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Close Listening

Bookish Podcasts during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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There are many different challenges that book publishing has faced over the years (Ginna 13), but the COVID-19 pandemic was all-encompassing as it affected the publishing industry, writers, booksellers, and readers. Many readers turned into listeners with the proliferation of audiobooks and podcasts (Guren et al. 11).

Podcasts are becoming more and more popular. Their proliferation of topics, their accessibility, portability, and facilitation of multitasking mean listeners can consume content while doing other tasks, for example manual work. Emerging research highlights the slow but steady advance of the “burgeoning audio trend” (Guren et al. 11), not only in the form of audiobooks, but also podcasts (as overall consumption of podcasts was claimed to more than double after pandemic slump). COVID-19 has influenced many industries and book publishing is no exception. This article presents a closer examination of podcasts about books and publishing, and how they give access to a new range of primary sources. Thus, they can facilitate further investigation of the book industry’s response to the pandemic. The podcasts in the publishing and reading sphere are diverse: they can be created by independent individuals or by organisations, with aims as diverse as community building, promotion of books and publications, or blogging about books in audio format. Podcasts are known and hailed for their accessibility (Prince 269) over different gadgets (phones, laptops, computers), and platforms (Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Castbox, to name a few). The word podcast itself is a portmanteau of *iPod* and *broadcast*. Podcasts can be streamed or downloaded on listeners’ devices and played offline. Podcasts are generally free unless the creators provide extra episodes via paid subscriptions. Although the main characteristic of a podcast is the audio format, podcast content can also be consumed in video format and even feature a transcript, which makes the format more inclusive and available for deaf or hard-of-hearing content consumers.

While a more general definition of a podcast is any digital media file, or series of files, distributed over the internet for playback on portable media players and personal computers (Lonn and Teasley 88), Lucian Bala-nuta (2021) expands this definition by including the experience, authorship, and variety of themes and genres. As such, he defines the podcast as

“an on-demand listening experience, mediated through audio or video platforms, which involves heterogeneous formats and generous thematic designs that can be authored by producers of multiple backgrounds” (38-39). Other authors mention that podcasts are distributed online and usually follow a schedule of updates, as well as follow a particular topic (Guertin 4), although the podcasts that revolve around the figure of their hosts sharing their opinions on any theme might not necessarily have a clear topical designation.

It is worth noting that podcasts are accessible and easily manageable, not only for listeners but also for creators. Hammersley (2004) highlights the lack of program constraints, broadcasting time limitation, and easy access to the creator’s tool kit: a microphone, internet connection and simple to use, free software for the necessary editing. At the moment, there are over a million podcasts published online (Götting) on an incredible variety of topics, including books, publishing, and literature.

Podcasts in general have recommended themselves as a useful educational tool over the last decade (Pierce 269). However, in the context of book history, they have not been considered much. There is much to be researched in the tendencies and qualities of podcasts that revolve around books: interviews with authors, the promotion or introduction of new titles, discussions of content, books as a medium, and of course the challenges that publishing and the reading scene in general are facing are all relevant topics. In addition to being a tool for lifelong learning (Pownell 2004), podcasts provide a discussion space for literary criticism (Guertin 8) in academia and outside of it. While podcasts about books are often discussions and analyses of content, they are themselves also texts that can be analysed from the perspective of agency, social activity, and text production in the digital age (Strauch 3). It is in this way that podcasts engage with discourse of political, socio-cultural relevance and can provide an enormous field for research.

Simone Murray indicates in her book *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing and Selling Books in the Internet Era* (2018):

Digital media's data-generating and -archiving capabilities enable researchers to document and analyze the publishing industry's mysterious "word of mouth" factor either in real time or retrospectively – from advance publicity for a title, through waves of critical and customer reviews, plus the long afterlife of social media discussion and tagging (55).

Many podcasts that deal with the bookish topics – bookstores, reviews, and recommendations of titles allow listeners to explore the many discussions of literature and the book within the reading community. These discussions also occurred within the context of 21st-century challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bookish Podcasts

The cancellations of first the *Book Fair* in Leipzig in 2020 (Peschel 2020) and later the *Book Fair* in Frankfurt in 2020 were significant events for the publishing world and reading communities. Karin Schmidt-Friderichs, the chairwoman of the *German Publishers & Booksellers Association* said in the press release on the official website of the *Book Fair* that the "Frankfurter Buchmesse is not only the world's largest book fair, it is also a constantly evolving enterprise. Lively, agile and adaptable. Given the current situation, this means a fair without an on-site exhibition in 2020 because of the more stringent corona restrictions being imposed once again." Due to the pandemic restrictions, these events had to be either cancelled or adapted to online or hybrid forms. All of these adjustments had to be implemented on short notice, as the restrictions of social interactions were becoming more limited as the pandemic progressed.

Constant features of the online world, podcasts are one of the modes of information exchange within larger a reading community that spans

many others: video, written blogs, TV and radio programs, for instance. Several bookish podcasts discussed the reactions to the rapid succession of restrictions. This could be observed in real time as the episodes were being recorded as new changes to public life were implemented, sometimes on a weekly basis. The podcasts in question are in German and focus first and foremost on reading and books, with occasional commentary on the various sides of publishing world as well.¹

Podcast *Kapitel Eins* (English: *Chapter One*) is created and co-hosted by journalist Jochen Gebauer and writer and translator Falko Löffler. Their first podcast episode aired in September 2018. Both podcast hosts reside in Germany and publish new episodes biweekly. Additionally, listeners can buy a subscription for bonus episodes that feature interviews with prominent writers, book bloggers, publishers, editors, etc. These bonus episodes are available on their website.

Podcast *Nachts im Buchladen* (English: *Nights at the Bookstore*) is created and hosted by Jenny Heimann, who introduces the listeners to different independent and chain bookstores in her area around the town of Hamm, North Rhine-Westphalia. In her podcast episodes, she interviews booksellers in their shops after they have closed for the day. The episodes usually feature the most popular books in the particular bookstores, as well as general book recommendations by the bookstore owners and employees. Additionally, local bookstores have a chance to advertise different offline events, such as book signings or meet-the-author events. The first episode of *Nachts im Buchladen* was released in November 2018. Jenny Heimann is a journalist with previous experience in bookselling. She currently works for her local radio station.

A publishing editor for science fiction, fantasy, and general literature at *Knaur Verlag*, Natalja Schmidt (a translator), editor Michelle Gyo, and writer Jennie Jaeger (under pseudonym Liza Grimm) created their podcast *Der Phantastik-Brunch* in 2020. The first episode was published on March 22. The three co-hosts focus on films, series, games, and books

1 All translations and transcriptions presented in this article are the author's own.

in speculative fiction. Unlike the two previously mentioned podcasts, *Der Phantastik-Brunch* was created at the beginning of the COVID-pandemic “in the fight against loneliness” (“Der Phantastik-Brunch”). New episodes are published every fourteen days and feature reviews of books and series, as well as interviews with other translators, editors, and writers.

These three podcasts are just a small fraction of what is available to German-language listeners. It is difficult to pinpoint a stable position of any podcast in the charts as new episodes are released every week, and the statistics of listening behavior and popularity is fluid and changes weekly. Moreover, the aggregators of statistical data for podcasts do not have access to data from all the platforms, websites, and apps to which the RSS-feeds share episodes. The available statistics show that *Apple Podcasts* is the most popular platform for content consumption by podcasts-listeners (“Apple Podcasts – Germany – Books”). In the category *Books*, podcast *Kapitel Eins* is in the 43rd position, *Nachts im Buchladen* is in 143rd place, and *Der Phantastik-Brunch* takes the 231st spot. These podcasts are also featured in the category *Arts* and have different positions in charts there as well. Charts deal with the number of people clicking on the episode or podcast title, rating them in the corresponding apps (for instance *Apple Podcasts*), and the number of comments left by listeners in a particular app. What complicates the statistical overview of any podcast even further is the language filter: charts do not always filter the podcasts by language but by the country in which they are accessed. As a result, there are podcasts in different languages featured in the charts for Germany in the category *Books*.

“...there’s no one here, we’re closed and it feels so strange.”

The episode of the podcast *Nachts im Buchladen* titled “Reading in Coronatimes”² aired on March 13, 2020 and was the first in a series of episodes dedicated to the changing local reading scene and its reaction to the cancellation of the Leipzig Book Fair. The guest of this episode – Antje Deistler – is the head of a literary agency (*Literaturbüro*) in the Ruhr³ region of North Rhine-Westphalia, whose general task it is to stimulate the regional literary scene. This includes the networking of authors, bookstores, and publishers. Moreover, they are often responsible for the organization of public readings and book tours for authors (the organization of which became challenging due to pandemic restrictions). Jenny Heimann, the host, expressed her worry about the negative effect of the rapid changes in restrictions on the literary scene in the region:

JH: *The events are unfolding rather quickly at the moment, and that’s quite extreme for an industry like literature. What do you think about that? (01:12)*

AD: *Well, I can’t speak for all the bookstores and publishers, who of course depend on trade fairs, who have to negotiate, who have to exchange information about all the news. I would also have loved to go to the Leipzig Book Fair, but it doesn’t hit us so hard if we, as a team from the Literaturbüro Ruhr, don’t meet all our colleagues in Leipzig and exchange the news. So, on Friday I have a couple of telephone appointments with all those people with whom I would have had a personal appointment on Friday at the book fair otherwise. What would be missing, of course, are the parties, is the personal contact. There is of course a lot of information that won’t be shared, of stories that could be planned, there are new ideas that won’t be developed, and so*

2 “Lesen in Zeiten von Corona.” *Nachts im Buchladen*, 13 March 2020, www.podcasts.apple.com/de/podcast/lesen-in-zeiten-von-corona/id1440765209?i=1000468314659.

3 Literaturbüro Ruhr, www.literaturbuero-ruhr.de/.

on. It's a pity that this won't happen, but I think we here at the Literaturbüro Ruhr are in the fortunate position that we don't lose any money because of it. I really feel sorry for some of my colleagues. (01:21-02:35)⁴

While at that moment the literary agency was still planning some public events and was hoping to be able to keep their visitors safe by positioning chairs at a distance, avoiding shaking hands, and not having too many people join the event in a closed space (04:23-06:36)⁵, the decision to keep the planned events or cancel them was still with the venue owners. The episode had been pre-recorded, and all public events were prohibited by the time of its release.

4 JH: Die Anschläge kommen ja im Moment ziemlich schnell, und das ist für so eine Branche wie Literatur doch ganz schön extrem. Wie schätzt du das ein? (01:12)

AD: Also, ich kann nicht für alle Buchläden und die Verlage sprechen, die natürlich auf Messen angewiesen sind, die Handeln müssen, die sich austauschen müssen über alle die Neuigkeiten. Ich wäre auch sehr gerne auf die Leipziger Buchmesse gefahren, aber es trifft uns nicht hart wenn wir als Team vom Literaturbüro Ruhr, all die Kolleg:innen uns jetzt nicht in Leipzig treffen und uns informieren. Also, ich habe am Freitag jetzt ein Paar Telefontermine mit all den mit dem ich am Freitag auf der Buchmesse persönlich verabredet war. Was natürlich flach fehlt sind die Partys, ist der persönliche Kontakt, da läuft natürlich eine ganze Menge an Informationen, an Geschichten, die man sich erzählt, die man so planen könnte, da werden die Ideen geboren und so weiter. Das ist schon schade, dass das nicht stattfindet aber, ich glaube, wir hier als Literaturbüro Ruhr sind in der erfreulichen Lage, dass uns deswegen kein Gelder wegbrechen. Da tun mir einige Kollegen und Kolleg:innen wirklich sehr Leid (01:21-02:35).

5 Da sind zwei Veranstaltungen demnächst geplant: am 26.03 und am 27.03 und natürlich werde ich den Bahnhof Langendreer fragen, *Wie sieht das denn aus? Wie schätzt ihr es ein?* und vor allen Dingen was können wir machen, damit das Risiko geringgehalten wird (05:48). Also, entweder wir sagen alles ganz ab, diese Entscheidung würde ich in den Fällen den Kolleg:innen und Kollegen überlassen, in den Orten wo die Lesungen stattfinden werden. Aber wenn wir sagen *wir wollen es machen*, dann muss man halt gucken wie gestalten wir das so, dass es auch in Ordnung ist, dahin zu gehen. Also, nicht alle bis auf den letzten Platz und da noch paar Plätze, nicht alle Leute da reinschieben. Es werden sowieso wahrscheinlich nicht so viele kommen. Und vielleicht jemandem an der Tür stehen zu haben, der die Leute daran erinnert, sich nicht die Hand zu geben, einfach freundlich...freundlich Coronawinken. Und vielleicht die Stühle so stellen, dass Platz ist. ... Und es ist vielleicht in diesen Zeiten gerade die gute Idee (04:23-06:36).

The following episode – released on March 20, 2020 under the title “Reading material for the Corona-time”⁶ – features some recommendations and announces that starting that week, bookstores would be closed because of the COVID-crisis, but that “the booksellers you trust would still supply you with the books you need. Most of them have set up a delivery service.”⁷ The guest of the second Corona-episode was Claudia Hellmann, the owner of a small local bookstore in Bockum-Hövel in North Rhine-Westphalia. Through her announcement to the clients, she was able to reorganize her bookstore in the first days of lockdown to fit the many forms of (online) orders coming in via WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, email, phone, and fax. She delivered the orders herself, keeping a safe distance, wearing a mask and gloves to protect herself and her clients. According to Claudia Hellmann, the clients gave her positive feedback, especially in regard to the flexibility of her small business. She openly expressed the need to cover her expenses for that month and her hope to be able to pay her business bills (01:54- 03:01). Support for local bookstores in lockdown had been expressed by the previous guest, Antje Dreitsler:

JH: *Okay, then my other alternative suggestion: Hamstering not only at ALDI for toilet paper, but hamster-shopping in the nearest bookstore, at the local bookseller preferably.*

AD: *I think there's a hashtag now, isn't there? Book-hamster or hamster book....*

JH: *Is that a Corona-hashtag?*

AD: *Yes yes!⁸ (16:19- 16:34 “Reading in the Corona-time”)*

6 “Lesestoff für die Corona-Zeit.” *Nachts im Buchladen*, 20 March 2020, www.podcasts.apple.com/de/podcast/lesestoff-f%C3%BCr-die-corona-zeit/id1440765209?i=1000468984192.

7 Episode description: “Lesestoff für die Corona-Zeit,” <https://podcasts.apple.com/de/podcast/lesestoff-f%C3%BCr-die-corona-zeit/id1440765209?i=1000468984192>.

8 JH: Okay, dann mein anderer Alternativvorschlag: Hamsterkäufer nicht nur bei ALDI in Sachen Klopapier, sondern einfach Hamsterkäufer in der nächsten Buchhandlung, beim örtlichen lokalen Buchhändler am liebsten.

AD: Ich glaube, es gibt inzwischen ein Hashtag, oder? Buchhamster oder Hamsterbuch...

JH: Ist das ein Corona-Hashtag?

AD: Ja ja!

Hamster-shopping is a term for the panic-induced hoarding of products, or *hamstering* (Sullivan 2020), that usually focuses on basic products like rice, noodles or toilet paper. Currently, in May 2022, *#bücherhamster* has 25,617 posts on Instagram. *Bücherhamster* (*book-hamstering*) encouraged people to re-invest the money that they normally would have spent on the trip to a book fair and order book packages from small publishing houses in order to support them (*Phantastik-Brunch*. Episode 2 09:40-11:45).

A guest on one of the following episodes was Johanna Lammert⁹, a bookseller from a small bookstore called *Carolin Wolff*. This bookstore also switched to online orders in response to pandemic conditions. Despite being busy with orders, the bookseller commented on the uncomfortable feeling she had: “Today it’s not *Nights in the Bookstore*, but for me it’s like night, there’s no one here, we’re closed, and it feels so strange.”¹⁰ (“Die Mitmach-Folge” 01:42-01:47)

Carolin Wolff, a family-oriented bookstore, experienced a boom in orders after they created a special offer of book packages for children, who could not go to kindergarten and were supposed to stay at home. The store created several curated reading lists and so attracted locked-down parents and their children. The book orders were sent not only to local customers, but all over Germany (05:03-07:11). Promotion of the bookstore’s offer took place mainly over Facebook and Instagram, but also through word-of-mouth. Promotion on social media from the bookstore itself also gave clients the opportunity to see the work of a small bookstore in lockdown conditions (07:13).

Books for children were not the only popular books at that time; books that featured escapes from reality in any form were popular, according to Margret Holota from a bookstore in Hamm, Germany. In the episode

9 “Die Mitmach-Folge.” *Nachts im Buchladen*, 3 April 2020, www.podcasts.apple.com/de/podcast/die-mitmach-folge/id1440765209?i=1000470397313.

10 CH: Heute ist es ja nicht *Nachts im Buchladen* aber bei mir ist es wie *Nachts*, also es ist ja keiner da, wir haben geschlossen, ganz komische Atmosphäre. (01:42-01:47)

“To the bookstore wearing a mask”¹¹ (released on April 30, 2020), she expressed her relief and excitement at being able to see her clients again and go back to the old routine, as dealing with the online orders over the shutdown period was challenging – selling and sending one book took three times as much work and time as it previously had (00:53-01:19). *The Plague* (1947) by Albert Camus was one of the oft-ordered books, together with classics and titles that had been released over the previous several years (02:01-03:00).

Podcast *Kapitel Eins*, hosted by Falko Löffler und Jochen Gebauer, has provided analysis and discussion of many genre books since March 2020, for instance *World War Z* (2006) by Max Brooks (episode 41)¹² or *Not Forgetting the Whale* (2015) by John Ironmonger (episode 59)¹³. Both of these novels deal with different types of pandemics and their social consequences. The 2019 German translation of the novel *Not Forgetting the Whale* (2015) was successful and placed in the *Spiegel* bestseller list, something Jochen Gebauer said could be the result of the release of the translated book “at the right time, in the right place” (*Kapitel Eins*. Episode 59 06:40) and characterized it as “an antidote to the current pessimistic pandemic” (06:57). At the end of 2020, *Kapitel Eins* decided to also provide paid content that listeners could access via subscription. The first episode was an interview with Natalja Schmidt, an editor from the publishing company *Droemer Knaur* (*Knaur Verlag*). The episode was released on December 22, 2020 and is accessible without any paid subscription as an example of the paid content the podcast plans to offer. In episode 60 (“Bonus-episode 3: Interview with Natalja Schmidt”), Schmidt (a representative of the publishing industry) provided insight into the work of her publishing company in Munich, Germany during the Corona-pandemic: as many employees were able to continue working

11 “Im Buchladen mit Maske.” *Nachts im Buchladen*, 30 April 2020, <http://www.podcasts.apple.com/de/podcast/im-buchladen-mit-maske/id1440765209?i=1000473122185>.

12 “World War Z.” *Kapitel Eins*, 6 April 2020, www.buchpodcast.de/2020/12/14/folge-59-der-wal-und-das-ende-der-welt/.

13 “Der Wal und das Ende der Welt.” *Kapitel Eins*, 22 December 2020, www.buchpodcast.de/2020/12/14/folge-59-der-wal-und-das-ende-der-welt/.

from home, the publishing house adapted a home-office format for the spring of 2020 and a mixed form in the summer, when employees could be in the office every other day (42:50). Some manuscripts and new releases were postponed for later that year, as it had been unclear how long the lockdown would last and how the pandemic would develop (43:58-44:43). As a result, according to Schmidt, autumn 2020 had a higher number of new releases than in previous years; e-books showed a moderate rise in sales, but not as dramatic as in the USA (45:18). The podcast host Falco Löffler commented on the importance of the *Book Fairs* in Frankfurt and Leipzig for the publishing industry and stressed how complicated the conditions of the 2021 *Book Fair* in Leipzig were for organizers: “I wouldn’t want to be in their shoes: now they need to plan the full program, half-program or complete cancellation just in case” (46:34). The guest of the episode mentioned above, Natalja Schmidt, is the co-host of another bookish podcast, *Phantastik-Brunch*. The podcast was started in March 2020 as a response to lockdown limitations. The three hosts of this podcast decided to continue the discussions of books, publishing, and literature that they would usually have in person, only online in audio form (Episode 1). In their second episode, titled “German-language fantasy & bookstore promotions in Corona-times” from March 29, 2020, the hosts discussed the creative approaches of writers and booksellers who were missing the interactions of the *Book Fair* in Leipzig:

NS: I think that's what a lot of people in the fantasy scene are missing now, probably in other genres as well, but especially when Leipzig was cancelled, and in the summer, what events will be cancelled there? I think a lot of authors have, of course, also some additional income – to be able to read there and to sell books. But it is also about the direct contact with the fans, definitely. (01:39-02:15)¹⁴

Although Simone Murray stresses that the “bookish community has become saturated with commercialism in online-born literary spheres” (62) and increasingly resembles a marketplace, the discourse presented in bookish podcasts illustrates not only the interest in the financial side of things, but also the emotional connection between the readers, writers, and booksellers. It would be too naïve to completely ignore the need of bookstores to pay their rents and the publishers to present new titles to the readers, but the emergence of new podcasts in the pandemic, as well as the popularity and persistence of the already existing ones, reflects a human connection. Readers could escape the loneliness via bookish podcasts, while booksellers had an additional platform over which to talk about local bookstores and their relationships to local readers. Publishers were pushed to develop other means of communication with both readers and writers and learn to deliver on promises to the latter in the challenging situation of lockdown.

14 “Ich glaube, dass vermissen einfach gerade wahnsinnig viele in der Fantastik-Szene, wahrscheinlich in anderen Genres auch, aber da insbesondere als Leipzig ausgefallen ist, in dem Frühsommer was da an Veranstaltungen ausfallen wird. Ich glaube, eine Menge Autoren und Autor: innen haben natürlich für dieses auch ein Zusatzverdienst — da lesen zu können und Bücher verkaufen zu können, aber es geht natürlich auch um den direkten Kontakt mit den Fans.”

Conclusion

Podcasts are not a new invention, but this media format has become even more ubiquitous since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020. While there was already an established bookish community on YouTube and Instagram (Tolstopyat 91), the podcasts about book history, publishing, and books and reading in general are not widely studied. A lot of research focuses on the didactic usages of podcasts, although they can be researched from various angles.

Based on the examples of three German-language bookish podcasts, discourse concerning publishing, the book market, and generally reading communities' reactions to the pandemic and lockdown could be observed to a small degree. Several podcast episodes that were released in 2020 reflect attitudes towards the decisions made by the government, the cancellation of offline events like readings and book tours, and the ways different agents of the book industry dealt with the instability and uncertainty of working in the current situation. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a number of challenges for individuals and industries, and the complete impact is yet to be seen. Bookish podcasts present a well of discourse that is fluid and its production ongoing, so future researchers of reading communities and publishing should find book-related podcasts to be a welcome addition to their sources.

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