

Libraries Without Books? Only if People Say 'Yes.'

Milan Čupka
Bratislava

With just a large counter, desks, chairs and sofas. No furniture, no shelves. Your first impression is that you are in a student café. Yet this is how more and more American libraries look like today. The era of libraries without books. Bratislava University Library has started a project this week that may one day turn it into a purely electronic library. However, book lovers who love the smell of books do not have to be alarmed. It won't happen that fast.

Transforming physical books into digital ones is by no means a new trend. However, due to a growing number of electronic readers and tablets in the past two years this transformative process has sped up. Less than a month ago, we witnessed a great turning point when the prestigious Encyclopaedia Britannica announced that it will no longer publish a printed version. The encyclopaedia was founded in 1768 and has shown, even to the greatest skeptics, that the digital era is irrevocably here to stay.

There have been numerous and fervent discussions about digitization going on in Slovakia in the past few days. The Slovak National Library has also started a new €50 million project that will convert about 2.8 million Slovak publications into a digitized form. However, last week the University Library in Bratislava introduced a different project that will finally allow its readers to fully benefit from this digitization that has been in progress for the past few years.

"At the moment we are centralizing all books & publications into a new digital library system (called MediaINFO", said Tomas Fiala, the head of Digitization Department of the University Library in Bratislava.

The members of the library have had access to digitized resources for some time now, but the digital publications were scattered in various different systems and databases that created their own practical restrictions to access. "At the moment we are centralizing all books and publications into a new digital library system (called MediaINFO", said Tomas Fiala, the head of Digitization Department of the University Library in Bratislava.

The system is running within the library for now, but should be available online within a month's time. At the moment, readers can flip through the Slovak newspaper published in the 1940es or a theatre magazine from the 1920es called Šepkár v hladišti (Prompter in the Audience).



Knihy a periodiká v bratislavskej Univerzitnej knižnici digitalizujú rozličnými zariadeniami. Postupne bude väčšina z nich zverejnená cez systém MediaINFO, ktorý v knižnici spustili tento týždeň. FOTO PRAVDA: IVAN MAJERSKÝ © AUTORSKÉ PRÁVA VYHRADENÉ (3)



Moreover, there are about 800 publications of the newspaper Obzor (The Horizon) from the second half of the 19th century available on the web. This periodical was published by Daniel Gabriel Lichard, the first Slovak professional journalist and can be found on <http://e.kniznica.info/free>. "We have only just started to fill the database. Gradually, other newspapers, magazines and books will be added. Members of our library will have access to more material than unregistered users," Fiala added.

Unique and Damaged Books have a Priority

Digitising services have been in place in the library for a few years now and have experienced a number of projects. A very precious collection of islamic texts was converted into electronic form as part of the UNESCO programme The Memory of the World. The University Library bought this collection in 1924 from a well-known Bosnian scholar, scientist and collector Safvet bega Bašagića whom this collection was named after. It became to be known as Bašagića's Collection of Islamic Manuscripts.

The digitisation of the newspaper Pressburger Zeitung required international cooperation. "No library had a complete collection of this periodical. We managed to complete it by scanning its different parts here in our library and the Hungarian National Library. Researchers and people interested in this periodical used to have to go from one library to the other to find what they were looking for. The electronic form enables us to have everything together," said Mr Fiala describing the benefits.

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"It is the decision of the library as to which documents are to be scanned. Not only do we look at the uniqueness of documents or whether they are in a state that no longer allows us to lend them out, but we also take into consideration how popular a book is, whether people ask for it a lot". This is the type of work that brings the library closer to a book-free state. A digitised document no longer gets lent out as a physical printed book so it gets 'conserved'.

Even though there are a number of scanners in the digitizing rooms that can scan books in pretty much any state, damaged publications require time and patience. One flow scanner can scan unbound materials at a rate of several tens of pages a minute. On the other hand, fragile books have to be scanned in a special protective mode, which could take up to a week to scan one publication.

Not Everyone in Favour of the World without Shelves

Electronic copies are saved in a high quality tiff format (a fairly standard graphics file format for computers), which is important, as today we do not know what technologies will be used in the future for reading of electronic books. This type of high volume data format should allow us to create versions for any type of book reading gadgets, tablets or other devices that will be popular with people in the future. The university can already cater for the demands of users today, as the Geneza MedialNFO system allows the books to be viewed on tablets.

What will the book-free library be like? As these libraries are gradually becoming a reality, this debate has started in the USA for some time. From the point of view of students, given that the first libraries undergoing digitization (in Slovakia) are university libraries, there are many benefits to be had. The students no longer have to worry as to whether they will have access to crucial academic books when they are up against a deadline for an essay. The era of books being unavailable because someone else has borrowed it or not returned it on time is finally over. They can 'visit' their now digital library during their favourite study time- let's say 2 o'clock in the morning. However, digital libraries have got their critics, too. One of them is, for example, the writer Michael Connelly, whose detective novels with Los Angeles cop Harry Bosh are also known to Slovak readers. He said, for Times magazine, that the very experience of flicking through physical books was what made him want to write and become a professional writer. "Can this happen to someone in a library without books? I doubt it," he added.

Good magazine editor Liz Dwyer has also thought about the drawbacks of digitization. "Thinking back about my student years, when I was looking through categories of books, I would often find books I had no idea existed or I could use," writes Liz and adds that this method can be compensated by a method often used by internet shops where you can find a section on related books to the one you search for or similar books that other people recommend.

Readers in discussions also commented on possible discrimination against the less well-off who have not got access to the Internet. These people will not only be totally reliant on physical libraries, but also won't be able to study outside the library. "I love the feeling of handling a real book. Why should I only read from a screen? There are also many other things that distract me when I read from a computer and therefore I prefer to hide somewhere in a corner without the reach of electronics," said one of the debaters.

The Bell to Classics Hasn't Told Yet

Despite some skeptical reactions, electronic books are becoming more and more popular. In the US e-book sales have grown by over 70 per cent every year and by as much as 475 per cent among children and youth, which means that the publishing industry is doing well these days. Martinus (www.martinus.sk) was the first bookshop in Slovakia that started selling e-books in 2010, although others have joined it with digital offerings ever since.

Last year the USA government started a huge project of cooperation between Amazon and American libraries. Over 11 thousand library members have joined this project who can borrow documents and books for their Kindle devices. In our neighbouring Czech Republic, the Library of Jiří Mahen in Brno has been experimenting with lending out electronic reading devices. They lend out 4 such devices for 14 days.

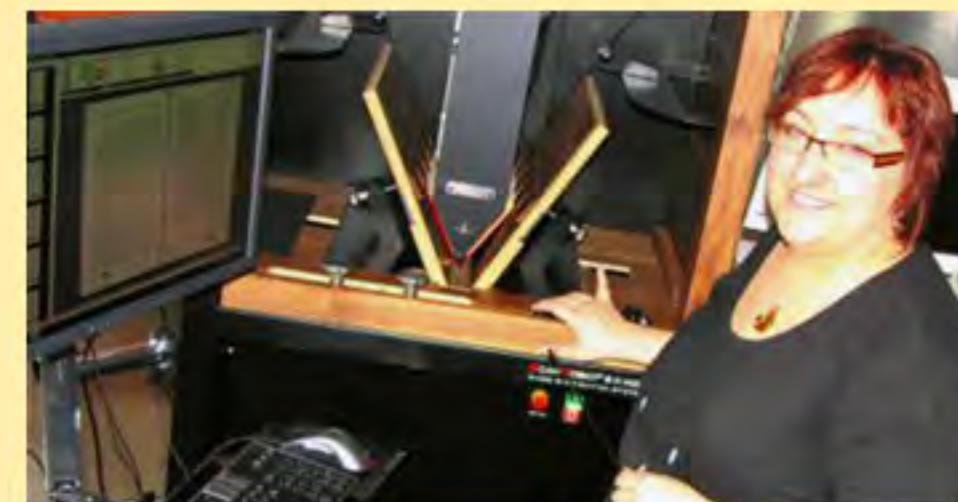
In the University Library in Bratislava people mostly come into contact with digitized publications when scanning old books. Publications with expired copyright (books published before 1942) can be processed into electronic form upon request by the public or members of the library. 75 pages in pdf format costs 10 EUR. The same amount with text recognition (for copying and pasting) costs 15 EUR.

Fiala believes that borrowing books for e-reading devices is only a matter of time. "And sorting out copyright issues. Our legislation isn't currently ready for lending of copyright protected materials," he adds. And the number of these will only grow. Eventually, as part of a €33 million euro project, the Central Data Archive, the Slovak University Library will also collect data from the Slovak National Gallery, Slovak National Museum and other institutions.

Despite the fact that real physical books still are and will be prevailing in libraries for the foreseeable future, the volume of digital data is increasing rapidly just as the trend of reading texts from the screens of various devices. Is Slovakia going to have book-free libraries anytime soon? "It is certain that for the near future we will be able to access physical and digital books in our libraries. Then it will be up to the people to decide. Physical books will not disappear from libraries or bookshops for as long as people demand them," Fiala concluded.

The Slovak National Library in the city of Martin will Digitize 2.8 Millions of Documents

The first digitized book is the so-called Kamaldul Bible, a two volume manuscript which is the first known translation of the Bible from Latin into Slovak. In other words, this precious 18th century document has been transformed from paper into a computerized digital form.



Digitization will enable to rescue the endangered written heritage and publications will become accessible to everyone. The Slovak National Library will use 31 types of robotic, semi-automatic and manual scanners that will be able to scan books in any condition regardless of age, quality, condition/damage, binding and size. "Each type of scanner is designed for a different type of documents," says Andrej Kožuch, the Head of the Digitization Center of the Slovak National Library, where this €50 million project has started.

The machines are operated by workers who will later train new workers. There are 15 people operating scanners at the moment. However, this will change as 150 people will work on the project in the future," explains Kožuch. New job opportunities will be filled by 2015. The project will later move to new premises in Vrútky.

Monika Šušorená has been working at the digitization project for a month. She takes a book, opens it in the middle and inserts it into the V-shaped machine. This method enables scanning of older, dried out or chemically damaged books that may fall apart. It is important Monika sets the machine correctly, the rest is done automatically. The book sits in a pointy cradle where the scanning head is lowered. Pages are turned by air suction. Then they are scanned into a computer and Monika sends them to her colleagues.

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"A lot of interesting books pass through my hands. The most intriguing are old books that are beautifully made and bound in leather. It is a very interesting job. We rescue books that would have fallen apart in a few years' time and this way we can preserve them for the future generations," she explains.

At times one can find bookmarks and leaves inside these books. Martin Hráč has just found two four-leaf clovers in one of the publications. "If that happens, the machine stops. The object is removed and the book is scanned again," he adds. Martin is working with a bigger machine digitizing bound newspapers or books of a larger format. "They are mostly books with strong enough binding to open them wide.

The scanner has two main cameras at the top that scan the pages after they have been pressed against a glass pane," he describes the method. He says they can scan 1 to 1.5 thousand pages in an hour based on the type and quality of the book.

The project's aim is to digitize the 2.8 million archived and book documents, newspapers and magazines of the Slovak National Library and the Slovak National Archive. All documents related to Slovakia have about 250 million pages. The library will digitize old books dated back to the 17th and 18th centuries. It is also paramount to save a sizeable part of the Slovak written heritage printed on so called 'sour' paper. The paper was made roughly between 1839 and 1990 and is in danger of disintegration and loss. All scanned books are then stored in a central database. The volume of the digital archive will be approx. 17 petabytes, which is about the size of 14 million computer hard drives.

"The documents will be archived and conserved. They will not be damaged any further and will be displayed to the public, which means people will be able to access these via the Internet or within the Slovak National Library or Archive," Kožuch adds. One third of digitized books will be available online. They are mostly free or orphaned books. The ones protected by copyright laws will only be available within the aforementioned institutions. The project is unique in its complexity- it will take 3 years to digitize and conserve all written Slovak national heritage.