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Interview Sigrun Eckelmann - TextGrid

9-11 minutes

Dr. Sigrun Eckelmann on Virtual Research Environments and on Changes in Scholarly Communication

When did virtual research environments first appear, and how long have they been supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG)?

Eckelmann: The DFG has been promoting this area since 2000. We were ahead of our time. The term "virtual research environment" did not exist at that point – instead, we discussed "thematically-oriented information networks", or digital Internet-based platforms where collaboratively-created information could be stored and continue to be edited. Since Web 2.0 technology did not yet exist, the possibilities were limited but the topic of information networks was quite dynamic and had already received funding. We first used the term "virtual research environments" in a DFG position paper in the summer of 2006.

What is a virtual research environment?

Eckelmann: A virtual research environment, as I now see it, is a means to support the combined work of a certain number of scientists who work together on a collaborative theme. Virtual research environments offer core services and tools into which individual research groups can integrate specific configurations and enhancements, bringing together geographically-dispersed researchers, research subjects, research processes and research results in collaborative processes. Ideally, virtual research environments can not only increase efficiency but also generate new levels of quality in research by making "border-crossing" research activities possible. Such interactions may be regional or disciplinary in nature, but they could also concern the boundary between research and the publication process, for example. There is a basic platform, or main page, where links to the workspaces of other scientists are created, as well as to other relevant sources. Even research methods, as far as they can function via the Internet, can be stored on the page.

You seem to attach a lot of importance to virtual environments.

Eckelmann: Yes, because the way in which researchers organize their research activities – as individuals, but above all as a group – has been fundamentally and profoundly changed through Internet communication, and yet it will

continue to change. Previously, researchers worked independently of other specialists in their field and interacted primarily with colleagues at their home institutions. They also went to conferences and met with their colleagues from other research organizations. Although there was cooperation between researchers in different locations, it was much more complicated to organize, since papers, and later floppy disks, had to be sent back and forth by mail.

Doesn't the accelerated pace of these new techniques primarily mean quantitative rather than qualitative change?

Eckelmann: Both are true: cooperation is thus greatly facilitated and accelerated, so that researchers can easily exchange information independent of location and time. The quality of scientific work is also changing because the digital techniques enable new research methods and subjects. I believe that the implications for the culture of research, in as far as they are affected by forms of communication, have not yet been fully perceived and understood by the researchers themselves. This change seems profound to me but it is far from being complete; it could mean a significant change in the structure of scholarly communities in the humanities. It is important to systematically investigate this question.

Do you see essential differences between the humanities and the natural sciences?

Eckelmann: Virtual research environments could perhaps bring the two together again. I don't really see any divisive elements, but rather a unifying one, which is our hope and our overall goal: that virtual research environments will facilitate the development of interdisciplinary research communities. Lately there have been joint projects between disciplines that had previously nothing to do with each other, such as linguists and biologists or climate scientists and historians. Such things are now possible and this is a serious qualitative change.

Does there need to be a generational shift for that?

Eckelmann: I do not think it is a question of generations. There have always been researchers who preferred to work on their own. People who like to work in teams will now have an easier time.

Is the individual researcher in the ivory tower a thing of the past?

Eckelmann: There always have been and will continue to be "individual researchers" and we should continue to support them. This is my personal opinion. They have produced excellent results in the past, after all. It's certainly not the case that the individual researcher is no longer able to contribute. On the contrary: even teamwork depends on the initiative of the individual members, and certainly not least of all on the individual contribution of the team's speaker/leader.

In the DFG, committees decide on the allocation of funds. Its members travel to meet, obtain evaluations from experts, and then re-convene. The reaction cycles are relatively slow. Can you keep up with the rapid pace of technological development?

Eckelmann: Development so far has not overtaken us, since we are apparently quick enough, sometimes even well ahead of time, in offering adequate funding opportunities. It must not be forgotten that the acceleration of work processes, those that enable the techniques to work, have not accelerated the work itself. An evaluation must be written, and that requires careful thought. The speed of thinking itself has not changed. The quality of the new forms of work therefore lies less in the accelerated pace than in the new content opportunities.

Do the committees still meet in person or do they meet virtually?

Eckelmann: Our committees meet in person, as a rule. When we have to discuss a quick and specific question, a telephone or video conference with a small group of people who know each other well is certainly very helpful. However, I would hardly allow a group of evaluators meeting for the first time to examine applications to meet via video conference. For good decision making, we also need the exchange of ideas, the conversations, which take place in the breaks. Safety standards in online negotiations are also more difficult to

follow. After all, it is important that confidentiality is assured because large sums are usually at stake.

What needs to be improved in the teamwork between researchers and information professionals?

Eckelmann: We hope that researchers on one side and information specialists from libraries or computer centers on the other will collaborate on developing common objectives and methods, especially regarding virtual research environments. The cooperation between these two groups has been difficult up to now. These two separate worlds do not particularly like each other; they know far too little about each other. Even the languages of the different groups are very different, which easily leads to misunderstandings. It is obvious that many applications were either written by a researcher and the library "attached" itself – roughly speaking – or vice versa. For us it's all about both sides developing integrative linked ideas together. Past experience has shown very clearly that the projects that end most successfully are those in which both sides work together on an equal footing. The problems we face today in shaping scholarly work organizations can not be solved solely by one side or the other. The competencies of both sides are inevitably required.

What role should librarians play in the future as the guardians of traditional research environments?

Eckelmann: I can not imagine a permanent virtual research environment without the participation of libraries and computer centers. They contribute the skills required for information management in the strictest sense. They have experience with the technical and organizational conditions which must be fulfilled so that the structure is stable and does not break down under smaller loads. I do not see that these developments will pass by libraries. However, my perception is that the awareness that they need to take an active role has not spread far enough in Germany. There's still information and advocacy to ensure.

Interview by Esther Lauer.

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