

Inaugural lecture: Francesca Bria

Auditorio Can Jaumandreu, Barcelona

Welcome to the 2021/2022 inaugural lecture, which marks the official start of the new academic year.

We are particularly pleased to begin this year now, after months of restrictions, as we return to a new normal. Today is a great day for me and for the University, a day that seems to point towards seeing you all in person more often, both for our upcoming graduation ceremonies, and for the activities we have planned to complete the celebrations for the UOC's 25th anniversary.

In 25 years, we have taken a project from Barcelona and used technology to make it global. **Today, technology means we are able to employ this hybrid format to reach out to the UOC community that is spread across 142 countries worldwide.**

«As the world's first online university, technology has been our ally for the last 25 years; an ally that will help us forge our path into the future; and, above all, an ally throughout the pandemic that allowed us to rise to the challenge of maintaining our teaching, research and administrative activities without sacrificing our levels of excellence.»

However, despite all this good work and the current positive trends with COVID-19, we mustn't forget the personal and economic losses caused by the pandemic, and we should acknowledge the good conduct and sacrifices of the vast majority of people. I want to express my appreciation and gratitude to all of them. Likewise, today's venue – the auditorium at Can Jaumandreu – shows us the central role for the UOC's future of the Poblenou campus, in such an iconic neighbourhood as Barcelona's 22@ district.

We've occupied Can Jaumandreu since 2005, thanks to a combination of our own economic and logistical efforts, and cooperation with the city council. **This campus brings together all of the University's research and teaching. We'll be able to foster interdisciplinary work internally, and creativity, connectivity and communication beyond the scope of the UOC.**

The strength of all this potential for the future is based on the experience we have gained over the years. That's why it's important we take stock of what we've done, before we look to new horizons. Now, I'd like to present the video report and then hand over to Pere Vallès, who, as President of the Foundation's Board of Trustees, will go over last year.

[Video report and speech by Pere Vallès from the lectern]

The inaugural lecture is an academic ceremony, but it also sets out our programme. Through the person chosen to speak the University shows its ties to their career and shares in their genealogy and way of seeing the world.

Today we have the honour and privilege to hear the thoughts of Dr Francesca Bria, to gain insights from someone who, from leading positions in different institutions and countries,

«...has defended digital policies that benefit citizens, and information technologies that are aligned with the common good and a European new humanism.»

I can't think of a better way to launch off as we look to guide our actions as a university that wants to contribute to reflecting on digital change, and wants to play a role in making this change happen. So, before I hand over to our guest speaker, I would like to use three pairs of concepts to briefly outline the role the UOC – as a university with a public mandate – can and must play in this context of digital transformation.

The first pair is ignorance versus education. And my use of 'versus' is deliberate. Because, as Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, said: **"If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."**

In other words, **funding for education isn't an expense, it's an investment... one of the best investments we can make, especially if we understand that the amount and constancy are just as important as the scope and diversity of educational efforts. Because talent – our ultimate aim – is one of the riches that is most fairly distributed.**

Obviously, this is no guarantee of anything. As the historian Carlo Maria Cipolla (another famous Italian) once said, human stupidity is also a constant: a feature fairly distributed throughout all sectors and social groups. But **while stupidity doesn't**

require any effort, talent does need an environment where it can be spotted, encouraged and multiplied. And we cannot afford to waste it...

Thus, online learning can act as the perfect lever to mobilize talent wherever it is to be found.

«Technology changes the paradigm, moving from distance education to education without distances.»

At a time of intense debate about unequal resources in Spain – the so-called "España vacía o vaciada" –, **the UOC brings high quality higher education within reach, adapting it to the needs of individual students and providing lifelong learning opportunities; we are bringing to life the European motto of: "leaving no one and no place behind"**.

The digital transformation of the education system, in its entirety and in all respects, forms part of the response needed to ensure equal distribution of resources everywhere, now and in the future. By reaching everywhere, we can incorporate all the talent present in rural areas or to be found away from the major economic centres; we can develop alliances to train and transform the people living there; we can support and respect the many different realities, and we can create and seize new opportunities to enrich the economy and culture in these places.

The second conceptual pair is voluntarism versus realism. Because, beyond the emotional and understandable response of "everything'll be ok" and rainbows, we need to treat citizens as adults. Without falling into a paralyzing fatalism, as women and men of science, we have a vital role to play when it comes to helping people understand the complexity of the world, fighting fake news, providing relevant contributions for future solutions, and bringing consistency and coherency to the actions we undertake as a society.

As science journalist Elizabeth Kolbert so strongly expressed recently, it's just as suicidal to deny climate change as it is to close our eyes to the inevitability of some of its effects. **Reality is complex... But it is precisely in this complexity where universities – if they can free themselves from the abysses of fatalism and voluntarism – can be socially useful.** So, we need to see information and communication technologies as useful channels for opening a dialogue with the society we form part of, as nodes to generate, share, disseminate and multiply knowledge... good knowledge.

And the third and last pair is: equality versus inequality. Digitalization can give us a false sense of equality; it can, in fact, create or worsen existing social, economic and technological divides. This is why it is so important to train citizens in digital skills, to incorporate this training as universal learning.

Only with the proper education will people be able to make the most of the opportunities arising from the digital transformation. They will be able to take part in the social, political and cultural life that surrounds them; and they will be able to gain the vital skills required to defend their rights and carry out their responsibilities. And again here, the education system in general – and a university like ours, in particular – has plenty to say and do.

«We need to see the internet as a basic civil right, one that's as vital as having reliable and affordable access to the web, net neutrality and equal conditions for all.»

The pandemic has highlighted the key role technology plays in our lives, to the point where nothing is beyond its reach... and wait and see what's to come.

Because digitalization doesn't mean just randomly adding the adjective 'smart', or doing what we used to do, but now 'streaming' it, or surrounding ourselves with gadgets... It means doing what we've never done before: new languages and new approaches, new processes and new creations, with unstoppable consequences both in terms of production and in our simplest day-to-day activities.

These three pairs we've just addressed – ignorance versus education; voluntarism versus realism, and equality versus inequality – show us possible ways to act. But, if they're not given the institutional support they need, their effectiveness will always be lessened and limited.

As Dr Bria has said: we need to "re-politicize" technology, because "technology is not a process that develops in a straight line. That's why it's vital that it be shaped by society." Promoting talent, realism and equality, over ignorance, voluntarism and inequality, depends – greatly – on public policy. **Policy that isn't based on the political situation, but on consolidated strategy, and on national projects committed to dependable maps.**

And to guide us with these maps of tomorrow, who better than Dr Francesca Bria?

Whenever you're ready

[Speech by Dr Francesca Bria from the lectern]

Grazie mille, professoressa Bria, per una lezione così stimolante.

We believe that the University needs two-way communication, so we wanted to get some questions from members of the UOC community and pass them on to Dr Bria.

These questions are from:

- Salvador Macip, researcher and member of the Faculty of Health Sciences,
- Efraín Foglia, researcher and member of the Faculty of Information and Communication Sciences,
- Mayo Fuster, researcher in the DIMMONS group,
- Victoria Olaria Escuin, a student on the Bachelor's Degree in Digital Design and Creation.

[Videos with the questions]

Now it's time for the last speech of today's ceremony, with a few words from the Catalan Minister for Research and Universities, Gemma Geis. In my opinion – one which I think is widely shared by others – this ministry's being restored recently is a sign of political action that can respond to Catalonia's future needs.

Consellera, please.

[Speech by Gemma Geis from the lectern]

Thank you very much, *Consellera*.

As you know, there are many ways of doing things, of rethinking and innovating... and then there's the UOC way of doing things which always looks to go that little bit further.

If you were watching closely, in the video report we mentioned a work in progress: the recording of a participatory version of *Gaudeamus igitur* – the university hymn par excellence –. Participatory because, despite the pandemic, we were able to mobilize over 300 people from all corners of our community: students, teaching staff, tutors, alumni, researchers and administrative staff. I'd like to congratulate all of them for their generosity and enthusiasm, and for making us feel proud to form part of the UOC.

But, while we put the finishing touches to that version for the upcoming graduation ceremonies, we'll close this inaugural lecture today with the adaptation of *Gaudeamus*

produced by the group Kundala. It is similarly unconventional, but still respectful, and with musical and video production levels of the highest standard.

I want to wish you, to wish us, all the very best for the 2021/2022 academic year!

Thank you very much for joining us.