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▶Seeing the light: Paul Nemitz (DG JUST) calls on readers to be wary of allowing big tech companies to determine the future

Standing up for freedom and democracy in the age of AI
Colleague's book faces up to big tech companies
by Miriam Tessens, CEND
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The triangle of technology, democracy and law. That's the field of work for Paul Nemitz (DG JUST) – who is principal adviser on justice policy. But it's also the focus of his book 'Prinzip Mensch'. Together with the German philosopher and journalist Matthias Pfeffer, he has written about power, freedom and democracy in the age of artificial intelligence – and the book is making quite a splash.

"*Technologies like the internet, artificial intelligence or quantum computing should be scrutinised on more than their technical aspects alone,*" warns Paul. *"And they shouldn't just be considered economic tools, as they can for instance, through mass collection of personal data and their analysis, exert power over people by nudging them towards certain behaviours. We should look at what these tools and technologies mean for the individual, their freedom, and the good functioning of democracy.*"

The book title refers to the 1979 work *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (in English: *The Imperative of Responsibility, in search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*) by the German philosopher Hans Jonas. He called for a new responsibility towards nature, and stated that even if there's only a slight chance of irreversible and serious damage to mankind by a new technology, you should make sure that doesn't occur.

> ***We cannot leave it to big tech companies alone to shape the world and the way we live***

"*This precautionary principle has in the meantime become engrained in the European Union Treaty and science and technology regulation,*" explains Paul. "*Concretely that means that if a new technology might have a devastating effect in the long term, we should take measures so that won't happen.*"

"*We must make sure that the rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy – which are threatened by big tech companies like Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft and their business models – are still going strong in the future, and that individuals are free and can reason for themselves.*"
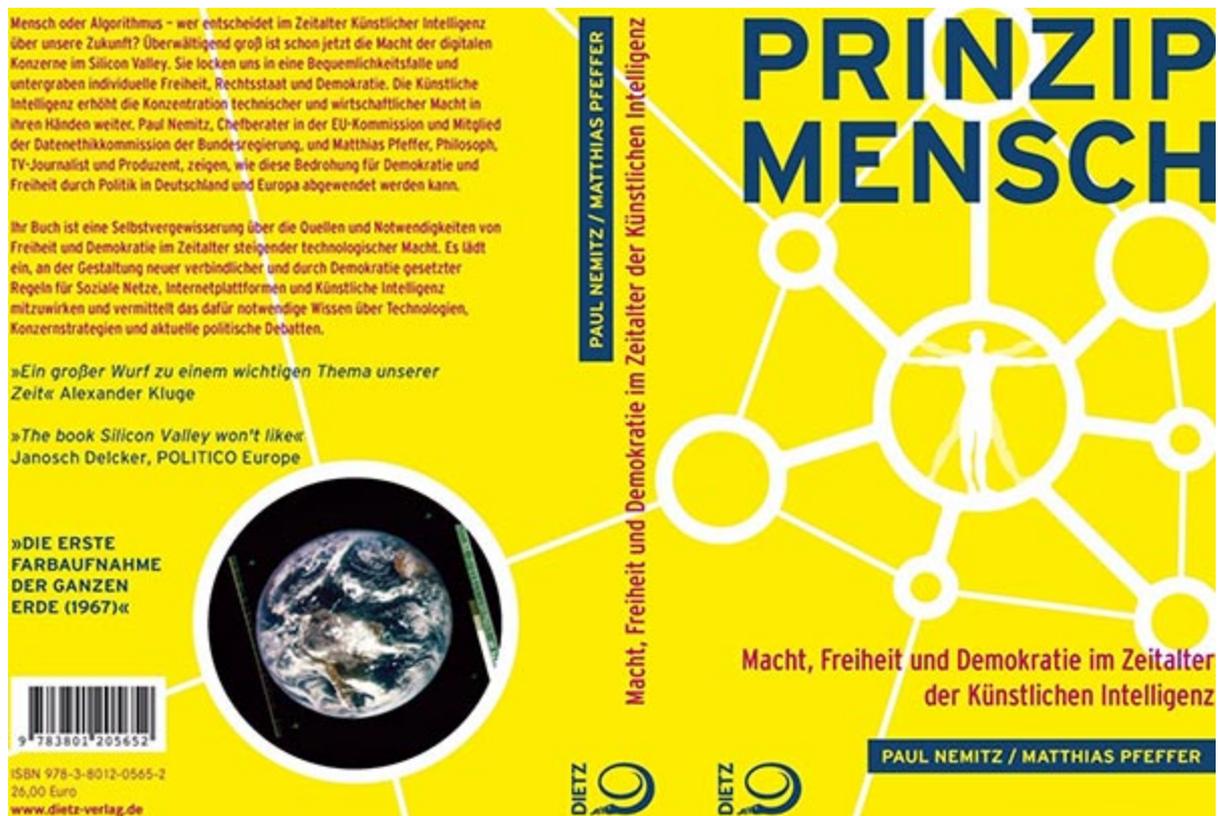
An invitation to think

The book starts with a critique: the world's digital and economic power lies in a handful of American technology companies - all of them, except Facebook, at least 10 times bigger in terms of market capitalisation than the biggest European tech company. How did they get this powerful? How do they use their power? How did democracies let them become so powerful?

According to their 'Californian ideology', technology is the solution to all problems and the ultimate goal is 'singularity', the merging of man and machine. Their thinking is very much influenced by *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* by the late American activist John Perry Barlow, in which he calls on governments not to interfere with the internet's independence.

"*Until not so long ago, self-regulation and ethics was also the stance of the EU institutions in relation to many aspects of technology,*" says Paul. "*But recent Council conclusions show there's a broad conviction now that the EU needs to reign in these big players.*"

"*We cannot leave it to big tech companies alone to shape the world and the way we live. We need strong democratic institutions, a credible industrial policy, and we need to use the law, to make sure rules are made with democratic legitimacy and are enforced on everyone, in particular the powerful players.*"

▶Prinzip Mensch invites readers to engage in politics, to protect democracy

The second part of the book is more optimistic and explains why in times of technological dominance it's worth engaging in the fight to keep up the rule of law and democracy. The final chapter offers some policy suggestions. For instance, obliging big companies that have built powerful networks to open up to, and interconnect with, new competing networks, since the current winner-takes-all principle of the platform economy makes it impossible to create alternative networks.

A work of friendship

The seed for his book was planted with the opinion piece *Constitutional democracy and technology in the age of artificial intelligence*, which he wrote for a scientific technology journal. The article was downloaded more than 20,000 times. "*When I write an article about law, I have about 30 readers,*" he laughs, "*so I felt there was more in it.*"

Together with his friend Matthias Pfeffer, a philosopher and political journalist, he started working on the project, which would last for two and a half years. "*The biggest challenge was to stick with it and finish it,*" he says, "*and to combine it with our jobs. I can assure you that much of our free time and many holidays were spent on this book!*"

 "*So far, the feedback has been astonishingly entirely positive,*" says Paul. "*There was no damning criticism at all.*" The book has definitely resonated with many readers, as the authors have been asked to write follow-up articles and are often invited to give presentations, including by the Technical University of Berlin and the German Informatics Society. "*The technical intelligentsia, like engineers, but also programmers or developers, have shown great interest. With this book, we invite them to also engage in politics, to make sure the fundamentals of democracy are delivered.*"

Paul donated a signed copy to the Commission Library, where you can also read the e-book through the e-resources service. The English translation, The Human Imperative – Power, Freedom and Democracy in the age of Artificial Intelligence, *will be published next March*.

The Prinzip Mensch book website (http://www.prinzipmensch.eu)
E-book through   (http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2523857&site=ehost-live)
the Commission's Library and e-resources service

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