

# The Importance of the Digitized Serbian Periodicals in the Context of

## “Europeana Newspapers Project”

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### Abstract:

Serbian newspapers and magazines which are included in the digital collection, testify to the wealth of information that accompany everyday life and current affairs in the society and they are a valuable material for researchers of various scientific interest, especially for a summarising view of culture and cultural history of this part of Europe. By adding to linguistic diversity of newspaper collections and by bringing in the distinctive cultural perspectives on historic events that may be interpreted from the digitized newspaper materials, University Library “Svetozar Markovic” – as one of the two partners in this project from the South-East Europe and from the non-EU countries – with more than 400 000 images from Serbian Cyrillic newspapers, increases the added value of this European project (<http://www.europeana-newspapers.eu/>). These new possibilities to search and browse through Serbian newspapers make European citizens, researchers, scholars and teachers more aware of our shared history and common European identity.

**Key words:** Europeana Newspapers Project, Serbian newspapers, digitized newspaper

“To gauge the scope of the 21st century’s challenges and the range of possible ways to grasp them, we must be receptive to all approaches, to all disciplines and cultures, and grant them all a forum for open discussion about the future... It is particularly important to keep a distance from the centrifugal forces generated by the giddy pace of change, because the ideal of ‘progress’ could easily lead us in directions that make us lose touch with human values”.

Koichiro Matsuura, *Director-General of UNESCO* (2000)

At the time of global digitization of all human knowledge and unseen global flow of information, there is a rational need for global digital scientific cooperation, which is the only one that can meet all the challenges the world poses to the contemporary science and humanistic heritage.

With a huge expansion of its possibilities to reach users, the Internet has grown into a global virtual reality, which often reflects the world around us. Although in such a constellation of things the possibilities of misuse are numerous, the potential for promotion of the highest civilization values is great.

In his book about globalization *Runaway World* (Belgrade, 2005), Anthony Giddens, a former head of the *London School of Economics*, names human preoccupation one of the basic determinants of the phenomenon of globalization, a period different from all previous periods in the history of mankind. The technical perfection of the potential overall destruction is bigger than ever, which further contributes to the increase of the capacity of human preoccupation. If we add to this the esthetical poststructuralist cancellation of any kind of “totality”, that is, the impossibility of the very knowledge or consciousness to rise to the heights of comprehensiveness, we can only conclude that every utterance becomes a political *per se*. This results in the great predominance of manipulation of political power.

This is especially true when it comes to the media. In a constellation where media are under the influence of micro-interests with particular identities, the domain of cultural history owns the alternative and corrective potential. In general, periodicals have been a rich source of information about history, politics, culture, art, and the totality of human life throughout decades. Definition of the term serial publication that means any kind of publication that is periodically published, that has continuous series and numbering, is not sufficient to cover the importance of periodicals, newspapers in particular. Bearing in mind the crucial importance of newspapers and journals for the interpretation of reality and cultural history, in its broadest sense, *Europeana Newspapers* [1] project was launched in order to shed light on the events of that period on a large scale of the overall social development.

## II

Project *Europeana Newspapers* provides new possibilities to search and browse through the newspapers across Europe in an open access mode for all interested people, researchers, scholars and teachers. This is a three-year project

funded by the European Commission, launched in February 2012 and is scheduled to last until January 2015. About 18 million digitized pages of newspapers in full text have been delivered to the *TEL – European Library* and *Europeana* [2] within the project. During the project seventeen institutions, including some of the major European national and research libraries will deliver content to suggest a common European identity, a unique political and historical context, and indivisible cultural heritage.

The main objective of this project can be recognized in *Europeana's* aspiration to become the largest provider of pan-European newspaper collections. In that sense, the project provides a complex search of the full content of the text, which includes the use of various tools and technologies for an advanced search and Retrieval.

By providing a rich diversity of newspaper materials in different languages and alphabets project aims at grounding basis for a more comprehensive outlook at European shared history and culture. By making available newspapers from various European countries accessible through the unique Europeana portal the projects enables users to compare historic perceptions at different countries on the news and articles about exciting events and cultural turning points.

The project main goal is to survey existing collections of digitized newspaper materials and to aggregate metadata on them making Europeana one of the greatest portals for accessing historic newspapers. Besides this project aims at refinement of existing collections of digitized newspaper materials by translating image materials into full text ones by means of OCR (Optical Character Recognition) and OLR (Optical Layout Recognition) for article recognition. Metadata standardization is high on the list of project goals since variety of metadata formats are currently in use describing digitized newspaper materials and in order to improve access to such content, common standards need to be adopted.

Project also aims at providing better displaying capabilities and more clear access conditions to digitized newspaper materials. Multilingual and multicultural nature of Europe creates challenges if one is to provide users with easy and seamless browsing experience when exploring collective European historic newspaper pages collection. To overcome this challenge is to translate newspaper pages into living, vivid experience of multilingual and multicultural continent with fragile but rewarding collective history and culture. In this challenge lays the importance of the project “A Gateway to European Newspapers Online” and hope

that by 2015 a more rich perspective on historic events may be gained by easily accessible newspaper collections from all over Europe.

As it achieved excellent results by taking part in several European projects and initiatives, University Library "Svetozar Markovic" (Belgrade, Serbia) was invited to participate in this project as an equal partner. University Library "Svetozar Markovic" [3] supplied metadata for more than 400,000 digitized pages of Serbian newspapers issued before 1945.

Among the 43 selected titles of Serbian periodicals, there is a diverse and interesting content, which can be roughly divided into four groups:

- *dailies, large format (Vreme, Pravda)*, which mirror life and customs, habits and aspirations of Serbian people, through the display of information about social, political and cultural issues and incidental daily (e.g., sports or advertising<sup>1</sup>) issues of the period;

- *literary journals*, where European public is presented with the range and scope of our literature through literary supplements, poems, short stories and novels by the most famous Serbian writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (*Stražilovo, Zora, Šumadinka, Nova iskra, Podunavka* etc.);

- *political and humorous-satirical newspapers*, which can be very useful when observing socio-political situation and the mood of the people towards governmental structures at the time (*Bodljikavo prase, Starmali, Starmladi*; political parties' newspapers such as *Srpska nezavisnost* or *Srpski narod* are also in this group) and

- *regular newspapers*, which portray the spirit of everyday life of ordinary Serbian people at the time (*Beogradske opštinske novine, Srpsko kolo, Zvezda, Nedelja, Male novine* etc.).

Serbian newspapers published during the First World War are in the special group which will enrich a separate part of the European digital collections, called "Europeana collections 1914-1918", especially important for the current anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War (*Ratni dnevnik, Ilustrovana ratna kronika, Službeni vojni list, Balkanski rat u slici i reči* etc.).

In addition to their great importance regarding the presentation and promotion of our culture in a European context, these publications together with other European newspaper articles [4] in other European countries which are part of this project, testify to the common cultural space and the unique European humanist legacy [5]. This is particularly evident in the examples of newspapers on the topic of global

phenomena (such as the First World War), and in specific cases, such as “Nova Iskra” where we read about the exhibition of the Kingdom of Serbia in the Queen's Palace in London, in the year 1907 (where they presented artwork from Serbia, handicrafts made by women, an overview of Serbian crafts, Serbian industry, forestry etc. [6], or when in the same newspaper we read that Jovan Cvijic, a Serbian scientist was invited by the Vienna Geographic Society to give a lecture [7].

Another example is Nikola Tesla in the newspaper articles published during his lifetime. By the time this project started it was very expensive and time-consuming to find information about the life and work of Nikola Tesla (1856-1943), the world famous Serbian scientist. We can say that the best way to collect at once information about Nikola Tesla is to visit his museum in Belgrade, but that requires travelling to Belgrade and staying there for a few days. This is a pretty expensive solution for the majority of people interested in Tesla's life and work. There are a lot of resources available online about Tesla, but the majority of them is not from contemporary newspapers. If we want contemporary information, we must look for it in the digitized newspaper collections.

Newspapers published in the USA are in the process of digitization through the *National Digital Newspapers Program*, a partnership between Library of Congress and National Endowment for the Humanities. The website *Chronicling America* [8] provides access to the information about historic newspapers and digitized newspaper pages free of charge for personal use. At the moment there are about 6 million digitized and searchable newspaper pages published between 1836 and 1922, and Tesla was mentioned on 5165 pages. If you try the same search in *Europeana* now, you will get only 22 results. This means that you have to visit European libraries which are engaged in the digitization one by one and search through their databases, because it is known that many more than only 22 articles about Tesla were published in Europe.

Some newspapers were digitized recently in Serbia but only as images so the text search is impossible. Project *Europeana Newspapers* will change that because 43 titles of old newspapers will be processed with **OCR** and the text will become searchable. This will be the first big corpus of searchable digitized texts in Cyrillic. Bibliographies of articles about Nikola Tesla have a lot of records - the articles from Serbian newspapers and after the project realization the full text of many of these articles will be available online [9].

The situation is similar when it comes to crucial historical events. For example, newspaper “Ratni dnevnik” with the official reports from the *War Press Bureau* was published daily during the First World War, between June 1st 1914 and October 12th 1918. This journal changed its place of publication. Its publication started in Valjevo and when it reached 99th edition it moved to Kragujevac. In 1915 its 241st edition was published in Thessaloniki and followed the advancement and destiny of the Serbian army. Starting from same edition, the journal became the official body of the *Supreme Council of the Armed Forces* edited by the *War Press Bureau*. Being the official bulletin of the Serbian military operations in the First World War, this journal represents an invaluable source for the study of history. The same text (and a syllable) was published entitled “War Press Bureau” in the first month and a half of the First World War in 1914. Some editions were accompanied by appendices. Starting from edition No. 34 (1917) there was a literary feature, and the column called *Literature* was introduced in the 20th edition (1918). The contributors to the journal were prominent authors such as Milutin Bojic, Ivo Cipiko and Jovan Ducic.

We can conclude that the main benefit of *Europeana Newspapers* for users worldwide is the possibility to search and read about any historical figures or events they are interested in, from the comfort of their homes, without visiting a library building or paying for the Internet content. The users will have the chance to find contemporary newspaper information about different topics that paint a different and perhaps a more objective picture than later publications.

### III

In the digital age, the ability to manipulate multiplies and becomes progressively more sophisticated. According to Baudrillard, participation in virtual reality means that a person, “sums up in a hyper-potential point” (Belgrade, 1994) in which communication alienates and at the same time allows for the current presence – or it creates the illusion of infinite possibilities of producing a symbolic self.

However, the vision of a kind of an “electronic agora”, endemic among the *digerati* [10] community, in which an individual acquires the right and the opportunity to voice his opinion and his point of view does not die down. Instead, one gets the opportunity to do so in a fundamentally new way using the cyber space. That is why



the digital age may reflect the possibility of a critical distance in relation to the accumulated information.

Whenever we think about common sense, critical thinking, science, culture and cultural history, we primarily turn to the European discourse. This is obviously reflected in projects such as this one, whose transparency and the abundance of authentic and unbiased materials, give any interested researcher the ability to make his own judgment about different cultural, historical and socio-political issues in accordance with his own critical mind and common sense.

Multilingual and multicultural Europe creates a challenge for those who provide users with easy and seamless browsing experiences when exploring historic European newspaper collections. To meet this challenge is to translate newspaper pages into a live vivid experience of a multilingual and multicultural continent with fragile but rewarding collective history and culture [11]. The importance of the project “European Newspapers” is in this challenge and the hope that by 2015 a more rich perspective on historic events will be gained by easily accessible newspaper collections from all over Europe.

By using the advantage of high technologies available in the project University Library “Svetozar Markovic” aims at creating innovative digital objects that will grab users’ attention and bring back the historical content of good quality into focus. This content is connected with the necessity of establishing wider and more specific scientific cooperation on the territory of the Balkans and Europe as well, on the foundation of the global process of digitization. This digital cultural and scientific cooperation should offer a great breakthrough in the various scientific fields through the open access academic records with no precedents in the past.

In the first place, this could contribute to the development of young highly qualified scientific staff. In addition, when it comes to the global presentation of the environment from which this kind of scientific material comes, wider implications will be of great significance as well. If we imagined national and global culture in a coordinate system, designed to curve in terms of the relevance of the information (especially the comparative approach) that come from the so-called small cultures, the curve certainly would have to be at the top of the chart, along those European readers who come from the so-called great cultures. By adding to the linguistic diversity of newspaper collections and by bringing in the distinctive cultural perspectives on historic events that may be interpreted from the digitized newspaper

materials, University Library “Svetozar Markovic” – as one of the two partners in this project from the South-East Europe and from the non-EU countries – with more than 400 000 images from Serbian cyrillic newspapers, increases the added value of this European project.

### **Conclusions:**

Historical newspapers represent the image of life at the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century. European Commission CIP ICT-PSP project Europeana newspapers provides millions of refined historical newspapers pages to worldwide audiences. This will boost interest of researchers and general public in this era and wide range of topics from the little details of everyday life to the historic events. Serbian newspapers are part of this multilingual and multinational corpus of newspaper searchable texts and present specifics of Serbian society of this era. Users around the world will have the chance to look at different sides of various events, from beginning of a world war to invention of electricity, based on newspapers from different countries. Importance of comprehensive approach to world history is important if we are to learn from it about human nature and help ourselves understand better contemporary and future events.

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