

# **Reclaiming the Utopian Surplus**

Open Education in an Age of Technological Fatigue

Markus Deimann · CALRG, The Open University · 15 October 2026

# The Lost Future

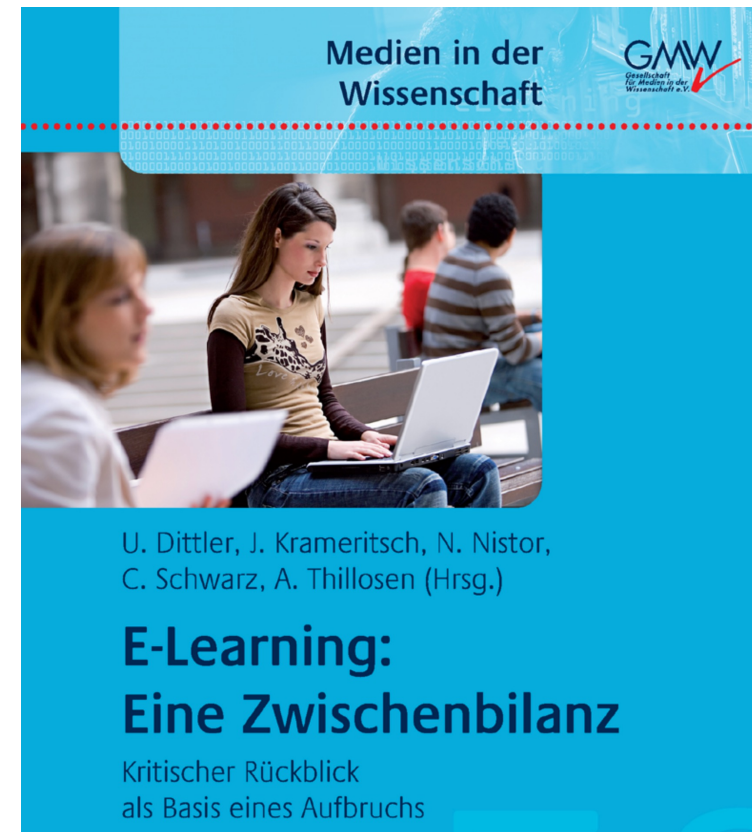


J. Zielonka, *The lost future: And how to reclaim it*.  
New Haven London: Yale University Press, 2023.  
doi: 10.12987/9780300271638.,  
p. vi

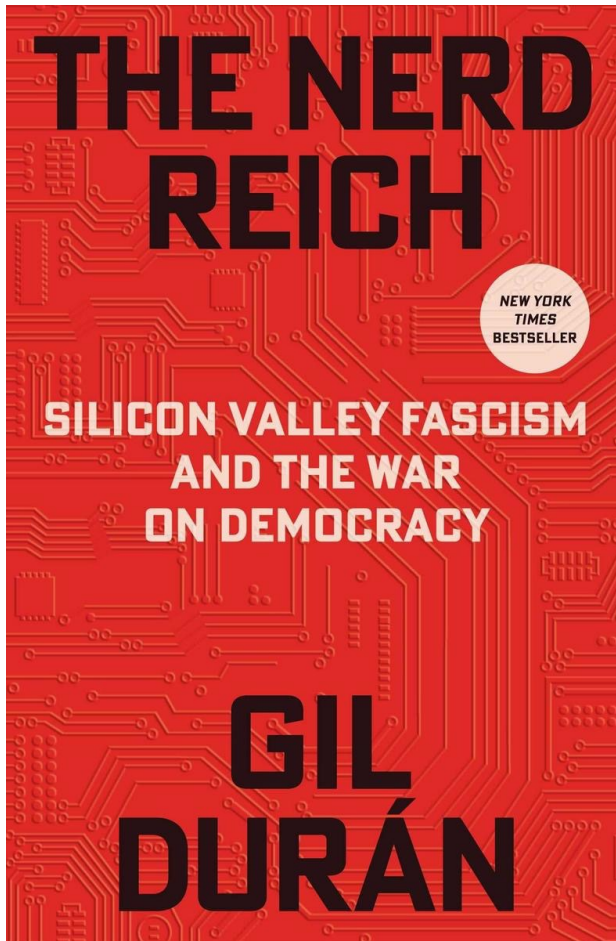
# “The Computer Holds the Promise of the Future”

A seminal text by an influential professor of education, written in 2009.

- Judged by its future, today's computer is a 'crutch'
- But it is also the vehicle in which we place all our hopes for a better education
- Yet, this utopian surplus has been hijacked by Big Tech



## Stolen Future



„We live in a world that has enabled a tiny number of billionaires to monopolize the visions of our future, and they would rather fund the end of the world – literal apocalypse – than risk a world of equality, fairness, and justice“ (p. 165)

## **My argument.**

From “Lost Future” to “Stolen Future”: The Challenge Is Imaginative, Not Technological.

# Agenda

1. Stolen Future
2. An Evening in Berlin
3. Educational Imaginaries
4. Bildung: Humboldt vs. Thiel
5. The AI Challenge
6. Reclaiming the Utopian Surplus



Chapter 1

# Stolen Future

# Picture the University in 2035

Please enter one word / sentence in the chat.



# Future or Hype?



One of the most damaging misconceptions that Silicon Valley has introduced into public discourse is the fact that it has become almost impossible to distinguish between descriptions of a possible future and mere hype. (P. 197)

Daub, A. (2026). What the Valley Calls Ruling. Suhrkamp.

# Reactionary Modernism

- Herf (1984, p. 1): "the embrace of modern technology by German thinkers who rejected Enlightenment reason".
- Technology is moved from Western 'Zivilisation' into German 'Kultur'.
- An analytical construct, not a self-description.

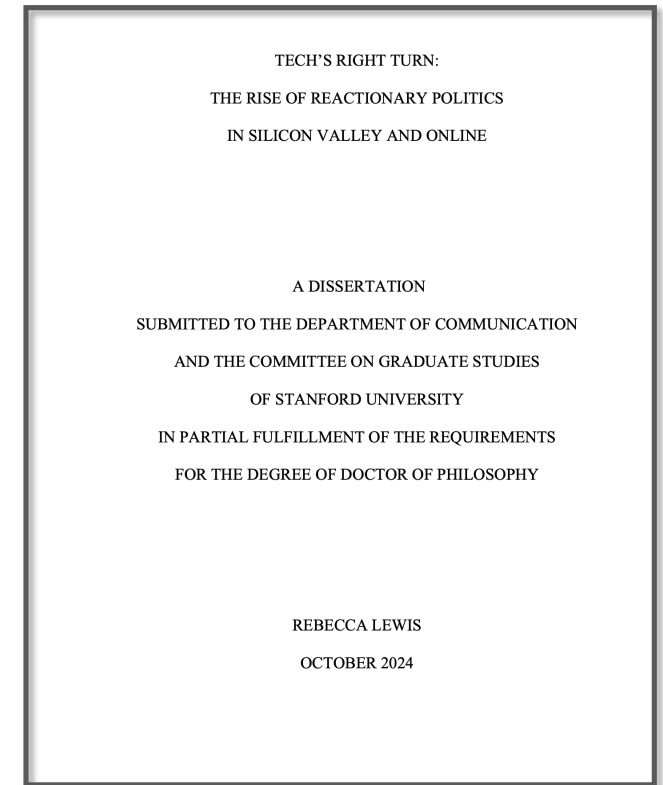
Herf, J. (1984). Reactionary modernism: Technology, culture, and politics in Weimar and the Third Reich (Repr). Cambridge University Press.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-15750 / CC-BY-SA 3.0  
([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv\\_Bild\\_102-15750,\\_Ausstellung\\_\"Deutsches\\_Volk-Deutsche\\_Arbeit\".jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_102-15750,_Ausstellung_\)), „Bundesarchiv Bild 102-15750, Ausstellung \"Deutsches Volk-Deutsche Arbeit\"“, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/legalcode>

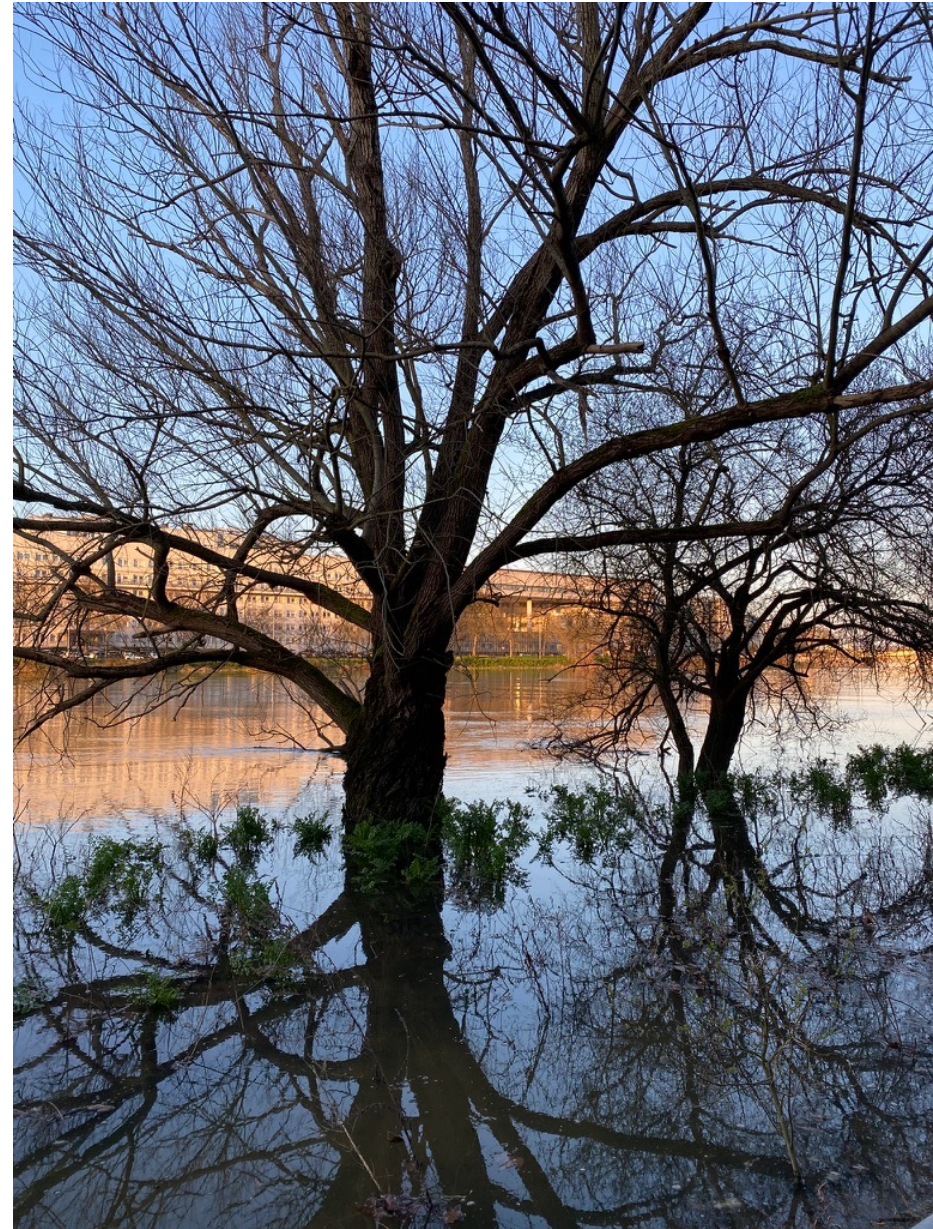
# Reactionary Futurism

- information technology as a vehicle to restore an idealised, unequal order
- the entrepreneur as hero
- bypassing mass media and schools. Thiel at the centre of the network.
- Shared core with Herf (1984): technology against the democratic legacy of the Enlightenment.



## A Lens: Four Features

- Technology yes, Enlightenment no
- Inwardness and the soul of the nation
- Closing the future
- Bypassing knowledge institutions



Chapter 2

# **An Evening in Berlin**

# The Axel Springer Award 2026



## Why a Ceremony? Why Thiel?

“With this honour, Axel Springer pays tribute to an individual who has, in an extraordinary way, created new markets, transformed existing ones and had a lasting impact on the technological, economic and social debates of our time.”

<https://www.axelspringer.com/de/ax-press-release/peter-thiel-mit-dem-axel-springer-award-2026-ausgezeichnet>

A publicly performed vision of one future.

# Freedom vs. Democracy

"I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible."

HOME > FROM SCRATCH: LIBERTARIAN INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITIES > RESPONSE ESSAYS



## The Education of a Libertarian

Peter Thiel • April 13, 2009 •

[Tweet](#) [Like](#) [Submit](#) [Share](#)

Berlin, 2026

Award Ceremony, Thiel states:

"I get pinned on that for seventeen years. It was this essay (...). Writing is such a dangerous activity. It's like more dangerous than having a child. The child turns out badly, you can always disown your child. Anything you write, you can never take back.

But yeah, it was it was this hastily typed out thing. It was... I don't think I said anything that controversial."

# “The Last Standing German”

Alex Karp, CEO of Palantir, video message

- “(...) whose heart still beats German”; but Thiel left Germany when he was 1 year old
- German inwardness + Silicon Valley capitalism; another “bizarre fusion” (Californian Ideology by Barbrook & Cameron, 1995)
- Not technology for democracy, but technology as an escape from it and versus modernity as an unfinished project (Habermas)



Chapter 3

# **Educational Imaginaries**

# Sociotechnical Imaginaries

- Collectively shared: not individual fantasies, but shared visions of communities
- Institutionally stabilised: embedded in policies, curricula and funding structures
- Publicly performed : actively brought to life through practice

Jasanoff, S., & Kim, S.-H. (Hrsg.). (2015). Dreamscapes of modernity: Sociotechnical imaginaries and the fabrication of power. The University of Chicago Press.

# The Primal Scene of Education



Codex ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Comenius\\_Orbis.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Comenius_Orbis.jpg)), „Comenius Orbis“, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode>

N. Friesen, „The Technological Imaginary in Education: Myth and Enlightenment in ‘Personalized Learning’“, in *The Digital Age and Its Discontents: Critical Reflections in Education*, M. Stocchetti, Hrsg., Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2020, S. 141–160. doi: 10.33134/HUP-4-8.

# The Open University



Why is this the exception and not the default?

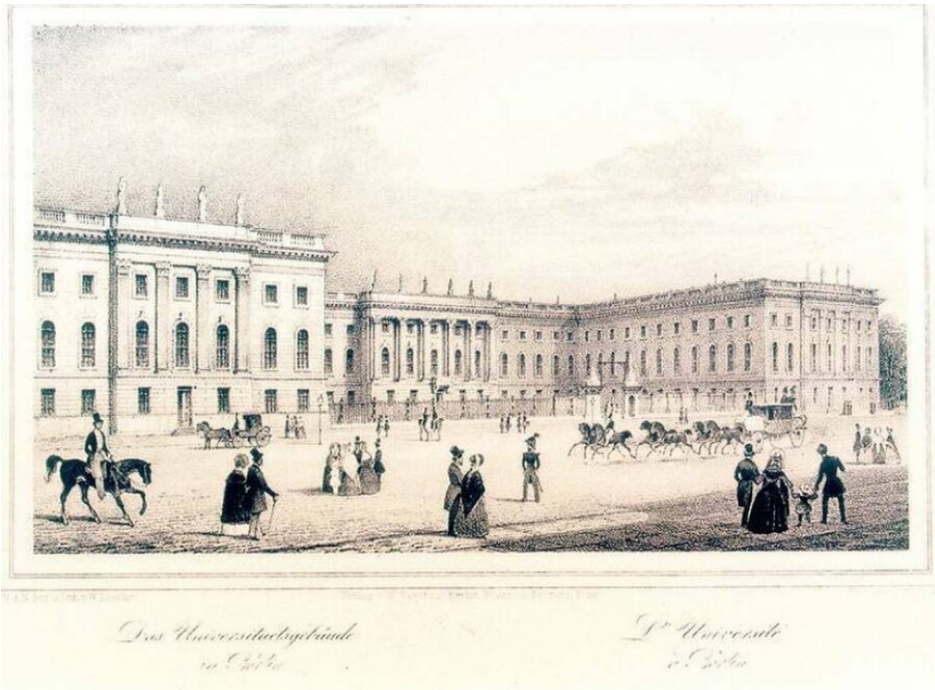
Chmee2 ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Entrance\\_to\\_Perry\\_A\\_and\\_B\\_building\\_at\\_Open\\_University\\_Campus\\_in\\_Milton\\_Keynes,\\_spring\\_2013.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Entrance_to_Perry_A_and_B_building_at_Open_University_Campus_in_Milton_Keynes,_spring_2013.jpg)), „Entrance to Perry A and B building at Open University Campus in Milton Keynes, spring 2013“, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode>

Chapter 4

# **Bildung: Humboldt vs. Thiel**

# Bildung Through vs. Against the University

Berlin University (1845)



Geschichtsfanatiker

([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lithographie\\_der\\_Berliner\\_Universit%C3%A4t\\_von\\_Wilhelm\\_Loeillot,\\_1845.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lithographie_der_Berliner_Universit%C3%A4t_von_Wilhelm_Loeillot,_1845.jpg)), <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>

Thiel  
Fellowship™

FAQ

Apply

The Thiel Fellowship gives \$250,000 to young people who want to build new things instead of sitting in a classroom.

Two years. \$250,000.  
Some ideas can't  
wait.

# Open vs. Closed Futures

| Bildung                                                         | Silicon Valley                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| keeping conflicts open, defending “the plurality of discourses” | a future already decided                                                                                                                                             |
|                                                                 | “The ending of worlds has become the business model.” (Durán, 2025)                                                                                                  |
|                                                                 | “Perhaps we should fear the Antichrist, perhaps we should fear the one-world totalitarian state more than Armageddon.”<br>Thiel, Oxford 2023 (quoted in Durán, 2025) |

# From Trolling to Policy



Davidmerfield  
([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Curtis\\_Yarvin.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Curtis_Yarvin.jpg)), „Curtis Yarvin“,  
<https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/legalcode>

## Curtis Yarvin

- Blogger, promoted for years by Peter Thiel
- universities and the press: “the Cathedral”
- “RAGE: Retire All Government Employees”

“These ideas, once dismissed as silly internet trolling, became government policy.”

Durán (2025)

Chapter 5

# The AI Challenge

# Is Open Education Made Obsolete by AI?

The AI imaginary: techno-solutionism + Cyberlibertarianism

*“Regardless of how optimistic or pessimistic the conversations around AI are, the underlying presumption is that ‘There Is No Alternative’.”*

Selwyn, „Resisting and reimagining Artificial Intelligence“, *Worlds of Education*,  
25.08.2023

## Contrasting Imaginaries

| The AI Imaginary                            | The Imaginary of Open Education                    |
|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| There is no alternative                     | Bildung: never finished, always opening up further |
| Education as content delivery               | Education as a democratic practice                 |
| Personalised, scalable                      | Collective, community-driven, uncertain            |
| Owned by a few, beyond democratic oversight | Knowledge and infrastructure as public goods       |

So the question is not how we invent a better future. It is how we take our capacity to imagine it back.

Chapter 6

# **Reclaiming the Utopian Surplus**

## **Schulmeister Was Right**

The computer still holds the promise of the future. But the future it promises today belongs to a different imaginary.

# Prefiguration

“... practices in which the goals and values of a future social order are already embodied in present forms of action.”

Wilhelm-Weidner, A., Deimann, M., Schubert, M., & Granas, B. (2026). Shaping the Future: Prefigurative Politics and the Political Dimension of Open Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence. In K. Tödt, B. Granas, & C. Büching (Hrsg.), *Digital Education and Innovation* (S. 443–468). Springer Nature Switzerland. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-26816-7\\_18](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-26816-7_18)

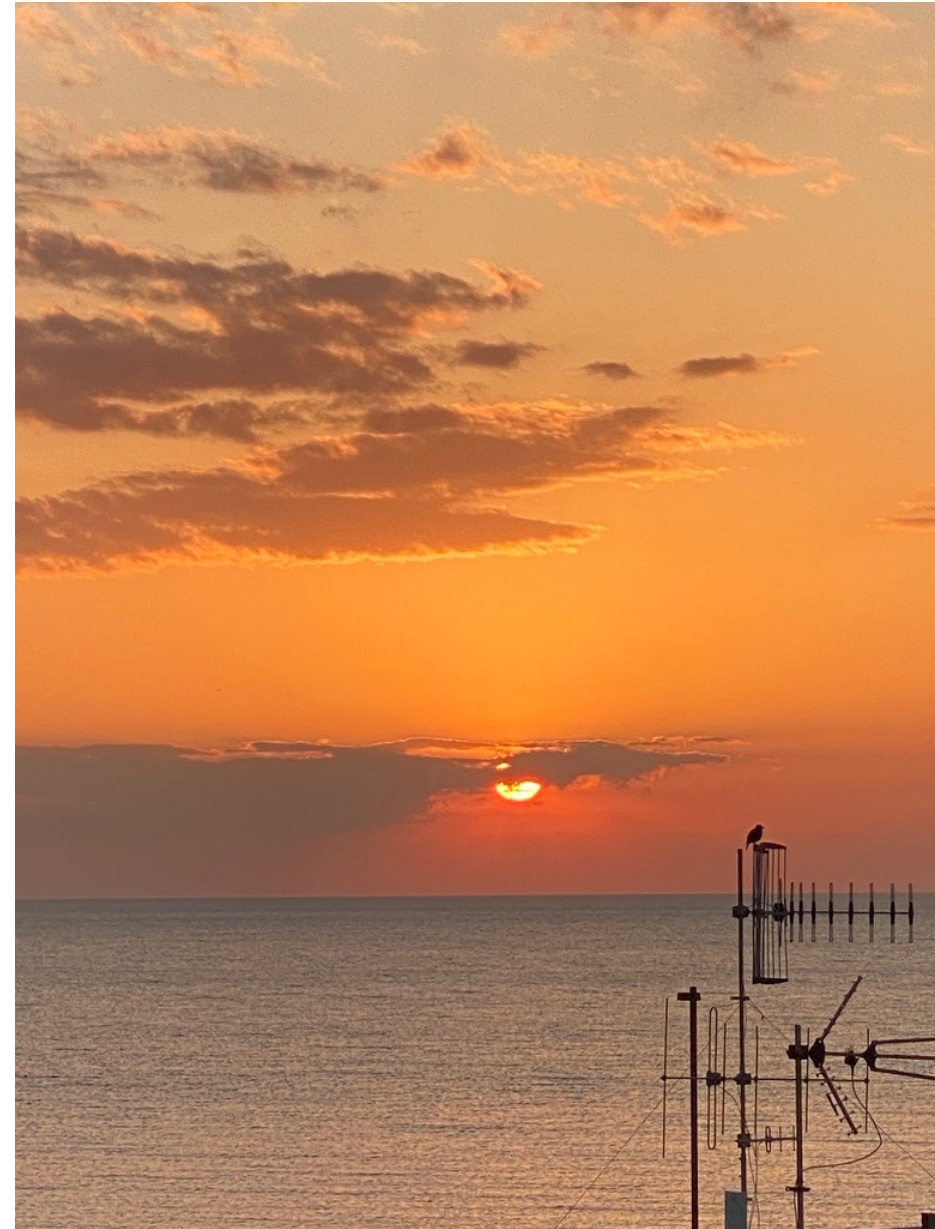


# Reclaiming the Future, Piece by Piece

|            | Content          | Infrastructure                                   |
|------------|------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Instead of | AI-generated     | Sovereignty as a service; rented, owned by a few |
| We build   | Open, modifiable | Open in code and governance, public in funding   |
| Examples   | Open Rewi        | Educational Sovereign Tech Fund                  |

# **The Future of Open Education Is Not Waiting to Be Invented**

Open to people, places, methods and ideas  
... and open to the future.



**Thank You.**

Markus.Deimann@rub.de

