoff ever happens) and thus at a time at which short-term predictions or forecasts are made on the product's future. Nevertheless, this short-lived future is essential to suffusing technologies with a magical aura and, once again, quasi-religious elements. James Carey and John Quirk (2009) see this particular moment as an example of how the future can be seen as *exhortation*:

> the future is often regarded as cause for a revitalization of optimism, an exhortation to the public to keep 'faith,' and is embodied in commemorative expositions of progress, world fairs, oratorical invocations, and the declaration of national and international goals. (174)

Tech fairs are places at which investor and consumer *faith* is reinforced. In recent decades, in particular, this has been a faith in digitization itself, seen as a mandatory and profitable future, faith in technologies capable of saving us (e.g. from excessive workloads, isolation, and disconnection), and a faith that we are doing the right thing in attending these events.

Over 32 years, CeBIT generated symbolic moments at which established and emerging brands in the computer, mobile phone, IT, and, more generally, digital technologies industries showcased their visions of the future *through* their products. CeBIT was also the place consumers, businessmen, tech enthusiasts, and tech journalists flocked to; to get a glimpse of the future in action, to be one of the firsts to try out new devices 'about to be used' by everyone. Through and thanks to CeBIT, the future was made visible, tangible, and imminent. Lastly, CeBIT was the place at which digitization's much-heralded and mandatory future (which had very real effects on product investment) had a greater chance of coming to fruition thanks to press coverage, advertising, and consumer presence as testimony to an envisaged future that was now upon us. In general, this is an important tech fair function: maximizing the chance that an imagined future will come to fruition and helping digital prophecies to self-fulfill (Fürst, 2017).

The purpose of fairs is, however, not limited to the fairs themselves and their future visions need to be shared: this is why specialist magazines and journalists perform such an essential role in spreading the technological innovation word. This dilates a fair's time frame and makes it important not only during the event per se but also later, potentially even years later. The pivotal role of media coverage in public sense-making related to technological innovations and emerging or imagined technologies has been widely acknowledged (Kelly, 2009; Pentzold et al., 2019). Coverage of the social impact of these technologies shapes the public imagination (Natale and Ballatore, 2017; Rössler, 2001), their meaning in public discourse (Cacciatore et al., 2012), and what people hear and believe about them (Cogan, 2005). In a study focusing on information and communication technology (ICT) journalists, Geiß et al. (2013) stressed that journalists play a

significant part in disseminating, explaining, and interpreting new technologies and fostering social understanding of future trends.

Journalists covering IT topics themselves influence perceptions of the future and audience behavior as well as developers' future strategies. In accordance with these findings, fairs are framed as places that play a leading role in the construction of discourses regarding desirable and achievable futures (Herrera-Lima and Martin Segura, 2018), and journalism reinforces their role as catalysts. Coverage of annual events such as CeBIT activates various temporal layers of journalistic news reporting (Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2016). Journalists combine the ritualistic functions of commemorative journalism as reporters look back at previous editions of the fair and what happened there. Doing so, coverage stimulates projections about the future impact of new technologies based on experiences with previous fairs. By bringing together what was, what is, and what will be at the event and in its aftermath, the different temporal layers of reporting create narratives in which fairs are symbolic places where the future is forged, accessed or decided, shaped, stabilized, and supported over time. This is one of the article's key points, and our aim is to gain an understanding of why CeBIT was viewed as a symbolic place at which to build, narrate, and negotiate the future of the digital media and of digitization itself. To fulfill this aim, we will examine a specific case study, Bill Gates's speech at CeBIT in 1995, how internal sources described it and then how it was reported immediately and years later as *the* event at which the digitization future was unveiled. This also made CeBIT itself a privileged place at which to experience and familiarize oneself with the digital future.

Methodologies and sources

Sources and materials for analysis were collected iteratively and two distinct sets of sources were used. The first was collected through in-depth reading, hermeneutic interpretation, and documentary analysis of 'internal' sources, mainly from CeBIT and Microsoft. Our focus is on documents from the fair's communication department regarding self-presentation, providing facts about what was going on in Hanover relating to the fair's relevance and topical orientation, including its annual mottos (e.g. 'Get the spirit of tomorrow' in 2001). These sources also comprised press releases and statements about Bill Gates's keynote speech in 1995 both by CeBIT and Microsoft staff.

The second, and most important, approach to our material was qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000; Meyen et al., 2019) of media coverage about the fair and its relationship with the future. The aim was to understand which the key events and moments that made CeBIT the place where the future was constructed were. For data collection, we used the Genios database to search for CeBIT coverage that would explicitly relate to the keywords 'future', 'visions', and 'tomorrow' in headlines and article leads between January 1985 (a year before CeBIT became an independent fair) and December 2018, resulting in more than 500 articles. These were articles published in general-interest media (regional and supra-regional German press coverage, daily and weekly periodicals) and special interest media (IT and technology) that engaged with the fair. This data collection amounted to articles prior to the event, reporting from CeBIT while the fair was going on and also articles written after it had ended or retrospective considerations of previous fairs. In an initial screening, we identified all article sections and paragraphs which engaged with matters of the future and had an at least minimal narrative structure (e.g. how future lives will be affected by new technology) and at least partially addressed future technology developments, expectations, or impacts. Other segments of the articles as well as duplicates (i.e. multiple uses of an agency report

or the same article in different local versions by the same media company) and articles which only addressed the future as a side note were not further considered. For our qualitative content analysis, we followed a methodological procedure proposed by Meyen et al. (2019), blending together deductive and inductive coding elements. In a first step, categories were deduced from our theoretical readings and existing research on how new technologies were imagined before they actually came to fruition, how their impact on the tech-branch or society at large after their launch was discussed, and also regarding media coverage's role in normalizing technologies. In an initial round of coding, these categories were applied to the material and thus inductively refined and adjusted them as well as supplementing them with additional categories. Subsequently, we made connections between these categories and highlighted articles to the codes employing qualitative data analysis (QDA) software (F4). This method allowed overarching patterns, common features, and differences in the original coverage to be identified while, at the same time, analyzing specific arguments, metaphors, and ideas identified in the material. While this analysis was strictly qualitative, we used some quantifying features of the QDA software (e.g. word frequencies and word combinations) to illustrate the occurrence of coded aspects throughout the material and over time. Finally, we translated all the quotations presented in this article from German to English.

This approach enabled us to identify critical events and crucial moments regarding the future in the history of CeBIT. How these events were discursively addressed and shaped contributed to making CeBIT a crucial place where the future was imagined and constructed, where the digital wonders of tomorrow were presented and then, eventually, later adopted. According to the selected sources, one of these key events was the keynote speech given by Bill Gates in 1995. Consequently, with the same methodology described above, we collected and analyzed press reports on this particular event in 1995, and then 10, 15, and 20 years later. The fine analysis complemented the general analysis and provide a more detailed understanding of the general lines and patterns of reporting we identified for CeBIT at large.

Findings

A short history of CeBIT

CeBIT was officially launched as a separate IT and tech fair in 1986, but it is the descendant of an office equipment industry trade fair, set up in the 1950s and with a reserved space since 1970 at Hanover trade fair, one of the biggest industry trade shows worldwide. CeBIT was always mainly a business-to-business event, primarily showing new office technologies to corporate representatives and, then, rapidly becoming *the digital technology fair*.

The fair developed into the largest and most significant IT event of the year, where all the most emblematic digital technologies were launched and the imminent communications' future was heralded: computers, CD-ROMs, laptops, mobile phones, sound recording tools, and all kinds of digital wonders were presented and launched in Hanover. VIP and digital moguls like Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, and Bill Gates attended CeBIT to demonstrate their belief in the digital future (the future needs prophets). Symbolic companies like Sony, IBM, Siemens, Nokia, Apple, Facebook, Huawei (Huawei's 2018 keynote speech, e.g. forecast an Asian future) and many others attended CeBIT to anticipate and shape future global market demands. Politicians like Gerhard Schröder, Angela Merkel, and Arnold Schwarzenegger also testified to the (deterministic) idea that digitization will drive future societies.

In 1995, the largest number of nonprofessionals recorded attended the conference: 29% of a total of 755,000 visitors (close to 200,000 people) were not interested in the B2B market but visited CeBIT's stands to see what the digitization future would look like. In the mid-1990s, CeBIT transformed itself from professional fair, for digital and computer specialists and technicians, into a popular event at which the technological future was visible to all. CeBIT's management responded by limiting this popularization: admission prices went up, duration went down to 7 days and two spin-off events were created. Consequently, while CeBIT was the biggest IT and digital fair worldwide in the 2000s and early 2010s, nonprofessional attendance declined over the last 20 years, as did total visitor numbers. CeBIT remained undecided whether to target the professional segment alone or attract the consumer market. Ultimately, a number of exhibitors and technology groups turned away from CeBIT in the direction of new specialist product fair destinations such as the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona and Internationale Funkausstellung in Berlin. This constant decline in popularity is the reason why, on 28th November 2018, CeBIT closed down, making the 2018 edition the last in its history.

How the digital future looked: CeBIT, 1986–2018

CeBIT emerged as a symbolic digital future space in media coverage only over time. Our sources show that the mediated narrative of the fair as a forge for, and window to, the future took some time to develop, becoming prevalent only in the early 1990s and declining shortly after 2015 (thus lasting more than 20 years).

Over the years and across various kinds of media, media coverage shows a steadily growing numbers of visitors and exhibitors from a range of countries, making CeBIT the world's biggest fair, the 'world's biggest computer show', or simply the 'world show' (taz, November 30, 2018), 'a fair of superlatives' (Süddeutsche, March 8, 1995) where 'each year hundreds of thousands try to catch a glimpse at the spirit of the future' (Handelsblatt, March 19, 2001). Even when numbers were already steadily declining, the event's volume and size were still presented as indicators of relevance right up to the end.

The role of the fair and its symbolic weight were not simply a matter of the IT-sector giants and tech-company CEOs who visited CeBIT over the years but also the presence of key economic and political figures. 'The future is a matter for the boss' an article in 2006 stated, reporting German chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to the fair (Darmstädter Echo, March 10, 2006). 'Quickly through the future' (dpa, March 5, 2013), described how Merkel, '*routinier* at CeBIT', rushed through the fair. Even in 2017, in the pre-final edition of the fair, journalists were still referencing CeBIT as the world largest fair for communication technology, the place where the future was presented to the world and to those in power – see the title 'CeBIT shows Merkel the future' (Neue Presse, March 20, 2017). The status of the fair was shored up by its size and demand and the presence of important and powerful people. While CeBIT is one fair among others from a perspective of industries, exhibitors, and perhaps also visitors, it is presented as a unique and outstanding event in coverage.

'It is CeBIT-time again, and Hanover is the capital these days' an article in Hamburger Morgenpost (March 19, 1999) reported, because 'a walkabout at CeBIT shows, today, what will be routine tomorrow'. CeBIT was described as a 'gigantic future laboratory' (Neue Presse, January 26, 2017) where visitors can 'grasp the future' (Welt am Sonntag, March 21, 1999). The fair is portrayed as a place where 'fascination for the future' takes the form of a 'display window for technology with a future' which fascinates people in 'this marketplace of visions' (FAZ, March 18, 1996), a 'market for future chances' (Tagesspiegel, March 14, 1996).

The level of detail on what these futures might look like varies from report to report, and it is quite clear that for the narrative to function, the details of the future do not really matter. Instead, a fascination with the 'brave new world at CeBIT', where 'thousands of companies show how we will live in the future' (Hamburger Abendblatt, March 12, 2014) prevails. The 'brave new world' is also recurrent in coverage of the fair, in various forms: for instance as either the brave new world of the workplace or home life. In a single year, the 'PC of the future' is reported (c't, March 16, 1998) as well as the 'office world of the future' (c't, March 15, 1999). Such recurring incantations that the future will 'belong to' a specific sector, company, or technology (e.g. flat TV screens and multinetwork mobile phones), say nothing about the technology itself but plenty about a place where 'visions become reality' and 'technology which was only a vision last year is here today'(AZ Mainz, March 25, 2004).

We have already seen that fairs as windows to the future have traditionally been linked to religious activities and have something of the religious festival about them, for example, as annual events and their desire to renew the faith and bring believers together. Reports portraying CeBIT as a symbolic vantage point for a glimpse of the future were also mythological and spiritual in tone, packed with metaphors and parables and sporting, religious, or mythological references.[2] For instance, the fair was repeatedly referred to as a pilgrimage site throughout and the various groups involved in the fair – exhibitors, speakers, and visitors – were all referred to in religious terms, as religious leaders or prophets and their communities of believers. The fair was described as the 'mecca of the worldwide information technologies sector' (Tagesspiegel, March 17, 1999), the 'mecca of the computer world' (Hamburger Morgenpost, February 23, 2000), and, even later when its decline was under way, it was still destined to 'remain the mecca' (FAZ, March 2, 2009).[3] CeBIT was not just for business or demonstrations of technological potency but also the place at which disciples of technology would commence their 'pilgrimage' (Handelsblatt, March 19, 2001). Hanover became 'a pilgrimage town for future technology' (taz, March 18, 1999). The use of spiritual and religious metaphors was not single religion-specific and at times it was complemented with mythological associations, for example, CeBIT is compared to 'something like Delphi, where you go to consult the oracle' (Handelsblatt, March 8, 2005). Although the North Star does not guide pilgrims, the 'stars of the computer sector' (Computerwoche, December 22, 1995) were to lead the way as 'prophets of the future'. The disciples of these messiahs (read CeBIT's visitors) would then receive 'the blessings' of 'software-gurus' (taz, March 15, 1995). The religious metaphors at once illustrate the uncertainty and vagueness of the prophesied futures, believers' faith and support, and the exceptional nature of their prophets and gurus. Journalistic reporting often employs understandable, tolerable, and presumably shared metaphors to convey an abstract topic like the future of digital technologies to an audience. Not only does the religious metaphoric resonate with culturally established stencils but being compared to a religious site also illustrates the perceived significance of the fair. This will also be significant later in the article, in our findings regarding the visit of 'messiah' Bill Gates. While some of these references are ironic and designed to poke fun at the grand aspirations and religious rhetoric surrounding CeBIT, they are a response to a very real exaltation of the fair and also supported its narrative. Going to CeBIT was not just a shopping trip but a step on the path to spiritual enlightenment.

Like other spiritual teachings, the sense of wonder at being able to see tomorrow today was not universal in the discursive framing of the fair, and heretical voices, disbelief, and disappointment were also heard. From CeBIT's beginnings, the futures presented there were not only greeted with excitement but also in negative terms. The future was seen as in a perpetual state of becoming, always on its way but never here. Sometimes, we learn from our analysis, the future felt too far

away to allow for low-risk investment, sometimes the visions were not considered sufficiently bold, fascinating, or appealing, and sometimes it came across as mesmerizing and a 'how we will live tomorrow' promise. Year by year, it became apparent that the futures outlined trod a thin line between fascination and boredom, the implausible, and the conceivable. In the coverage, specifically, two different modes of discontent with the future are tangible: the imagined future is either too far away and coming too slowly or it is not far enough away from the current experience to qualify as a real vision. Articles like 'Computer-fair CeBIT touts the digital future, but there isn't much new to see in cyberspace' (taz, March 19, 1994) and 'CeBIT exhibitors advertise the world of tomorrow with slogans from yesterday' (Tagesspiegel, February 23, 2000) are juxtaposed to claims that the promises of the future are too far-fetched and present 'too many unsubstantiated promises' (Computerwoche, March 27, 1985). The tension between impressions that 'the depicted visions of the future are under-sensational and rather antique' (Frankfurter Rundschau, March 21, 1998), on one hand, and that the future was not certain enough and visitors would demand actual products to buy instead of 'cloudy visions' (Handelsblatt, March 13, 2002), on the other, is a constant over the decades of reporting.

CeBIT was only moving 'at walking speed to the multi-media future' (Rhein Zeitung, March 24, 1998) and the big themes were to be the same for years, while 'real visions are rare' (Kölner Stadt Anzeiger, March 2, 2010). Alternatively, visions would 'simply take too long to become reality' (Hamburger Abendblatt, March 18, 2004). The reports also show that while the role of the fair was seen as making future technologies accessible, there is no consensus as to whether it should be the technology of tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. 'Rather than presenting visions, most exhibitors hold on to their existing products' (taz, February 26, 2000) and 'not much was really new' (Handelsblatt, March 16, 1989) was a typical critique, while the claim that visitors and media audiences were actually asking for 'real existing products' (FAZ, March 15, 2003) supports the opposite trajectory. The future presented was sometimes too bold to believe in or aspire to or not as imaginative and visionary as hoped for or stale and boring pretty quickly, too vague, or simply not in line with the contemporary *zeitgeist*. The future also needed to be timed correctly and, ironically, prophecies about the future needed to be adjusted and renewed: making the same prognosis for the future was not seen as supporting the validity of the claim but rather as repetition and disappointment. Nevertheless, even criticism that the fair failed to live up to expectations or presented potential futures, which were not convincing over time supports the construction of the fair as *the* symbolic place where the future was presented.

Predictions and prognoses failing to come true were not much of a concern in coverage and rather taken as a nostalgic or humorous testament to how far the world had come since the false predictions were made. Even though the 'sector does not want to be reminded of old predictions' (Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger 10.03.2005), perceived failure to deliver the future as demanded or to make accurate prognoses was not really seen as contesting the fair's role: 'All the technological dead ends that were presented in the past have been rightly forgotten, because who would otherwise be delighted by the novelties annually presented at the fair?' (Hamburger Abendblatt, March 12, 2002).

In the fair's latter years, CeBIT as *the* place to see the future was also increasingly contested. The future is described as having moved elsewhere, for example, to other fairs in Barcelona, Berlin, Shanghai, Las Vegas, and others. The last CeBIT fair was held in 2018. Since then, the media have reported rumors of a new high-tech fair in Hanover, to be organized by Messe AG, just as CeBIT was. The new fair initially predicted for autumn 2019 and then postponed to March

2020 – unsurprisingly – was said to be a 'window to the future' (Kremp, 2019). When God closes a door, he opens a window.

Messiah Bill Gates speaking: When the future arrived in 1995 and how it was later remembered

The 1995 Bill Gates's keynote speech was an extraordinary moment in CeBIT history, and one which has frequently been highlighted in commemorative journalism over the years reinforcing the typical rhetoric and discursive strategies relating to how the fair was envisioned and constructed as a window to the digital future.

It is not only a matter of CeBIT or Bill Gates but 1995 itself is one of the history of digital media's most emblematic years (see Balbi and Magaudda, 2018). Bill Gates himself, Nicholas Negroponte, and Mark Poster published three of the most famous books on digitization's bright future that year; John Perry Barlow accorded the internet the status of one of the most important revolutions in communications history (and 1 year later, in 1996, wrote the Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace); the Internet moved from political-military control to business tool with the symbolic Netscape corporation IPO in the United States; eBay, the MP3 format, and DVDs were all launched; and in the movie theaters, *Toy Story* was the first cartoon made entirely using digitally generated images.

This was the vibrant and promising year in which the 10th CeBIT fair took place. At the time, Bill Gates was 'the undisputed superstar of the computer age' (Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger, March 10, 2005) and his keynote speech on how life would look ten years on was one of the most explicitly declared visions for the future ever presented at CeBIT. Gate's keynote speech was based on 'Information at your fingertips 2005', a short movie presenting a criminal case about art smuggling, ultimately resolved by a mother and her son and the knowledge of the world available to them at their fingertips. The movie, however, did not premiere at CeBIT but had been shown to the world a few months earlier on November 14, 1994, at the Comdex fair in Las Vegas. Awareness that this particular version of the future had been presented before at another fair did not really diminish the allure of the event for the press. Presenting a vision for 10 years on, Gates emphasized that none of the technologies presented would be technologically out of reach, most of them would not even be new. Ten years on, this technology would be normalized as a seamless and natural part of people's digitalized lives. The actual visions in the movie, explained by Gates interrupting and stopping screening at several points, were reported but not in too much detail. But the broader ideas around them were given a great deal of press attention: for example, the fully automated family home organized by central computer hubs, a wallet PC, screens in all sizes from pocket to wall-sized, wireless technologies, voice control, and mobile access to information and communication on the go, and finally, interactive television allowing you to choose a different ending if you were not happy with the one you had seen.

The real story, however, was not what Gates was saying or not saying in his speech, but the fact that he was there, giving the speech. Gates himself, via his presence alone, brought his 'blessing' to the 'multi-media rapture', which was CeBIT 1995 (c't, May 01, 1995). The then 39-year-old founder and head of Microsoft, described as the 'software pope' (General Anzeiger, March 16, 1995) or 'software guru' (Süddeutsche, March 02, 1995), was presented as a 'herald of the electronic future' (Süddeutsche, March 13, 1995). That the religious metaphors persisted both with CeBIT and with Bill Gates is clear. For the more secular of the audience, Gates's wealth and fortune as a 'multi-millionaire' was repeatedly highlighted, implying that he could not have

acquired such wealth if his visions were wrong. CeBIT 1995 was hence an opportunity to witness the 'visions of a billionaire' (Zeit, November 24, 1995), a computer hero, who spoke to his 'disciples' who honored him like a 'messiah' (taz, March 15, 1995) – and a messiah at mecca is the perfect match. A report in *taz* makes the absurdity of the near cultist adoration and expectations around Gates' visit clear. Still, while skeptical of the adoration, the article speaks of him as a prophet whose predictions about technologies had come true in the past implying that his latest prophecies are likely to be equally realistic. The report recounts the reception of the keynote speech through the eyes of an 11-year-old admirer of Gates's. But, the child was disappointed because 'Bill told us nothing new today'. In the wider web of trade fairs, CeBIT did not come first. Other articles also refer to the 'recycling' of his Comdex-keynote and 'Information at your fingertips' as an idea which had been around for some time and while these had been 'epoch making' and 'unique' a few years back, they were no longer so (Computerwoche, March 10, 1995). A number of articles reported that, with his high-pitched voice and tired looks and having apparently cut himself shaving, the guru was not a charismatic public speaker and needed the video to impress – the Software messiah was mortal after all. The audience was, however, described as being impressed by the keynote speech and even more so by a prediction Gates made for the more immediate future, just a few months on: 'Soon Bill will give us Windows '95 and with it the Microsoft Network (MSN). The MSN is another way in which Bill will rule the world' the child-protagonist in *taz* is quoted as saying. Indeed, 1995 was also the year in which Bill Gates publicly presented the Windows 95 operating system at CeBIT, immediately before its launch later in the same year.

Bill Gates's keynote speech was remembered and reported later in several articles with telling titles like 'Back to the future' (Neue Presse, March 12, 2015). Recollections of Gates's visit to the 1995 fair are full of superlatives, highlighting the size of the event, the mesmerized crowds, and that Gates had to arrive in secrecy and sneak in through the cellars. The capacity of the hall could not hold the crowds and so the talk had to be live-broadcast to neighboring halls. As in 1995, reporting what Gates said was secondary to the spectacle of the guru's presence. Seen in this light, the memory of the speech is thus also mixed in with something else he did at CeBIT that year: presenting the soon to be released Windows 95 'to the world' and thus not only illustrating but also shaping the future of computing and impact digital technologies for years to come.

However, the Microsoft guru was also remembered because of his wrong-sounding predictions. Gates's forecast that MSN would be able to compete with the World Wide Web is presented as 'the fatal error' (Welt, March 12, 2015) of his vision back then. Windows '95 initially did not have a web browser. It was only later that Internet Explorer became a standard feature, helping it to gain ground over its competitor Netscape. More generally, 'in 1995 CeBIT looked into a better future, but some of far-sighted Gates's visions turned out to be a flop', *dpa* wrote remembering Gates's 'future visions from the past' (dpa, February 10, 2005). Ten years on, once again, 'bold visions and one big mistake' were mentioned. If MSN was a flop, other visions 'came true' (Tagesspiegel, February 10, 2005). Gates 'risked a daring look into the digital future' (Kölner-Stadtanzeiger, March 10, 2005) and shared 'a clear vision for 2005', but customers 'did not want their fridges to tell them what to eat' (Handelsblatt, March 8, 2005). Some predictions were ahead of their time or were not accepted by users, which is not Gates's fault. It is a persistent narrative that many imagined futures turned out to be real technologies and parts of everyday life, although several via Microsoft's competitors. This does not, however, challenge recollections of the fair as the place where the future was told and unveiled for the first time – some predictions may have been wrong, but others were right and you could hear them at CeBIT. Memory, retrospection, and prospective

reporting have been complementary in establishing the fair as the place where the future was first seen.

Conclusion

This article set out to explore the way in which the role of tech fairs in imagining the future of digital technologies was framed and narrated in public debate. Looking at general and special interest media and using the whole of CeBIT's history as a case study, as the largest computer fair in the world in the past, we analyzed the fair's portrayal as a symbolic place at which technologies were showcased, and possible and competing future visions presented to the public. CeBIT fairs were characterized as moments at which a 'window to the future' opened up and visitors could get a first glimpse of future technologies and experience them first hand. That many of the visions shared and prophecies made would turn out to be fallacies was less significant than the shared assumption that the fair was indeed a special temporal, spatial, social, functional, and symbolic place where the future was made accessible, controllable, and, ultimately, consumable. The strong bond between the fair and the future was not equally present at the start but built up over time and required ICTs and digitization to make it a normalized catalog of professional and private lives. Once it was established, the discursive strategies and narrative elements involved in picturing the fair as a place at which the future could be seen were continuously reproduced, even when CeBIT's decline had begun.

We complemented our general analysis with a close up of the reporting about a particular key event capable of showing CeBIT's depiction as the digital future's 'mecca' more than any other: the 1995 keynote speech by the digital messiah of the day, Bill Gates. This extraordinary moment in CeBIT history is indicative of the discursive framing of the fair as a whole and illustrates the way in which expectations that the fair could provide a sneak preview into digital futures were built over time. Recollections reinforced the narrative that the future was there to be seen at CeBIT. When retrospection revealed 'failures' and errant visions, expectations of future visions were confirmed.

Nevertheless, this article is not only about CeBIT and Bill Gates. Our conclusion is that tech fairs, and CeBIT specifically, are crucial places at which the future is built and Gates's speech was a turning point in the mid-1990s. But other insights emerge from our empirical sources and they are about the future of digital technologies itself and how this future is to be narrated. First of all, the idea that the digital future needs to be narrated and treated as a quasi-religious matter: evangelists, pilgrims, technological devices as the holy grail, saints, liturgies, and several other religious metaphors were used to reinforce digitization's mythology as contemporary society's new religion. Secondly, our sources have shown that studying the way digital media were seen in the past is useful to our understanding of digital media today. Little was said in this article about the actual contents of the visions and the kind of future imagined at the fair. But some of the prophecies mentioned are still with us and, more surprisingly, still in the forms of prophecies. Think about the Internet of Things combined with 5G networks and the persistence of communicating fridge examples. And again, active users deciding 'alternative ends' to their movies or favorite TV series (in late 2018 Black Mirror made an attempt with *Bandersnatch*, which was widely discussed as an exception). These examples show us that digitization future has a long history and that some persistent prophecies from the past still impact on the present. Future historiography of past digital futures will hopefully shed more light on the persistent designs and visions past societies invested in digitization. As we saw in the theoretical part of this article, these hopes may or may not change

much over time, but they are crucial to understanding the meaning of digitization today. This is part of the third and final insight we can get from our sources: the digital future has a political and strategic dimension. Accurate or otherwise, future predictions show that digitization will remain relevant for years to come and this is a strategy used by corporations and even politicians to show that digitization is and will be the most powerful force for social change (Natale et al. 2019). This is also part of what we called the performative character of the future: digitization's decisive future justifies investments *today* by governments and private companies. The digital futures have politics.

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Notes

1. According to Wendell Bell, understanding these options is crucial for public sociology today, too:

   To act intelligently, people need to know, among other things, the alternative possibilities that exist for their future, the future consequences of their own and others' possible actions, the future probable behaviors of relevant other people and their consequences, and the probable outcomes of events and processes that may affect their future, many of which they cannot control. (Bell, 2009: 90)

2. Similarly, Blondheim and Rosenberg (2017) have claimed that the relationship between newly developed media technologies and religious metaphors make sense of them.
3. Twenty-eight articles in our sample used a variant on the mecca reference.

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