

My Own Private Public Library

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In the present paper I will explore the sharing of digitized books on online platforms in post-socialist Bulgaria. As this undoubtedly sounds a bit dry and remote, I will start with a story to provide some context. Last summer I was walking the streets of Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, with a friend of mine when we saw an old building: its windows dirty, its paint was falling off : quite shabby and derelict in general. 'This is a branch of the city library,' my friend told me, 'I used to come here in the 90s to read and steal books'. 'You stole books!', I replied slightly shocked (not too shocked, because this was common practice with regard to libraries in the 90s). 'Of course', he said, 'no one else would read them anyway'. And then he told me how he stole 'Dynamics of Faith' by Christian existentialist Paul Tillich by hiding it in his pants. I found quite charming the image of this young school boy passing by the old ladies working in the library, hoping that they won't notice the "Dynamics of Faith" in his pants. And I think this is a good story to describe the general condition of libraries in the years after 1989 when the state basically withdrew all active support for culture, the common library system collapsed, and 2400 out of 9347 libraries were closed in 10 years. In addition, many libraries saw their collections progressively diminish due to carelessness, theft, or poor preservation conditions. Such was the dynamics of faith in the first years of the transition period that talking about a coordinated state strategy for libraries was considered suspicious. The mantra was a combination of deregulation, decentralization and privatization. I claim that the rise of pirate electronic libraries in Bulgaria in the first decade of the 21st century should be situated in the context of these dramatic changes in the role of the state.

Electronic 'libraries' on the Bulgarian web legitimize themselves through the rhetorics of sharing. They claim to be made by users for users in the name of the public good. I would like to explore this rhetoric and tease out the inherent contradictions in it, the rift between public and private being just one among many. Digital 'libraries' thrive at the intersections between formal and informal economy, law and ethics, commercial and non-commercial interest, engineering and bricolage. Can a platform for sharing of pirated books be accepted as a public library? What kind of rhetorical strategies lie behind the notion of a 'library'? And finally what kinds of actors fill the spectrum of the book sharing economy? In order to answer these questions I did mapping of the Bulgarian web and identified popular web sites offering e-books. I distinguished between: 1) private collections of books existing online with free access, 2) online bookstores, 3) collections of public institutions, providing free or paid access. Often there were interesting synergies between these different kinds of platforms. In addition, I did content analysis of a thread on the legal forum lex.bg (Lex, 2010) discussing whether the web site "My Library" (Chitanka.info) can be considered a public library or not. I will present my observations in what follows.

On books and jars

According to the popular account, the collapse of state socialism led to the expansion of the 'informal sector' in Eastern European countries. The negative consequences of reform encouraged individuals and groups "to work in and through informal social 'networks' and personal 'contacts' to help each other (often to achieve their legal rights), to derive economic or political benefit (often in the absence of

effective institutional development) and to consolidate interpersonal and group obligations” (Pickles, 2008, 12). Such observations often refer to the so called economies of reciprocity, remittance based economies and household economies (ibid). The paradigmatic example of informal economies is the case of families living in the city who work, off the record, on a piece of land in the country side to secure additional food. The preparation of vegetables and fruits for the winter amidst Soviet style city dwellings is memorized in a beautiful haiku by Bulgarian poet Georgi Gospodinov: “Behind the apartment building my mother boils summer in a jar”.

The simple linear connection between economic crisis and informal economy is rejected by authors such as Adrian Smith. Instead, he claims that informal practices have already been widespread during socialism and should be understood within the context of locally embedded historical and cultural continuities. What is more, it could be argued that it was precisely through informal practices that socialism was “domesticated”, transformed from within (Creed, 1997). Smith invokes the concept of “economy of jars” to describe the way in which various products enter into systems of reciprocal gift giving: “The ‘economy of jars’ is a deep seated setoff cultural/economic practices, which blurs the boundaries between the categories of the ‘economic’ and the ‘cultural’ (Smith, 2004). In a society in which everything was controlled and formalized by the state, people withdrew in the private sphere of consumption and exchange as a form of retreat and silent opposition. The greatest ideological battle was fought in the private sphere of consumption (Mineva, 2010). It is a common place to explain the collapse of socialism with shortages of goods and censorship of Western cultural products. There are legendary stories of people exchanging tapes with rare and supposedly “immoral” Western music, access to which was always a source of prestige and cultural capital. Books that were forbidden also found their ways through informal channels.

So, it becomes clear that the contemporary practice of sharing books online is not without its historical precedent and reflects a more general propensity towards informality in Bulgarian culture and economy. The distinction between public and private appears as a distinction between the formal state politics and ideology, on the one hand, and the informal, under the counter, reciprocal relations between private people, on the other hand.

I claim that it is precisely this independence from/resistance to the state that is the ultimate marker of sharing, regardless of financial factors. An example that might support such a hypothesis is the case of file sharing in Sweden. Andersson describes Sweden as a post-materialist society that is concerned with issues such as political participation, freedom of speech, environmental protection and beautiful cities, compared to older, materialist values reflecting greater existential insecurity (e.g. public concern for issues such as economic endurance, rising food prices, or crime rates) (Andersson, 2011). Contrary to my attempt to relate practices of sharing to shortages in socialism and the economic crisis in the 90s, Andersson relates it, to material abundance. What is going on here? It seems that the common factor in both cases is the evasion from state sanction and authority. In this respect informal economies have both a practical consumption-related dimension and a symbolic political one.

Finally, a note of caution should be made. There is a significant difference between the informal economy under socialism and the sharing economy glorified nowadays. A good example of the discourse

surrounding the economy of sharing is the complaint by journalist Neel Gorenflo that: ‘As collaborative consumption goes mainstream, it risks losing the very thing that attracted people in the first place, the unique and even transformative social experiences made possible when you interact with helpful strangers’. He goes on to explain the competitive advantage: “When I met Sarah to pick up her car, DaffodillPickle, we struck up a conversation about aquaponics, she gave me an impromptu tour of her aquaponics setup on her balcony, and then sent me on my way with fresh strawberries she picked for me on the spot. That made my day. That’s never going to happen at Hertz because this kind of intimacy can never be scaled” (Gorenflo, 2013). The author does not realize that the intimacy that he holds so high is already a mediated intimacy, intimacy achieved through a technical platform. That makes it quite different from the kinship or neighborhood based intimacy of informal relations in socialist Bulgaria, for example. And that is why one cannot make direct parallels between the economy of reciprocity and gift-giving under socialism and the volunteer work and gift-culture on online sharing platforms. The mediation of Internet changes the scope and nature of informality while preserving its potential to delineate a zone of freedom from state control.

If it looks like a library...

Apart from the distinction between formal and informal, there is also an important distinction between legal and ethical that is often debated when it comes to copyright. In the present section I will analyze one particular case – the electronic library *Chitanka.info*, known also as ‘My Library’ (‘Моята Библиотека’). ‘My library’ was created in 2005, when a Bulgarian living in Germany decided to upload his own personal library on the Internet. Since then the library has grown in popularity with tens of volunteers digitizing books in Bulgarian and uploading them. There are no banners or ads on the website, all contributions are voluntary, and while there are indeed pirated books, there is also a significant percent of books which are already in the public domain. However, in 2010 the Bulgarian Cyber Crime Unit closed down the site and confiscated all servers associated with it due to alleged infringement of copyright. A fierce public debate followed the police action against *Chitanka* and led to the eventual restoration of the web site.

I would like to draw attention to the discussion whether *Chitanka.info* is a library or not. The legal intricacies of the question are discussed in great detail on the legal forum *lex.bg*. The owner of the server claims that the web site is a library and thus is exempted from the accusations of copyright infringement. The arguments for this are: that the entity is completely non-commercial (there are no financial gains whatsoever), that it allows free access to e-books to everyone and that it works for the promotion of learning. The counter arguments are that regardless of whether the website is non-commercial, publishing houses lose money because of free access to their books, and more importantly, there are legal requirements that specify which institutions can qualify as libraries and which not (Lex, 2010).

Nevertheless, Borislav Manolov, the creator and owner of the site, claims that while formally and legally *Chitanka.info* might not be a library, informally and ethically it is one. A strong contradiction between law and ethics is introduced in examples such as the “black list” on *chitanka.info* which includes all publishing houses that have requested their books to be removed from the web site. Such publishing

houses cannot request their books to be later re-uploaded. The black list also includes media that have published uninformed and unfavorable articles on *Chitanka.info*. It is obvious that the web site tries to establish an alternative framework of justification, an “ethical” set of rules which it counterposes to the obsolete rules of law. The site justifies itself in this way but at the same makes a political statement that challenges current copyright law. If they look like a library and if they behave like a library, why can’t they be a library?

But then what is meant by the possessive pronoun ‘my’ in the name ‘My Library’? There is a serious tension between public and private when it comes to ownership that can be spotted here. *Chitanka.info* started as a private book collection uploaded online. The site is privately owned by its original creator. At the same time it is maintained and developed by a dedicated community of volunteers for the public good. Is it public or private? Is the ‘my’ in ‘My Library’ the ‘my’ of the owner, or the ‘my’ of every single one of the numerous users. The tension between public and private reappears when it comes to potential financial gains from the website. Does it work for the public good or for private profits? *Chitanka.info* explicitly emphasize their non-profit character. The name ‘library’ is so important because it is used in opposition to media descriptions of the web site as a ‘bookstore’. According to the law the web site is not a library. But it does choose to present itself that way.

The ‘present-yourself-as-a-library’ strategy is followed by many other players in the e-books field. Thus one can find a quite dubious web site called “National Library” (<http://narodnabiblioteka.info/index.php>), or sites such as *e-bookBg.com* which calls itself an ‘online library’, or *Koronal.com*, presented as a ‘virtual library’. There is of course also the ‘Bulgarian virtual library’ *Slovo.bg*. Even though all these web sites describe themselves as libraries, their positions on the spectrum of formal-informal economy, public and private, commercial and non-commercial activity vary greatly. *Slovo.bg* for example doesn’t host any pirated books, but of all Bulgarian classics which are in the public domain. It is maintained by a formally registered non-profit organization that accepts donations and has its own online bookstore. *E-bookBG.com* provides pirated books, hosts ads and also provides a link to its electronic bookstore. *Koronal.com* is a library for free essays and university papers directly linked to a web site which provides these types of materials for money. *Chitanka.info*, as already mentioned, hosts both pirated books and books in the public domain, and is maintained by completely voluntary work. It doesn’t even accept donations in order to keep its non-profit status untarnished.

To sum up, different actors position themselves differently along the lines of the commercial/non-commercial, legal –ethical, formal-informal. The fact that all of them use the word ‘library’ is a testimony to the legitimizing power of the word with all its hidden connotations. In the sphere of e-books in Bulgaria the word ‘library’ performs a function similar to the one performed by the word ‘platform’ in the context of social media (Gillespie, 2010). In his provocative article ‘The Politics of Platforms’ Gillespie argues that the term ‘platform’ is used by YouTube “to make a broadly progressive sales pitch while also eliding tensions inherent in their service: between user-generated and commercially produced content, between cultivating community and serving up advertising, between intervening in the delivery of content and remaining neutral” (Gillespie, 2010, 3). In a similar way the word ‘library’ is used in the Bulgarian context to elide tensions and obfuscate rifts. It conveys a concept of public good that can be

back traced to socialist state politics, but is radically different from it in its opposition to the state and its emphasis on sharing as a practice of individual freedom and circumvention of censorship. It is precisely the role of the state that I plan to discuss in the last section of the current essay.

Baby food, chic lit and nationalism

There is a current fascination with the informal economy marked by the appearance of books such as “Stealth of Nations: The Global Rise of the Informal Economy” by Robert Neuwirth, which glorifies “the globe-trotting Nigerians who sell Chinese cell phones and laid-off San Franciscans who use Twitter to market street food” and shows that “the people who work in informal economies are entrepreneurs who provide essential services and crucial employment” (Neuwirth, 2012). The new emphasis on informality can be found also in the field of ICTs for development. Authors such as Richard Heeks insist on the importance of new models of technological innovation. Heeks discusses the potential of “grassroots” (per-poor) innovation in the developing world and introduces the Indian concept of *jugaad*: “the impoverished quick-fix to get or keep technology working within an environment of relative poverty and resource constraints” (Heeks, 2009, 15). This focus on the informal economy and ad-hoc solutions in ICTs for development is the result of often justified criticism against failed large scale projects of structural changes in state industry and economy. The hype surrounding the sharing economy is a part of this more general move in the direction of informality. It seems to me that the concept of sharing economy can be interpreted as a radicalization of the neo-liberal paradigm with its distrust for the state and its tiresome regulations. But what are the large-scale implications of such an informal approach to the digitization of e-books?

To begin with, in Bulgaria the informal sharing of digitized books online is not a niche activity that complements state politics for digitization. A comprehensive state strategy for digitization is missing at the current stage, and existing efforts are sporadic and insufficient. There are several projects for digitization financed by the EU (Bojadjiev et al.) but they focus almost exclusively on the historical heritage of the country, Church-Slavonic manuscripts from the 13th century, for example. The unique access of Bulgarian public libraries to such rare documents makes them important actors in the preservation of cultural heritage. At the same time, since these works are already in the public domain, the question of copyright is not relevant. The tricky issues arise when it comes to more contemporary texts. Journals and magazines, documents from the archives and key books from the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century have been partially digitized by libraries. But what if someone wants to read contemporary Bulgarian fiction online? One solution is to visit one of the many web sites that publish debut texts of authors. This is always a bit risky, as anyone who has spent time reading love poems of 20 year-old students can confirm. What about more established authors? Or not even to mention scientific books? Here, the answer is more difficult. The market for e-books in Bulgaria is in a condition between fragility and non-existence. Books in Bulgarian are still not allowed on Amazon. The total amount of Bulgarian e-books sold legally is around 1000 (Bogdanov, 2013). The bookstores for e-books are either independent, or connected to the mobile phone operators in the country, or extensions of Bulgarian bookstore chains. In any occasion, even the 1000 books now on sale are newly published books. Digital access to orphaned books or books in the public domain (which are not Church-Slavonic

manuscripts) happens neither through state libraries nor through the market, but only through the practice of sharing online.

But because sharing is informal, illegally ethical and spontaneous, it has resulted in less than systematic results. Thus, the collection of *Chitanka.info*, while aiming at being extensive, inevitably favors chic lit and science fiction: the most popular genres among volunteers engaged with digitization. Another popular online collection contains recipes for babies' food (Biberon, 2013). Several pro-nationalist sites have extensive web archives of documents with historical significance. And photos from the distant past have been collected in 'museums 2.0' resulting from private initiatives and constructing a new vision of heritage from below (Kazalarska, 2012). The very fact that such informal, de-institutionalized collections have appeared shows that there is significant interest in the topics they are dedicated to. At the same time, there are no universal standards for digitization and no prospects to achieve systematicity (Bojadjiev et al.) There is no dialogue between the collections, no hyper linking, no underlying unity. What we observe is not a universal library, a repository of human knowledge (Kelly, 2006), but a patchwork, the work of bricoleurs – people who make do with whatever is available in the absence of an overall plan or strategy. I invoke here the concept of bricolage proposed by Levi Strauss in relation to mythological thought. He opposed the engineers' creative thinking which proceeds from goals to means to mythical thought which re-uses available materials. Levi-Strauss's distinction can be used as a metaphor to underline the inherent 'bricolage' nature of sharing as a practice. This is not inherently good or bad. What I want to ask is whether this is the best approach to digitization of books in Bulgarian language. Obviously this is not an easy question to answer but it is an important one and is often overlooked in discussions about sharing.

In addition, the fact that *Chitanka.info* doesn't have any source of monetary income and relies on goodwill provides it with an ethical justification but makes the process of digitization web slower and harder. There is shortage of people and time. Is this the most efficient approach for digitization? Hat is more, many web sites call themselves 'libraries' following the example of *Chitanka.info* and parasitize on its good reputation, while at the same time gaining private profits.

Sharing: who cares?

In conclusion, I would like to question the pervasive rhetoric of sharing that has captured contemporary political and social thought. Sharing is good. Sharing is caring. But is it enough? I was provoked to ask this question by a blog post called: "What the Boston bombing taught us about Internet arrogance?" The author compares collaborative action online with the actions of the government and finds the latter being significantly more effective: "My point isn't to paint the government as perfect, far from it. I get as frustrated by government incompetence and I hate paying taxes as much as anyone. But I'm not so self important to think that I, the Internet, social media, Reddit, the tech industry, and even Anonymous, can solve all of our problems if the government just gets out of our way" (Dao, 2013).

Relating this position to the question of digitization of books in Bulgaria, I have to admit that I started my paper with the clear intention to praise *Chitanka.info* for the way they fill gaps left both by the government and the market. My admiration for this web site has not diminished even a little in the

process of writing this paper. On the contrary, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the team keep to their views even in the smallest details and provide high quality books through voluntary work. But what I want to ask is: is that enough? And should we abandon our faith in the state as a provider of public goods?

Obviously, the main debate about Chitanka.info is a debate about copyright and whether users are allowed to digitize and upload books without the permission of publishers. But setting this aside, the big question for me is: who do we want to digitize our books? In a more global context, do we want this to be done by a private corporation such as Google or by public entities? As Dutch researcher Geert Lovink provocatively states: "Google suffers from data obesity and is indifferent to calls for careful preservation or naïve demands for cultural awareness...Google is not after the ownership of Emile Zola. Its intention is to lure the Proust fan *away* from the archive. Perhaps there is an interest in a cool Stendhal mug, the XXL Flaubert T-shirt, or a Sartre purchase at Amazon. For Google, Balzac's collected work is abstract data junk, a raw resource whose sole purpose is to make profit, whereas for the French it is the epiphany of their language and culture" (Lovink, 2012, 153). In the local Bulgarian context, what happens to national language and culture when digitization is dispersed among numerous actors with different positionality on the scale of formality, legality and commercial interest? What do these actors care for? And isn't it high time for the state to start caring about its cultural politics?

The battles over copyright should not distract us from the question: who should digitize books? And how do we provide public access to those books? These are not either-or questions. New synergies can emerge. My only claim is that the current emphasis on sharing makes us dismiss too easily the state as an actor. Is sharing by definition a practice outside the domain of the state? Can it be reconceptualized in the context of public institutions? Can there be a fruitful symbiosis between an overall public strategy and private initiative? The question remains open for anyone who cares enough to discuss.

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