

Volunteer and tech power bringing new ideas to life at the University Library Belgrade

Milena Kostić

University Library “Svetozar Marković”, Belgrade, Serbia.

E-mail address: mkostic@unilib.rs

Vesna Vuksan

University Library “Svetozar Marković”, Belgrade, Serbia.

E-mail address: vuksan@unilib.rs



Copyright © 2017 by Milena Kostić and Vesna Vuksan. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Abstract:

The University Library in Belgrade treasures an invaluable collection of legacies of Serbian academia – scientists, professors, writers, historians, diplomats. These legacies abound in important scientific materials, rare editions but also contain a lot of data such as letters which testify to the personal lives of people and the local history. Such materials have been recognized as fruitful for genealogical research as they uncover details about predecessors and ancestors of the people who shaped social and academic development of Serbia.

Having only one librarian specialized in digitization of old and rare materials, the library needed to recruit more: this is when volunteer energy came to the scene. After providing the appropriate equipment, the Library recruited digitally-curious LIS students. It was a joint and successful endeavour throughout 2015-2016 which resulted in digitized and searchable 400.000 online historical newspaper pages, plus 30.000 pages of legacy collections materials.

Once online, the collections have become very popular among humanities and social sciences researchers who have started in-depth analyses of materials and have published their results in a book about the local history of the 18th century only to reveal new and peculiar facts about the period.

Apart from achieving such publicity in the popular history field, the University Library has been organizing physical and virtual exhibitions spiced with the cutting-edge technology, an illuminated display cabinet, especially suitable for presenting fragile materials.

Keywords: volunteers, University Library Belgrade, digitization, technology, Magic Box

University Library in Belgrade

The University Library in Belgrade has almost a century of history as the official central library of the University of Belgrade. It was the first building in Serbia that was intentionally built as a library at the end of 1920 when the Carnegie Endowment granted 100.000 dollars to the Serbian government for the construction.

Today, it is one of the biggest scientific libraries in the Balkans and a parent library for all higher education libraries in Serbia with the main role to meet the educational and scientific needs of academic population -- students, university teachers and researchers. As a cultural institution of national importance, the Library strives to preserve Serbian cultural and historical heritage and make it available to all interested individuals. During this endeavour, the University Library has gained rich experience in digitization of cultural and historical materials: completion of the first digitized collection of manuscripts from the legacy of Isidora Sekulic, a famous Serbian writer; digitization of old Cyrillic manuscripts; establishment of Phaidra, a digital repository and E-theses for storing doctoral theses; contribution to many international digitization projects such as Europeana Newspapers and British Library's Endangered Archives.

Organizational Challenges and Volunteers Club

Organizational structure of the University Library is formally strictly defined as a traditional hierarchy. However, as the library workload has been increasing over time, the management has been exploring alternative organizational models such as "flatarchies". This type is a blend of a hierarchy and flat organization as it allows formal structure along with ad-hoc intersectoral and cross-functional teams. "Organizations with this type of structure are very dynamic in nature and can be thought of a bit more like an amoeba without a constant structure" (Morgan 2014). In a nutshell, there is a hive of activities to undertake and libraries in Serbia have to be creative in overcoming the ongoing understaffing issues: number of staff is decreasing due to the official employment ban in public institutions which prohibits hiring new workforce after permanently employed staff retire.

Over the past years, the University Library has identified a new strength in volunteers to rise to this challenge. "Volunteering strengthens society through participation, whilst helping to extend and deliver services and enhance the lives of volunteers in numerous ways" (Howlett, 2002). The University Library today welcomes volunteers – talented individuals who are ready to contribute to the work of the Library with their enthusiasm, abilities and interests. They come from faculties of the University of Belgrade such as the Faculty of Philology and Faculty of Organizational Sciences but also from a number of faculties in Serbia through cooperation with the International Academic Center.

With the support and help of staff, volunteers contribute to the accomplishment of the mission of the Library through various activities – development of innovative services, digitization, education, translation activities, organization of events, public relations and many other. Volunteers are dedicated and energetic individuals who contribute to the diversity and success of the Library team. In exchange for their time and effort, they acquire new skills, meet new people, gain extremely valuable business experience and receive a good recommendation when applying for a scholarship or a job. They also have a free membership at the Library.

“While studying and analysing the psychology of volunteerism, Clary and Snyder (1999) identified six motivational functions of volunteers i.e. (1) values; (2) understanding; (3) enhancement; (4) career; (5) social; and (6) protective. [...] The volunteers working in the library do seek for benefits in Career, Understanding and Enhancement as volunteerism outcomes. That means volunteers look for gaining career-related experience (Career), gain knowledge and skills and get an opportunity to utilise the same (Understanding), seek to grow and develop psychologically (Enhancement). During the process they attempt to satisfy a value, social or protective function, (Satisfaction) through involvement in volunteerism. The overall satisfaction determines the volunteer’s intentions (a knowing and willing determination or decision to act in a certain way) about future library interactions as both users and volunteers” (Tikam, 2011: 554).

With the aim of having highly motivated and satisfied volunteers, the Library Volunteer Club tends to recruit students for specific projects based on their professional orientation and interests. For example, the Library appoints language students for translations, Library and information science students for reference work and metadata, and Organizational sciences students for digitization with OCR.

Digitization of Legacy Collections and Historical Newspapers

Although one can often hear about the manipulative aspect of the digital age, it has a great capacity and resources for the promotion of the utmost civilization values. The idea to create and to present legacy in a fundamentally new way is expressed in the transparency of digital collections the University Library has been building over the past years.

Being the leading academic library in Serbia, the University Library in Belgrade continuously shapes the digitization approach by identifying researchers’ needs, current gaps in the accessible digital collections in the country as well as their own digital capabilities. During previous several years, two collections especially emerged as valuable resources for history and genealogy researchers and history-curious general public: 1) Legacy Collections, and 2) Historical Newspapers.

1) The Library treasures an invaluable collection of legacies of Serbian academia – scientists, professors, writers, historians, diplomats. Over 30 such special collections, versatile in size and importance, are kept in the Library. The most prominent and popular ones which are significant for genealogy and local history are as follows:

- Joca Vujic’s Collection - one of the richest collections for studying Serbian national and cultural history and literature. Joca Vujic (1863–1934) was a great benefactor of the University of Belgrade, a landowner and a famous bibliophile. The majority of books that he donated to the University Library in 1923 date back to the 18th and the 19th century. The collection contains valuable manuscripts, documents and letters.
- Gedeon Dundjerski’s collection was in fact Petar Stojadinovic’s collection who was a famous collector of old books, a bibliophile from Novi Sad. This collection was bought by Dundjerski as a gift to the University Library in 1929. It mainly contains books about the history of Serbian people and Serbian literature. This collection is important for studying Serbian national and cultural history.
- Miroslav Premru’s Collection was donated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1927. It contains old and rare books, historical resources and reformation and renaissance literature.

These legacies abound in important scientific materials, rare editions but also contain essential data such as letters which testify to the personal lives of people and the local history. Such materials have been recognized as fruitful for genealogical research as they uncover details about predecessors and ancestors of the people who shaped social and academic development of Serbia. This was the reason that Library decided to digitize the selection of books that belong to various collections including: Joca Vujic, Gedeon Dundjerski and Miroslav Premru. Digitized versions of these publications contain metadata connected to the Library's online catalogue and are available online for browsing, but the publications are not fully searchable.

2) Another significant collection that reflects political, economic, social and cultural milieu of the 19th and early 20th century is the Historical Newspapers collection that comprises of 45 titles printed between 1850 to 1945. The most popular titles include daily and weekly newspapers such as Beogradske opstinske novine, Nova iskra, Glas naroda, Zora and Srbadija which “depict everyday life in Serbia and development of all areas of human knowledge and practice throughout two centuries” (Dakić et al 2014).

Within *Europeana Newspapers* project (2012–2015) the Library digitized 400.000 newspaper pages from this collection. One of the major breakthroughs was simplifying browsing and search options of this Cyrillic online collection which is a rarity in Serbia nowadays. The aim of the project was to make Historical Newspapers publicly available, to create expert tools in order to provide the best quality, to compile an overview of the digitized newspaper content in Europe, to give recommendations for metadata based on the best practice and to raise awareness of researchers of the importance of the project through workshops and info days. Thereby, the University Library has positioned itself as the main content provider for researchers in Serbia. It has aspired since to participate in as many such projects as they provide innovative partnerships with other libraries, institutions and companies and focus on building up present expertise and on improving academic cooperation with the use of new technologies.

Volunteers Empowering the Digitization Centre

Digitization Centre opened at the University Library in 2008. So far, over 600.000 pages from a variety of publications (newspapers, manuscripts, books, maps, doctoral thesis) have been scanned in this Centre. It is predominantly used for digitization activities of the Library but it also provides digitization-on-demand service to other institutions and individuals.

As regards equipment, the Centre uses 3 flatbed scanners and 2 super-fast image scanners. Recently the Library modernized digitization with a state-of-the-art technological device. Namely, in 2015 the University Library acquired Robotic Book Scan within a Tempus project *Equal access for all (EQUI-ED): Strengthening the social dimension for stronger European higher education area* which was implemented by five Serbian universities. This is cutting-edge technology which can scan up to 2500 pages in an hour as it has a bionic finger.

Having only one librarian specialized in digitization of old and rare materials, the library needed to recruit more: this is when volunteer energy came to the scene. The Library has been engaging volunteers in various tasks, however, this one required a more systematic approach. The first phase of the digitization process was to scan the Legacies collection, the second was to scan the Historical Newspapers and the third was to upload them to an open access digital repository and add OCR functionality where applicable.

After setting the scanning room with the appropriate equipment, the Library recruited digitally-curious LIS students for the scanning process and students of Organizational sciences for documents upload and OCR. The volunteers' selection process based on professors' recommendations comprised of the interview followed by training, testing and creating a work plan. During winter and summer semesters from 2014 to 2017 students assisted in digitization activities at the University Library. They were guided by the digitization librarian and their progress was closely monitored. Students' results were calculated towards the university credits as part of their practical assignments which was highly motivational for them. On the other hand, having students help with various steps, the digitization librarian was able to work on more complicated and advanced tasks which improved the overall achievements of the Digitization Centre and the Library. To express gratitude, the Library wrote recommendations to volunteers which helped some of them find a job in other libraries. Moreover, in the process some volunteers discovered their interests in fields such as photography for instance and continued to pursue them as a hobby.

It was a joint and successful endeavour which resulted in digitized and searchable 400.000 online historical newspaper pages, plus 30.000 pages of legacy collections materials. Once online, the collections have become very popular among humanities and social sciences researchers who have started in-depth analyses of materials and have published their results.

Exploring and employing the collections

In order to emphasise the value, richness and availability of the digitized collection of historical newspapers, ULB librarians have started to explore it and initiated two series of articles "Plemstvo duha" and "Heroine duha" published on the Radio Television of Serbia (RTS). The texts they wrote were about the most prominent Serbian scientists, historians, diplomats, writers, university professors and rectors who have influenced and directed political, academic and cultural scene. The articles abound in information from historical newspapers and are spiced up with trivia that could not be found elsewhere. In addition to reminding the audience of the achievements of Serbian elite, these texts were aimed at promoting the collection and at inviting researchers to explore it further.

Another collection of articles written by academic librarians on various topics from historical newspapers and published on the RTS website showed many aspects and perspectives that could be analyzed in this versatile corpus. For example, the text about the family letters of Milos Obrenovic, Prince of Serbia grew into a comprehensive doctoral dissertation which was afterwards published as a serious and revealing monograph. The research conducted in the aforementioned collection of Joca Vujić

"surpasses the level of cultural heritage and presents itself as scientific material of high importance. By analyzing this collection, its provenience, structure and contents, the fact that Joca Vujić methodologically and systematically assembled materials about cultural history of Serbs in Vojvodina is confirmed. The Vujić library and his archival collection were declared cultural heritage of great importance in 2014" (Brzulović-Stanisavljević 2016).

"Five-year research and cataloguing of the Archival Collection of Joca Vujić was crowned with a project "Digitization and Presentation of Cultural and Scientific Heritage of the Archival Collection of Joca Vujić and Publication of Family Letters of Miloš Obrenović, Prince of Serbia" supported by the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia in 2015. Within the project the summative inventory of the whole collection was

taken, the letters were digitized, digital library of selected letters was created and set up on the University Library web page” (Brzulović-Stanisavljević 2016).

The outcomes of this in-depth research reveal some personal relationships in the genealogy of Obrenović dynasty. In particular they portray its founder Milos Obrenovic who was a very powerful and stern ruler, and yet caring and gentle father which could not be discerned from his disposition.

Another example of successful and vivid portrayal (Dakić et al 2014) of the historical newspapers collection was initiated by an article published on RTS website about classified ads and advertisements which first appeared in Serbian periodicals in 1834. This article inspired a joint research of three academic librarians about advertisements entitled “Job offers from print to online advertisements through the prism of the Europeana Newspapers Project”. Research thoroughly analyzed employment opportunities across the 19th and 20th century and compared them to contemporary job search and recruitment practices, which gave a clear overview of social settings and rules at the time.

Apart from achieving such publicity in the local history field, the University Library has been organizing physical and virtual exhibitions spiced with the cutting-edge technology, an illuminated display cabinet, especially suitable for presenting fragile materials.



Picture 1: Magic Box

In order to keep up with the new technological trends in librarianship and to protect old and rare books, the Library bought Magic Box with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Information. This cabinet display provides virtual, yet very real experience of leafing through the digitized valuable and protected library collections. Important and fragile material can be presented via this modern device which is suitable for interactive display of delicate material whose availability is usually restrained. The material can be searched through on a transparent touch screen while the physical publication can be seen behind it. In addition to digitized publications, photo galleries and 3D models, films can be displayed in this device.

The University Library is the first institution in the East Europe and the third library in the world to own this device which will become a pulsating window into the world of interests of various experts in humanities (Milnović et al n/d).

Volunteers enjoyed being introduced to this new technology. In addition to experiencing it as end-users, they were shown how digitized materials are prepared, uploaded and operated in it. Students reported this was a unique experience and they were quite captivated with the device and inspired by it.

This inspiration was successfully used in the setting-up of virtual exhibitions. Volunteers contributed to their organization by helping to digitize selected publications and to upload digitized materials into Magic Box. This help was very beneficial in particular in the organization of the celebration of the Library's 90th anniversary in 2016. Volunteers had various small task in virtual and web exhibition "Digital Cyrillics" which was the most prominent event of the day.

Conclusion

Overall, this joint adventure has brought to life new ideas at the University Library and has created a foundation for strengthening cooperation with dedicated volunteers. The Library has successfully overcome its problem of understaffing and simultaneously helped students empowered with new technologies to channelise their potential and develop some new skills. Moreover, library treasuries have become visible to the general public and their scientific promotion has attracted various researchers to carry out analyses about local history and genealogy. One of the most important benefits of this endeavour is that the library has become more important to students and their positive experience has attracted more students. In 2017 the Library is continuing to work on new ideas equipped with motivated assistants and it is enhancing its image in the academic community and the general public.

References

Brzulović-Stanisavljević, B. (2016). *Porodična prepiska kneza Miloša Obrenovića iz Arhivske zbirke Joce Vujića u Univerzitetskoj biblioteci "Svetozar Marković"*. Beograd: Univerzitetaska biblioteka "Svetozar Marković".

Dakić, N., Trtovac, A., Vuksan, V. (2014). Job offers from print to online advertisements through the prism of the Europeana Newspapers Project. INFORUM 2014, 20th Annual Conference on Professional Information Resources, May 27-28, 2014, Prague, Czech Republic.

Howlett, S. (2002). Volunteering in Libraries, Museums and Archives *Cultural Trends*, Vol. 12, No. 46., pp. 39-66.

Milnović, V., Kostić, M., Milošević, M. (in press). Safeguarding and Promotion of Fragile Archival Material from the Lazić Family Private Library. *Infotheca*, Vol. 17 No. 1.

Morgan, J. (2014). *The future of work : attract new talent, build better leaders, and create a competitive organization*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Tikam, M. (2011). Library volunteerism outcomes: what student volunteers expect. *Library Management*, Vol. 32 Issue: 8/9, pp.552-564, <https://doi.org/10.1108/01435121111187914>
Permanent link to this document: <https://doi.org/10.1108/01435121111187914>.