



## Profile

# Kathleen Fitzpatrick

**Kathleen Fitzpatrick is currently the director of scholarly communication at the Modern Language Association (MLA), which is the largest scholarly society in the humanities, bringing together scholars, teachers, students and other members interested in the study of language, literature and culture.**

Kathleen received her BA and MFA from Louisiana State University and her PhD from New York University. She was a professor of English and Media Studies at Pomona College from 1998 to 2013 and also holds appointments as Visiting Research Professor of English at New York University and Visiting Professor of Media at Coventry University.

The MLA hosts an annual convention and publishes a wide range of journals and books in the field, including the *MLA Handbook*, an authoritative resource for writers of research papers in the humanities. It also publishes the *MLA International Bibliography*, the only comprehensive bibliography in language and literature.

When asked about her role as director of scholarly communication at the MLA, Kathleen explained that she has responsibility for overseeing the development and editing of all the Association's book and periodical publications, as well as for 'our other scholarly communication initiatives, such as *MLA Commons*. I work with our member committees to ensure that their goals for our publications are met and to imagine new means of supporting the ways that scholars want to communicate and collaborate with one another.'

Your Editor noted that the arts and humanities have historically been relatively poorly served in terms of digital content, so was keen to find out from Kathleen how she feels that this has changed over recent years, or, indeed, whether there are still things that she would like to see develop further. 'My sense is that publications in the arts and humanities may have moved a bit more slowly than those in the sciences in embracing digital communication', she began, but added, philosophically, 'that deliberative nature has served our fields well: while there is a much greater percentage of scientific content available digitally, there has

9 been little experimentation in terms of its form, which remains fairly locked into the model of the PDF, replicating the print journal article from which it derived. By contrast, in the arts and humanities, we've seen much more in the way of innovation in the possibilities that the web presents for scholarship: multimodal, networked texts; massive data-driven visualizations; complex mapping projects; open scholarly communities; and so on.'

'in the arts and humanities, we've seen much more in the way of innovation'

Kathleen acknowledges that 'These newer forms aren't as ubiquitous as the PDF, of course, but they have created an atmosphere in which scholars are able to continue experimenting with new forms for their work. It's my hope that the platforms and projects that we develop at the MLA can inspire such experimentation.'

It is clear that Kathleen has a great sense of pride in her role and what she and the MLA are helping to achieve for the community, so your Editor was keen to understand the career path that had brought her to her current role. She began by saying lightheartedly that 'a series of happy accidents and unexpected opportunities led me to where I am now.'

'When I was a faculty member, I frequently brought alumni back to campus to talk to our students about their career paths, and, inevitably, the people with the most interesting jobs got to those jobs through some indirect and often unpredictable route. I'm no exception; first, during a depressed year on the job market, landing the one faculty position whose ad most perfectly described the odd combination of things I did; then, when I ran into difficulty getting my first book published, using the blog I'd recently established as a means of thinking through the changes that were beginning to take root in scholarly communication; then, when one such blog post came to the attention of the Institute for the Future of the Book, having a chance to experiment with developing an online scholarly community. And finally, finding myself with the opportunity to put what I'd learned both in the development of that community and in the research I'd done on scholarly communication at the service of the Modern Language Association.'

Sometimes fate has a fortunate knack of putting a person in the right place at the right time to find the perfect role for them, and it seems that Kathleen is one of those lucky people. And it is a role that she has clearly taken to heart. She recalled vividly 'the afternoon I received my first author's copies of *Planned Obsolescence*. I was completely taken by its physicality: the velvety cover stock, the evocative cover image, the beautiful page layout. There was something deeply affective about my response to it – and yet that beautiful object could not have come into being without the equally rich digital networks through which I'd discussed, drafted, received feedback, and improved the manuscript.' That experience shaped her views going forward, and she added, 'That moment made clear to me the degree to which the book and the internet can be mutually supporting and can work together to enliven scholarly communication.'

'the book and the internet can be mutually supporting and can work together to enliven scholarly communication'

The innovation that the internet allows has made possible the rise of open access (OA) publication and dissemination of scholarly work. Your Editor was interested to know how the move to OA has impacted on Kathleen's role at the MLA. 'One of the early projects I undertook at the MLA was leading a process of revising our author agreements to ensure that they all became green OA friendly, such that the authors who publish with us would be free to deposit their work in the repository of their choice.' She went on to add, 'More recently, we have developed and launched *CORE*, a repository connected to *MLA Commons*, in which any member can deposit his or her work, make it available both to colleagues in the field and to the broader public, and have that work represented as part of their scholarly profiles.'

The MLA is clearly making the most of the technologies available in the 21st century, but Kathleen is realistic enough to accept that there is more to be done. 'Lots of exciting new scholarly work is being produced in innovative formats and on innovative platforms, but too often that work is not considered to 'count' in conventional review and assessment practices . . .' she noted, before continuing, 'New kinds of work may demand new modes of reading and evaluation, but our processes need to adapt to the work, rather than vice versa.'

- 10 The MLA has created a set of guidelines for evaluating digital work, as have a number of other scholarly societies; scholars and administrators should seek out these guidelines and use them to ground the assessment of new modes of scholarly work on their own merits.'



Kathleen speaking at a summer meeting of the Institute for Liberal Arts and Digital Scholarship (ILiADS).

In drawing the interview to a close, your Editor asked Kathleen if she manages to find time in her busy schedule to switch off from the day job and relax. 'I love to read genre fiction: detective novels, science fiction, young adult novels, and so on. There's something about the worlds created by these genres that can permit a temporary escape from this one!'

And on that note, your Editor thanked Kathleen for taking the time to talk to *Insights* and allowed her to escape (albeit temporarily) to one of her beloved alternative worlds.

*Kathleen was interviewed for 'Insights' by Steve Sharp*

#### Acknowledgments

Photographs are courtesy of the Modern Language Association (first page) and Angel David Nieves (second photo).

**Article copyright: © 2015 UKSG. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](#), which permits unrestricted use and distribution provided the original is credited.**



Steve Sharp

Co-Editor, *Insights*

UKSG

E-mail: [s.l.sharp@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:s.l.sharp@leeds.ac.uk)

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4088-167X>

To cite this article:

Sharp, S, Profile: Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Insights*, 2015, 28(3), 8–10; DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1629/uksg.266>

Published by UKSG in association with Ubiquity Press on 06 November 2015