

Visions, needs and requirements for (future) research environments: An exploration with ERC Grantee Elena Esposito

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Researchers are at the very heart of the EOSC: So what do researchers really need to do outstanding research, and produce high-impact research results? Moreover, how do they think could the EOSC support them in their research endeavours? Let's see what sociologist Elena Esposito has to say.

“EOSC helping to find projects that are keen to each other”

TU Wien: So, what does your work currently focus on?

EE: I am a sociologist. I want to look at the social consequences of algorithmic prediction in three specific fields, which are insurance, medicine and policing. The idea is to look at how digital forms of prediction affect our society that still relies on probabilistic kinds of forecasts. The basis of my work is theoretical and as a sociologist I try to find topics that are socially relevant and at the same time sociologically interesting.

TU Wien: What datasets are you working with?

EE: Our ERC project is divided in three parts and we work with different datasets for each of them. The one already started is on precision medicine, where we work with datasets of already published articles and grant proposals in the US and in Europe. Our project is divided in Germany and Italy with the host institution being in Germany. Mostly we work within German facilities and enjoy a very good collaboration with the university library. We use mostly the databases available to the library, plus we have contacts with Columbia University and with other institutions. For the project on insurance, we will work on different kinds of data, for example data about user behavior.

TU Wien: Would there be something helpful for you to be even more efficient in your research?

EE: Well, I have to say something, which holds for all other questions: My situation is very different in Germany and in Italy. I have much better support in Germany. That is why we work mostly there. There is still a big difference in library services and availability of resources. So I have to give a different answer according to the two situations. In general, it would be very useful to have better information about research projects that are similar or comparable or keen to mine. You discover after a while that there are really exciting research projects, partly even in your same university, that are looking at the same issues and can be extremely useful, but in some cases to find them you rely basically on randomness. You happen to get to talk with people who say: You know this person has this similar project and so on. Having a kind of knowledge management system that allows you to find out which researcher can be a resource for you or can be useful to be in contact with, I think that would save us time and help produce better results.

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TU Wien: You mentioned now that there is a difference between Italy and Germany. Do you have any idea where this difference comes from?

“Success in interdisciplinary research requires a strong orientation to problems”

EE: The University and the academic system in Italy work differently than in Germany. I think that my main problem in Italy was that in my previous department interest for research was not really supported. In some cases Italian academic culture relies still more than in other countries on personal relationships rather than on international research outcomes. The kind of support for research that I had in Germany and can observe in other countries can not always be taken for granted in Italy and this can be a problem. At the University of Bologna where I work now, however, the conditions are much better and research is certainly enhanced.

TU Wien: What does it take to foster interdisciplinary research in Europe and beyond?

EE: In my experience, I have the impression that success in interdisciplinary research requires a strong orientation to problems rather than to the background. In some cases the idea is that we meet with a different discipline and we experience each other. What is our approach? What drives us? And then we find a common ground and start researching. I have the impression that in many cases what you can share are relatively basic general issues and not the real interesting topics. If you are working on a focused problem, a real research problem, instead, you don't have to explain all the background and you just see what everybody can offer to solve that problem. In general, I think that this is the best way to foster

productive interdisciplinarity. Of course, you don't always understand what the other researchers from other disciplines have in mind and what is their background, but if you refer to a problem it is not always needed.

TU Wien: What would you need the ESOC to be to support your research?

EE: In general, I have an impression about European research structures. In the last years, I have been working often with people from the United States and there is a clear difference between the European approach and the US approach. This refers to the fact that in Europe the general grant organization and research support tends to foster big consortia of many different institutions working on the same problem, which requires much administrative work and a lot of coordination effort (the projects are somehow connected, but in many aspects also very different). I am wondering if this is really productive. In the United States and in some specific programs in Europe (also the ERC goes in this direction) the financing goes directly to a single project with a single goal that has to be accomplished by itself, which is of course much easier and lighter to deal with. I understand that there can be a reason for big research consortia. You want to foster communication between researchers working in different ways. I see the logic but I think that the balance between the work required and the results is not always the most convenient one.

“I expect our publication landscape and also the reward system to change in the coming years”

TU Wien: An issue that often came up in previous interviews is the reward system. What is your opinion on that?

EE: Well, what I expect is that in the coming years the system of accreditation and rating of



research will change. I observe that the review system in journals is not updated anymore. Especially young people are talking about open access and its role for research. Influential research is often not reviewed or not reviewed in the same way, according to our established review system. The system of peer review in principle can be very useful and in many cases I got really useful clues from reviewers - but the trend is towards a system requiring the reviewers mostly to criticize and not to coach the projects. This risks becoming a system that tends to punish real creative innovative research, because if you have a mediocre project with huge literature covering all the fields, you often get a revise or resubmit, while real inventive risky projects are more likely to get rejected. The system sometimes promotes mediocrity and I don't think it is productive. On the other hand, I already see trends that go in a different direction. I expect our publication landscape and also the reward system to change in the coming years and I think that it would be very productive if institutions get prepared to that and try to find ways to bypass the rigidity and the almost punishing attitude of some evaluation systems.



Elena Esposito is Professor of Sociology at the University Bielefeld and the University of Bologna. A leading figure in sociological systems theory, she has published extensively on the theory of society, media theory, memory theory and the sociology of financial markets. Her current research on algorithmic prediction is supported by a five-year Advanced Grant from the European Research Council.

