

# It's too darn hot

*Climate change is one of the biggest threats we face. Two environmental activists embarked on a translation project to get the message across*



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Two years ago, Columbia University Press published a book that tackles climate change in a rather new and refreshing way. We decided to translate it; not primarily as a commercial project but because we felt it was very important to reach new audiences.

## The Madhouse Effect

*The Madhouse Effect: how climate change denial is threatening our planet, destroying our politics, and driving us crazy* (Columbia University Press), by Michael E. Mann, Distinguished Professor of Meteorology and Director of the Earth System Science Center at Pennsylvania State University, and Tom Toles, the Pulitzer Prize-winning political cartoonist for *The Washington Post*, was first published in 2016 and reissued and expanded in 2018 for the rising temperatures of the Trump era. The authors wanted to clear the fog of manufactured and self-interested climate scepticism around climate change by informing and motivating lay readers.

While numerous other factual books on climate change have been published in recent years, *The Madhouse Effect* is characterised by its uncomplicated language combined with a satirical undertone. In just 150 pages the text succeeds in being clear, concise, complete and, thanks to the sharp cartoons, even illuminatingly funny. It also looks at how language itself has been altered by shadowy paid lobbyists and professional ‘astroturfers’ (paid lobbyists who present themselves as grass-roots activists). As Mann points out, ‘Unfortunately the term “sceptic” has been hijacked,

especially in the climate change debate, to mean something entirely different. It is used as a way to dodge evidence one simply doesn’t like.’

Unfortunately, however, the book was only available in English. We wanted to bring it to the attention of the German-reading public. Although many German speakers can read English, many do not particularly want to – especially in a book of this type. Books which seem to be ‘academic’ are almost never taken up by the general public. We felt this was particularly unfortunate for a book which might be written by a self-proclaimed ‘pointy-headed,

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lab-coat wearing, left-brained scientist’ but which deliberately avoids being overly scientific, especially in its collaboration with a ‘laid-back, artistic, right-brained editorial cartoonist-satirist’.

## The German context

One might be forgiven for thinking that a book of this nature would be unnecessary in Germany in any case. The country is, after all, seen as one of the pioneers of action to combat climate change, as evidenced by its forward-looking *Energiewende* (energy transition). Sadly, just as in the USA, over recent years the German

*Energiewende* has come under increasing pressure from *Klimaskeptiker* (German climate sceptics) and industry interests.

So how did the two of us get involved? The project was the brainchild of Matthias Hüttmann, one half of our duo and the long-standing chief editor of *Sonnenenergie* (the membership magazine of DGS, the German arm of the International Solar Energy Society), meaning that he has plenty of experience in dealing with *Energiewende* sceptics. The other half of our team, Herbert Eppel, is a long-standing environmental and energy campaigner (co-founding the Pro Wind Alliance in 2008, and joining DGS around the same time). When Matthias approached him about the book translation, he was immediately hooked, despite the fact that it quickly became clear that this wasn’t a conventional translation project. Rather, the idea was for the book to be self-financed and essentially self-published. In other words, it was more of an environmental campaigning project than a commercial one.

The teamwork that we developed during the course of the project was exemplary, and was a key part of its success. It’s fair to say that neither of us would have had the motivation to tackle the challenge on our own.

## Translation challenges

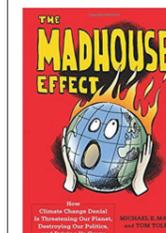
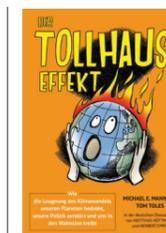
We intended the German version to be a faithful translation of the original, and we did hold to that as far as possible. Clearly, the original text and indeed the cartoons are very US-centred, both in terms of the politics and associated shenanigans as well as in terms of the (quite possibly climate change-related) weather events. One of the reviewers suggested that the book could have been made more relevant for German readers by including examples of recent extreme weather events from Germany and neighbouring countries. But where to draw the line? Should we also have included examples of German energy politics? We had to make our



decisions about what would work best for this particular translation.

One key challenge was deciding on a German title for the book. We fairly soon decided on *Der Tollhauseffekt*. The German adjective *toll* actually means ‘splendid’ or ‘super’. The compound word *Tollhaus* can indeed describe a madhouse, both in the colloquial sense of a ‘locus of lunacy’, and in the technical sense of a psychiatric hospital, but these days some businesses are using this word as a name for a themed safe-play area or a film and music venue, such as Kulturzentrum Tollhaus Karlsruhe. While that could suggest something more like the innocuous English ‘funhouse’, the book’s cover illustration provides a clue as to what sort of madness the book concerns.

Another challenge came with the chapter on geoengineering, which is subtitled ‘What could possibly go wrong?’. It starts with the lyrics to the song ‘The Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly’, which many Americans grew up with – she swallows a spider to catch the fly, and then goes on till she swallows a horse (‘she’s dead, of course’). The lazy option would have been to simply omit the poem. However, this would have been a shame, since it is a perfect parable for the risks of geoengineering. Thankfully Matthias has a poetic streak, and decided to rise to the challenge with: ‘Es war mal eine alte Frau. Sie verschluckte



Translating cartoon captions was challenging but worthwhile

eine Fliege, warum weiß man nicht so genau’ etc.

## Looking at the pictures

We also had the cartoons to contend with. One fundamental question was whether the English cartoon texts should be overwritten by German text or whether to use a ‘subtle’ approach, which is what the Italian translators of this book have done for *La terra brucia*, the Italian version of *The Madhouse Effect*. Although overwriting the cartoon texts clearly involved significantly more typesetting effort, we soon agreed that this was the right way forward.

Many of the cartoons did present

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linguistic and/or cultural challenges. How does one adequately convey the meaning of ‘off-road kill’, for example? Thankfully, translator colleague Margit Röntgen came to the rescue in this instance with *Ende Gelände*. And the cartoon entitled ‘The Persistence of Procrastination’ obviously draws inspiration from Salvador Dalí. The original English title of Dalí’s painting is *The Persistence of Memory*, or *Die Beständigkeit der Erinnerung* in German. It has been suggested that our German title, ‘Das Forbestehen des Aufschubs’, doesn’t quite cut it and that ‘Die Beständigkeit der Leugnung’ would

## Further information in English

- <http://www.michaelmann.net/books/madhouse-effect>
- <http://www.michaelmann.net/content/return-madhouse>

## Further information in German

- <https://www.dgs-franken.de/medien/tollhauseffekt/>

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