A Digital Librarian
Interview with Tamara Butigan Vučaj, conducted by Biljana Dojčinović

Tamara Butigan Vučaj, photo: Biljana Rakočević

Tamara Butigan Vučaj is the head of the Department for the Development of Digital Library and Microfilming of the National Library of Serbia, the national representative of the Republic of Serbia at the DARIAH-ERIC consortium, https://www.dariah.eu/, and a member of the Members Council of the Europeana Network, https://pro.europeana.eu/person/tamara-butigan.

You are right at the centre of the development of digitisation in science and culture in Serbia. What exactly is your task at the National Library of Serbia?

The National Library of Serbia (NLS) is open to digital transformation, and I have the advantage of heading the department whose task is to carry it out in the most evident possible way: to transfer library collections from paper to screen, into the digital format. However, since

digital transformation is a process that permeates all segments of work of a cultural institution such as the NLS, I dare say I see my task as making the management, communication and dissemination of results digital; within my power, of course. I am aided by my fifteen years of experience from European organisations and projects, which were all closely connected to digitisation. European projects of digitisation in which we participated largely reduced the inferiority we tend to feel towards our colleagues from more developed countries. And if you can even call it a task, I believe we have reduced the gap between us and Europe, at least in segments such as metadata in the digital library, where we have been applying European standards for quite some time.

How do you perceive the modernisation of access to materials and its collection and preservation, as well as use, at the NLS?

The NLS is one of the pioneering cultural institutions when it comes to digitisation, but it is yet to undergo true digital transformation. The key word for modernising the approach to materials is *open access*, which means that it is the library's mission to open its collections to all categories of users as much as possible, of course, in accordance with copyright law. This mostly means that the materials should be described, that is, processed bibliographically, and that process has not yet been finalised for all the materials at the NLS. The precondition for the digitisation of any source is quality description, because it helps with searching, finding, selection and digital presentation later on. It is from that description that we extract metadata and further improve them. We mustn't forget that materials in the digital format should be searchable not just by their metadata, but by the full text and that is what we will work on in the future. The collection of materials, that is, procurement, as we say in this field, should also be carried out in the digital space, and not just in the domain of searching and finding, but also purchasing, which is not the case now. I will list the institution of digital mandatory copy for paper materials as an example of a good practice, which is still an unreachable standard for many national libraries, while the NLS has successfully been implementing it since 2011. Preserving the materials would be improved by introducing a system for the identification of those who take them out of the library, and digital preservation for digital sources is a process that we are yet to undertake. When it comes to use, to me, the key word is *reuse* of materials and I strongly support it, especially for the parts of the fund for which copyright protection has expired. I always state Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum as an example, which was closed for several years because of reconstruction (much like the National Library of Serbia between 2007 and

2011). The museum's director approved the use of all digitised museum exhibits, so Rembrandt's *Night Watch* can be found on clothes, pencils, boxes, coasters. Of course, this can become kitsch, but if we care about the use of the material, that is not so important.

How do you see interlibrary communication – now and in ideal conditions of digital librarianship?

Interlibrary communication is a dialectic category – I am talking about Serbia now. There is a form of imaginary rivalry that turns into real intolerance among the biggest libraries, which all comes from decision-makers. I believe that this is the reason why our librarianship is objectively weak as a profession and the biggest sector in culture. On the other hand, librarians can cooperate among themselves excellently and this is a source of satisfaction in the profession. A digital model of librarianship that would suppress and change human vanity and the personal benefit of individuals has yet to appear. Digital transformation is more transparent, and therein lies the hope that this problem will perhaps be less prominent in the future. When it comes to international interlibrary communication, things are different. Digital librarianship truly connects libraries and librarians and it is not by chance that we are called the librarian "mafia".

What does that mean?

Perhaps I should have added a smiley face behind the word. This means that we are very well connected and that we cooperate excellently, and that we support each other. For instance, when we were scanning the journal *Domaćica* (*Housewife*), there were plenty of issues that we at the NLS did not have, but we wanted the entire digital collection. All it took was sending an email and digitised issues arrived swiftly and accurately. I am certain that this would have been far slower and more convoluted if it had been done via official memos.

What is being microfilmed today?

This is a good question. We know that, officially, microfilm is still the most secure medium for permanent preservation, but, despite that, microfilming is a dying art that is making way for digitisation. That is expected, but there are the so-called microfilm writers that place

digital copies on microfilm. The NLS does not have this equipment, but it would be good to acquire it, so the right answer to the question would be: digital copies should be microfilmed.

What does the DARIAH-ERIC consortium provide for us in Serbia, and what does it require of us?

DARIAH-ERIC (Digital Research Infrastructure for the Arts and Humanities, or, simply – Dariah) is an important consortium of the European Commission: it is one out of 23 research structures that are tracing the development of European science. In all EU member states, there are offices at science ministries that coordinate the participation of their researchers in these consortiums. Serbia is the only Dariah member that does not belong to the European Union, and it is also a founding member of the consortium. As it so happens, the institutional representative of Serbia in this body is the Ministry of Culture and Information, which means that the centre of the national branch of Dariah is displaced. It is clear that this membership enables communication and participation in projects and working groups of the European consortium, as well as use of digital tools developed by other member states. We are required to justify membership each year with financial and non-financial participation. The financial participation is about 2,500 euros (calculated relative to the national GDP) and it is regulated by the Ministry of Culture and Information. The non-financial participation is achieved with specific results in digital humanities, mostly achieved through projects in which our institutions and civil sector organisations participate. As the national representative of the Republic of Serbia in this consortium, I can say that every country has its own unique roadmap, as they say now, that is, that there is not just one model for all countries. The development path depends most on people who are involved in the implementation of this structure at the national level. The Government of the Republic of Serbia has officially supported the membership in the consortium, which means we are even more responsible to bring it closer to the research community and encourage cooperation in the field of digital humanities and art.

At the start of the year, you were a guest at the Faculty of Philology within the Knjiženstvo project, presenting the Europeana project. Can you connect what we do in Knjiženstvo to the European project of digitising historical and cultural materials?

Knjiženstvo is a digital humanities project and I am certain that it could be enriched and improved even further through Dariah. Europeana is an ecosystem, that is, not just a portal that

offers access to digital cultural heritage (over 50 million digital objects from more than 3,500 libraries, archives, museums and galleries), but also a huge community of people from the sector of culture, IT, education, research and a virtual space for learning, exchange of ideas and promotion of digital cultural heritage. Members of the *Književstvo* project could join the Europeana research community, and also contribute by writing for the Europeana blog, thus contributing to the promotion of the history of women's writing and activity in Serbia. And had we met before, you could have helped in the creation of the great Europeana exhibition in 2019, on the topic of women pioneers in art, science and society, https://www.europeana.eu/en/exhibitions/pioneers. Our Jelena Dimitrijević would have fit in quite nicely with Marie Curie, Dora Gabe, Madame de Staël. The synergy between *Književstvo* and the NLS, i.e. its digitisation department, to be more exact, is natural and desirable. I would like to mention here the digitisation of the journal *Ženski pokret* (*Women's Movement*), in partnership with the Institute for Literature and Art, which is searchable in its full text on the national portal of searchable periodicals, pretraziva.srb, and it also exists in the Digital NLS and on the Europeana portal. The journal *Housewife* is also completely digitised, and we will continue in that direction.

With the support of the European Union Delegation to the Republic of Serbia, the NLS has established the software infrastructure for the aggregation of metadata, which is a direct channel for the inclusion of digital collections from Serbia into Europeana. The only thing preventing us from including more digital content from Serbia in this European portal is limited personnel potentials in the department of digitisation.

How do you perceive the impact of the pandemic on the development of the digital sector in humanities and culture?

The pandemic accelerated what had already started before, and that is digital transformation and the application of artificial intelligence in all areas, even in humanities and culture. I am grateful to be included in European initiatives, which recognise the pandemic as a chance for development and positive action. I don't know just how many times I've heard Churchill's famous quote in webinars during the pandemic: *Never let a good crisis go to waste!* In June, it was my great satisfaction to participate in a three-week workshop on the impact of the pandemic on digital transformation. The workshop was organised by Europeana, and led by top experts specialised in the area of digital transformation. We had a dozen set topics such as the new perspective of the digital, overcoming the digital gap, the space for innovation and

experimenting, and we added some new ones, such as the work-from-home culture, re-examining in-person meetings, the relation of the cultural sector towards the Black Lives Matter movement. This re-examination of our current situation is the first step towards concrete change, which is something that our country lacks. I believe that our culture has not opened a proper debate on its own future during the pandemic. And if there is a constant at this time, then that's change, which, again, requires willingness and adaptability. And that is where the humanities will fare better than culture, because the research community is more flexible than the community of experts in culture.

You graduated from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering (ETF), which had long been considered a "male faculty." How do you perceive this belief – from the perspective of the time in which you studied and from your perspective today as an IT expert?

I've never once regretted enrolling at the Faculty and successfully completing it, because it offered me width and taught me how to think. Engineering education, unlike others, enables you to connect theory and practice and create algorithms for the practical solution of problems. I like to believe that I have mastered that, at least partially. And I also have not regretted doing my endlessly interesting job, where I still find challenges, to this day. In my family, the ETF is somewhat of a tradition, at least considering the generations that have graduated from it. I will reveal to you that, aside from tradition, I had a strong feminist motive to choose that faculty in particular, and it's not as if I hadn't thought about enrolling at the Faculty of Philology and studying the French language. Namely, I wanted to be financially independent, and that was in the nineties, when my faculty was one of the rare faculties that could guarantee that. During my studies, the ETF had already stopped being "a male faculty," there were almost as many female students as male ones, and I believe that many of us graduated, as well. I remember a misogynistic quip told to me by the then Assistant Professor, Zoran Radaković: "What's the difference between a woman engineer and a bearcat? There's no difference – it's neither a bear, nor a cat…" That did not insult me. On the contrary, I found it funny, and I often say that myself, and I believe this was the intention of the Assistant Professor. I did my first real engineering job briefly, because life guided me first to the sphere of education, and then culture. Perhaps this does not give me the right to offer my view of women engineers, but I know many of my colleagues do the engineering job as well as men and I think the difference is diminishing with each passing day. What is possible is that women with engineering degrees decide to compromise in some other branch more easily, which

doesn't make them any less of an engineer. And in the end, I do not consider myself and IT expert, I prefer saying I'm a digital librarian, or, to be more correct, a female digital librarian.

Translated by Radojka Jevtić