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Interviews

Services

About

More

All Interviews

The Story Behind

Educators

Finance Leaders

Authors

Journalism

Economics

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Sorina I. Crisan-Matthey de l'Endroit, PhD · Jun 30, 2024 · 15 min read

Women in Academia: Dr. Elisa Cugliana's Work on the Books of Fortune & in Digital Philology



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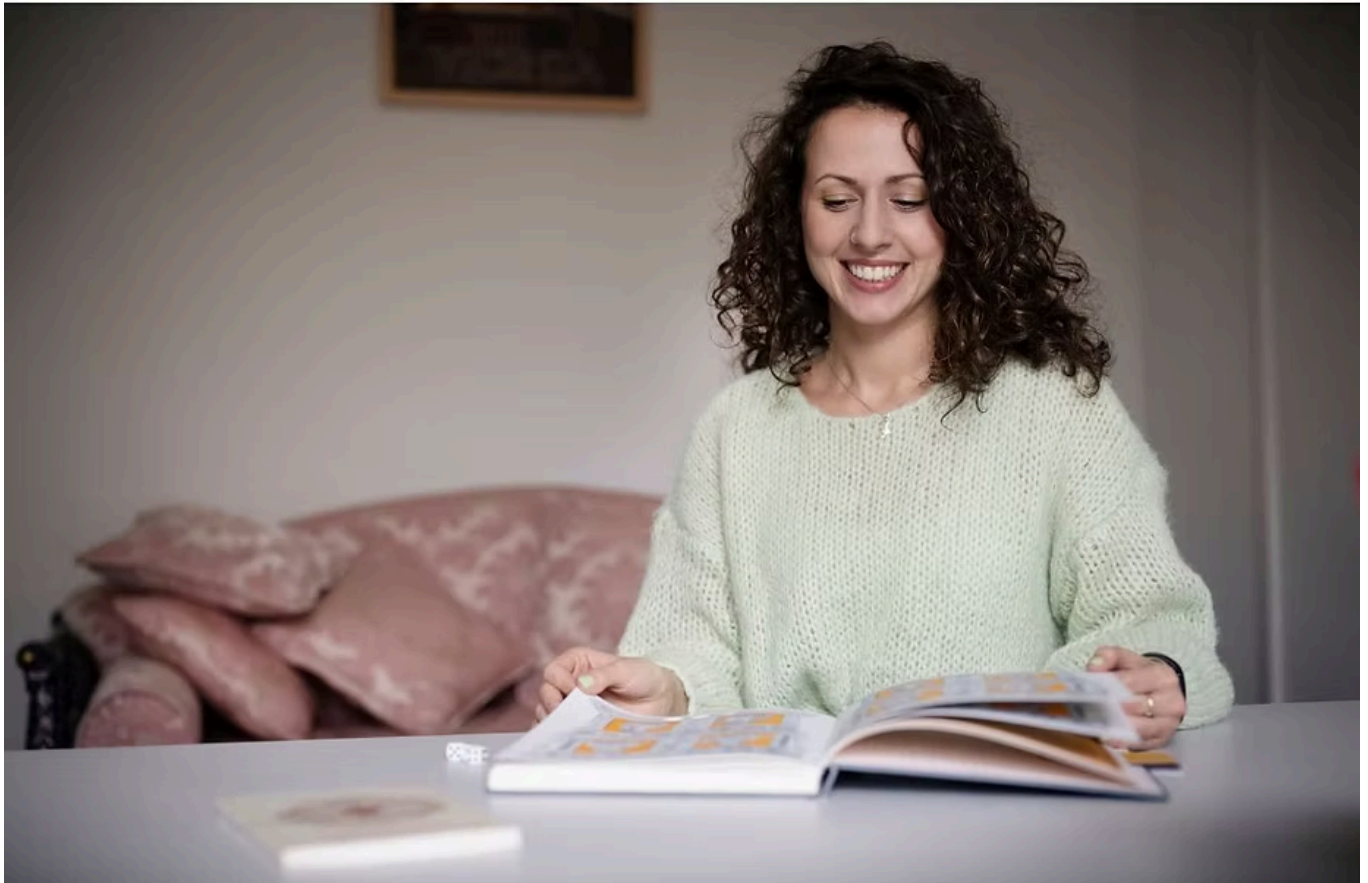
What is it like to bridge the gap between pre-modern manuscripts and the digital world while pursuing an academic career? In this interview, Dr. Elisa Cugliana, Junior Professor of Digital Humanities at the University of Cologne, discusses her unique and inspiring career trajectory. Specializing in the digital/computational editing of medieval texts and the philology of Germanic languages, Dr. Cugliana's noteworthy scholastic contributions stand at the intersection of traditional and modern academic work. She meticulously studies and helps digitize medieval texts, particularly manuscripts from the medieval German-speaking world. In this conversation, Dr. Cugliana discusses five main topics: the integration of digital methods in the humanities field, the interdisciplinary skills required for modern scholars, the innovative application of biological methods to historical text analysis, her noteworthy career and personal journey that led her to her current position, and her practical and profound advice for junior scholars interested in conducting similar types of research. She also describes her work with the books of fortune, noting that during Antiquity, "these texts were taken seriously and considered vital sources for decision-making." Furthermore, Dr. Cugliana emphasizes the role that mindset has on current research and analytical methodologies and reflects on the impact that persuasion has in academia, stating that while the quality of research should speak for itself, it is important to "try to convince people of the value and excitement" of our respective body of work. In short, Dr. Cugliana's insights provide a compelling look into the dynamic field of digital humanities, where the past meets the future in fascinating ways.

Interview by Sorina I. Crisan – Matthey de l'Endroit, PhD

This interview is part of the Educators: Academic, Non-Academic & Hybrid series, which profiles educators across disciplines, institutions, and sectors — exploring how they teach, lead, and shape the minds of the next generation.

WOMEN IN ACADEMIA

Dr. Elisa Cugliana's Work on the Books of Fortune & in Digital Philology



Q1. What is Digital Philology, and how do digital methods enhance the study of historical texts?

Answer: To understand digital philology, we need to separate its two components: 'digital' and 'philology.'

The term 'digital' is familiar since we use it almost every day. Here, it refers to using digital methods for scholarly purposes. Digital philology is part of the digital humanities, where traditional analog disciplines like the humanities start relying on digital methods and merge, in some respects, with other fields such as computer sciences. This shift brings these disciplines closer to the hard sciences by creating measurable results and employing quantitative methods, rather than relying solely on analog approaches. The use of digital methods is challenging because capturing humanities concepts quantitatively isn't easy. However, it also presents an extraordinary opportunity by making these disciplines more explicit, transparent, logical, measurable, and traceable.

'Philology,' on the other hand, is the study of the origin and development of texts. A significant part of philology involves editing texts, especially pre-modern manuscripts, which are hard for the general public to read. Philologists make these texts accessible to modern readers by providing explanations, interpretations, and commentaries, creating a bridge between the past and the present. The methods used in philology vary depending on the text's origin. Studying a 19th-century text, for instance, differs from examining a medieval manuscript. Medieval texts often

exist in many different copies, and because texts were copied by hand, they could be altered freely since the concept of authorial intent was different from today.

My area of expertise in digital philology focuses on medieval texts, particularly manuscripts from the medieval German-speaking world. My background is in Germanic philology, which encompasses the study of texts in all Germanic languages (which include, among others, Old English and Old Norse).

Combining these elements, digital methods have brought significant advantages to digital philology. For example, in some cases, we use methods from biology developed to study DNA evolution to trace the development of texts over centuries. This interdisciplinary approach makes digital philology a fascinating field.

Q2. How can biological methods used to study DNA help in analyzing historical texts?

Answer: Simplifying a lot, we can explain this as follows: DNA is represented as text, with letters symbolizing proteins. In this way, DNA can be seen as text. The methods developed in biology to study and analyze DNA can also be used to study and analyze the development of texts in philology.

An important principle is that when DNA replicates, it does so with variants or errors. Similarly, when medieval scribes copied texts, they introduced variants. This mechanical process is unavoidable; hand-copying inevitably introduces changes. Therefore, the methods used to study how these variants develop in DNA replication can also be applied to the study of text copying and development in philology.

Q3. Where can students in the humanities gain interdisciplinary skills and experience such as yours?

Answer: In the humanities, we don't have cool labs where people wear doctor-like outfits. We're just regular people working in universities. Currently, I'm at the University of Cologne, where we have study programs that teach skills necessary for research projects similar to mine.

A good starting point is to find a research project that aligns with your interests. Universities are the best places to look for these opportunities, but there are also other institutions promoting workshops and interesting initiatives.

For example, when I studied in Italy, I was in a traditional program focused on linguistics and philology, with only one course in digital humanities. However, I found many parallel activities like workshops, tutorials, winter schools, and summer schools. These allowed me to develop my skills in different directions, following both the traditional philology path and improving my digital skills.

You probably won't find everything you need in a single study program, so you have to stay open to interdisciplinary opportunities. That's the key.

Q4. What is a crucial topic in your field of study now?

Answer: An important topic in my field right now is the need to overcome the still-present bookish paradigm that characterizes how we use digital methods. This relates to the concept of "forma mentis," a Latin term for mindset, which is still influenced by old media. We often try to represent our knowledge and contents on a page, even when producing digital resources.

Scholars might not openly admit this, but we often still strive to fit our work onto a page, even in a digital environment. While digital publishing allows for vast quantities of data, images, and audio files, this increase in quantity doesn't necessarily signify a paradigm change. Digital methods can offer much more, especially in how we communicate, represent, and expand our knowledge, as well as how we analyze it.

Embracing the digital paradigm means improving the scientific value of humanities research. This involves not only making our research findings and data explicit but also our interpretations. Interpretation is a dynamic process that

combines different kinds of information, and in the humanities, it is valued on the same level as data. With digital methods, we can make our interpretations more traceable and transparent.

For example, programming languages, which are performative and based on high levels of formality and logic, can capture and represent our interpretation processes. This makes the processes more transparent, allowing others to follow and reproduce them, thus evaluating them more effectively. This is a crucial task for us. We may not yet have all the necessary technology, but this is an important and rapidly evolving field. I believe it will flourish in the next ten years.

Q5. How are you applying digital methods to study historical books of fortune?

Answer: At the moment, I'm trying to put these principles into practice in my own work. I'm working on a project about a book of fortune, or "sortes" text. These books of fortune were fascinating texts used since Antiquity, and throughout the Middle Ages to predict the future.

For those curious to see how these books look like, I recommended accessing the following link which shows "München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 312," which is a collection of books of fortune in late-medieval German. Even if most people nowadays probably cannot read the text depicted on this website, the codex is one of the most beautifully illuminated, so it is a pleasure to leaf through it even if one doesn't know the language.

Going back to describing the meaning behind these books of fortune, initially, in Antiquity, these texts were taken seriously and considered vital sources for decision-making. Over time, they became more like games. These books were special because you couldn't read them from beginning to end; you had to interact with them actively. You would use randomizing mechanisms like throwing dice, drawing dots in the sand, or using animal bones (instead of dice) to start a chain of hints that would lead you from a question about your future to an answer given by an authoritative figure, such as a king or a prophet.

You could ask almost any question, but usually, you chose from a list of questions about everyday life, such as "Should I marry that person?" or "Should I start this trip?" These books reveal a lot about the worries and questions of people at the time, providing precious information about their lives. They also show how people had fun, as these texts became more like games over time.

I'm focusing on one specific book of fortune, the "Prenostica Socratis Basilei," a book of Arabic origin. I'm studying its Medieval German versions, of which there are five, with ten different witnesses (manuscripts and early prints). I aim to create a digital scholarly edition, or more precisely, a computational scholarly edition, where my interpretations are expressed in formal languages.

In my edition, users will be able to follow all the paths in these books from questions to answers and see where these paths cross. The mechanisms varied greatly among the versions. In one German version, you throw dice; in another, you use a movable paper installation that looks like a wheel. In yet another, you count the numbers associated with the letters of your name and add further numbers based on the time of day. My edition will showcase this variance as much as possible for the readers.

Q6. What inspired your interest in Digital Philology and, what languages do you speak?

Answer: This field is really a mixture of many things I love. I've always adored books. To give you an example, I actually pretended that I knew how to read before I even learned how to read. As a child, I wanted to read so badly, so I'd sit there with a book, make up stories, and pretend I was reading. Books have always been so important in my life, and I especially think that old books can tell us so much about the people of the past.

I'm particularly interested in the materiality of books—the roles they played for people and how they've shaped our culture and knowledge. This is something that is very important to me. Another aspect that plays a significant role in my interests is languages.

I truly love languages. I studied linguistics during my bachelor's and master's because I've always found it fascinating to understand how language works in our brains, how it's created by our minds, and how it has developed over time. Languages change significantly over time. How people spoke in the Middle Ages is very different from how we speak today, though there are exceptions.

One of my first research projects was on the Cimbrian language of the seven communities of Asiago in Vicenza, Northern Italy. This community survived until about the end of the last century and spoke a variety of German that sounded like Old High German, essentially German from the Middle Ages. This community was like a linguistic island. They had migrated from Bavaria starting in the 11th century and settled in Italy. Because they were isolated from the languages around them, their language remained very conservative and didn't change much. This phenomenon often occurs when languages are isolated from their original community. I found it so fascinating to hear a language from the past through these people.

I learned the language and worked on recordings because my grandfather was also a scholar in this field, which I discovered later. I found his recordings in my grandmother's cellar, much later after I had already found my own interest in studying this language. They were on reel tape, so I had to use an old tool to listen to them, and I played them over and over again. I even worked on this for my master's thesis, and it became my daily passion. I also worked on creating a dictionary for this language, together with a professor in Italy. Although I can't speak it with anyone because almost nobody else knows it, it helps me understand people from Bavaria since their dialect is similar.

An important aspect of my work in this particular field, which needs to be also mentioned, is the use of computers. They have significantly expanded our knowledge and provided us with different kinds of insights that might otherwise remain out of reach. Computers operate on a much larger scale and in ways that differ from our own brains. By combining the human brain's approach with computational methods, we can uncover truths and information that would otherwise remain hidden or unnoticed. This integration of human and computational approaches opens up new possibilities and discoveries that enhance our understanding and research in this field.

And, to answer your question about how many languages I speak: Cimbrian (if it counts), German, English, and Italian (my mother tongue). I also studied French in high school, so I can understand it and I often read and watch movies in this language. Additionally, I studied Norwegian because I love Nordic languages, but I am still working on this one.

Q7. What are the key decisions or experiences that have helped shape your professional trajectory?

Answer: There are three important decisions or experiences that have had a crucial impact on my professional trajectory.

First, one of the most important decisions I made was to go abroad. During my PhD, I enrolled in a joint degree program with the University of Cologne. I was studying in Venice, and I expanded my PhD project to be accepted as a PhD in Germany as well. This required more work than initially planned, but it was worth it. Going abroad opened many doors for me. It broadened my mind, made me more flexible, and exposed me to new knowledge. Being open to new experiences and environments increased my opportunities because the market is bigger.

After completing my PhD thesis in February 2022, I started a job in Germany in March. Then I applied for a higher position the year after. This was a significant step toward my dream of becoming a lifelong professor. Currently, I am in a junior professorship, which is a qualification period, but it's a big step forward.

Second, collaboration with other scholars has played a crucial role. Working with scholars of different nationalities has been invaluable. I have learned so much from my colleagues, and their shared experiences are precious. Collaborating with others teaches you a lot and enriches your knowledge.

Third, my experience with teaching has been fundamental. Teaching is essential if you want to get a professorship. I have a cute anecdote about this. I started teaching in elementary school. I would come home, line up my stuffed toys on the bed, and teach them everything I learned at school that morning. I did this for years. It might sound a bit odd, but it helped me develop communication skills early on. As I grew up, I continued teaching in a more professional capacity. I taught languages in Italy and was a tutor during my bachelor's and master's programs. I took every opportunity to teach because I loved it. Communicating what I knew and enjoyed felt great.

Q8. Can you tell us a little more about your grandfather? And how has his work and/or your family's professional background impacted your academic career interests?

Answer: My parents had always told me about my grandpa. I never got to know him because he died before I was born, but I had always heard about him. My parents were very proud of what he had achieved. However, I couldn't really make much sense of what he had written before I became a linguist myself.

It was by chance that a professor of mine in university mentioned the Cimbrian language. This rang a bell for me because I remembered that my grandpa had worked on it. I started to develop my own interest in the subject and found it fascinating for the reasons I mentioned earlier. During my studies, I discovered his notes and writings, and they suddenly made a lot of sense to me. It felt like we met in those books, almost by chance.

To answer your question, I think we might have tendencies or familiarities with certain things in our blood. It's something that is in you and just needs to be discovered. So, while I don't think he was the direct reason for my interest, it was nice to 'meet him' later in my career.

To tell you a little more about my grandfather, his name is Alfonso Bellotto, and he is an inspiration. He went to university, but he was not an academic. He was a high school teacher who taught languages, English and German. He started focusing on his linguistic work when he retired. It was his passion, and he managed to teach and write books about it. It's fascinating how dedicated he was, and he learned much of it on his own.

I don't come from a family of academics. My father is an electrician, and my mother is a musician (a pianist, and a cymbalist). In a way, my mother's career as a musician is somewhat academic, but it's different from a canonic university path. She went to the conservatory, which in Italy is equivalent to a master's degree, but it's a different world from a strictly academic career. Now retired, she was a music teacher in high school. So maybe teaching runs in the family.

I wouldn't define my family as academic, and I'm happy about that because it kept me grounded in the real world. When I came home from university and explained my studies to my parents, I enjoyed making them understandable for non-scholars. Sometimes scholars get lost in abstract concepts, but it doesn't have to be that way.

Q9. What are your views on the topic and concept of 'persuasion'? Does it have any role in your work or studies?

Answer: I think it's very interesting because, as a scholar, I would not like to say that I need persuasion to convince my students or readers. I see persuasion as a rhetorical tool to convince people of something. As a scholar, I would like to convince people because of the objective arguments I am presenting. I want my research to speak for itself. This concerns the quality of my research because I want people to evaluate the quality of my research as objectively as possible. I do not want them to be influenced by someone or something that leads them to a biased opinion.

However, when I speak to students, present my papers at conferences, or talk to my friends and family about what I do, I try to convince people that what I do is fun and fascinating. I do my best to convey this because it is so important to me. In those contexts, I try to convince people of the value and excitement of my work, but not to convince them of the quality of my work or how good I am. I believe that the work itself should demonstrate that.

There is an exception in the realm of scholarship when it comes to applying for funding grants. In those cases, you are required to sell your ideas. You need to make sure that your work can compete with many other excellent ideas because funding institutions have a limited budget. In that case, you really have to persuade the institution that your project is worth their funding. Ideally, your project would be funded because it's amazing, fantastic, useful, and necessary, but it unfortunately doesn't work that way.

For me, writing funding proposals is almost the most difficult format of writing because when I write scientific articles, I can just focus on the quality of my work and my communication skills, which I cherish and treasure. I do not have to sell anything. But when I need to request money to continue funding my project, I need to have a product that is attractive to those I am asking for support from.

Q10. To conclude, would you like to share any remarks or suggestions with junior-level professionals interested in following a similar line of work to yours?

Answer: You only live once, right? So, the first piece of advice I would give is to follow your dreams. And I mean it very seriously. It's very important to follow what makes you happy. This might sound obvious but it's not, because the path toward professorship can be very hard. You need a lot of strength, and only passion gives you that strength to face all the steps you need to take.

Often, scholars and professionals in other fields forget that life should be fun too. For example, I really want to have a professorship for life, right? I really do. But I also know that the path is long. So, I want to make sure that the way to the professorship is enjoyable and worth living. So, my advice is this: if something doesn't make you happy, quit. There is nothing more important than your physical and mental health. The academic world can be harsh, with unhealthy power relations, but you don't need to accept that. It's not worth it.

And, for more practical advice, I would say find a topic you really want to know as much as possible about. When you have a topic that you truly love, and you focus on the content, nothing else matters. That content will open doors for you. I don't believe in focusing on politics nor lobbying. As scholars, we need to stick to our research objectives because that's the most important thing.

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Dr. Elisa Cugliana

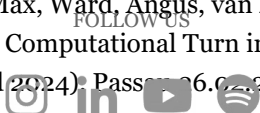
Junior Professor of Digital Humanities with a special focus on digital editions; specializations: Linguistics and philology of Germanic languages and (digital/computational) editing of medieval texts.
University of Cologne | Germany

To learn more about the work discussed in this interview please see the following publications:

Bellotto, Alfonso. 1978. *I racconti di Luserna*. Vicenza: Industria Tipolitografica A. Dal Molin e figli.
Online: <http://archiv.sprachminderheiten.de/bellotto1978c.pdf>

Cugliana, Elisa. 2023. "Coding Editions. Computational approaches to the editing of pre-modern texts." Conference paper, 9th conference "Digital Humanities im deutschsprachigen Raum" (DHD 2023), Trier, Luxemburg, 13.03.2023-17.03.2023
<https://zenodo.org/records/7715285>

Cugliana, Elisa, Kuczera, Andreas, Grüntgens, Max, Ward, Angus, van Zundert, Joris, Andrews, Tara & Dekker, Ronald. 2024. The Epistemological Value of the Computational Turn in Scholarly Editing. 10th conference "Digital Humanities im deutschsprachigen Raum" (DHD 2024), Passau, 06.02.2024-01.03.2024.



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***Note:** This interview was recorded on April 29, 2024, and has been edited for clarity, ease of readability, and length.

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