

Techniques of Publishing

Draft translation of a talk given at the seminar Informace mezi komoditou a komunitou [The Information Between Commodity and Community] held at Tranzitdisplay in Prague, Czech Republic, on May 6, 2014

My contribution has three parts. I will begin by sketching the current environment of publishing in general, move on to some of the specificities of publishing in the humanities and art, and end with a brief introduction to the Monoskop initiative I was asked to include in my talk.

I would like to thank Miloš Vojtěchovský, Matěj Strnad and CAS/FAMU for the invitation, and Tranzitdisplay for hosting this seminar. It offers itself as an opportunity for reflection for which there is a decent distance from a previous presentation of Monoskop in Prague eight years ago when I took part in a new media education workshop prepared by Miloš and Denisa Kera. Many things changed since then, not only in new media, but in the humanities in general, and I will try to articulate some of these changes from today's perspective and primarily from the perspective of publishing.

I. The Environment of Publishing

One change, perhaps the most serious, and which indeed relates to the humanities publishing as well, is that from a subject that was just a year ago treated as a paranoia of a bunch of so called technological enthusiasts, is today a fact with which the global public is well acquainted: we are all being surveilled. Virtually every utterance on the internet, or rather made by means of the equipment connected to it through standard protocols, is recorded, in encrypted or unencrypted form, on servers of information agencies, besides copies of a striking share of these data on servers of private companies. We are only at the beginning of civil mobilization towards reversal of the situation and the future is open, yet nothing suggests so far that there is any real alternative other than “to demand the impossible.” There are at least two certainties today: surveillance is a feature of every communication technology controlled by third parties, from post, telegraphy, telephony to internet; and at the same time it is also a feature of the ruling power in all its variants humankind has come to know. In this regard, democracy can be also understood as the involvement of its participants in deciding on the scale and use of information collected in this way.

I mention this because it suggests that also all publishing initiatives, from libraries, through archives, publishing houses to schools have their online activities, back-

ends, shared documents and email communication recorded by public institutions—which intelligence agencies are, or at least ought to be.

In regard to publishing houses it is notable that books and other publications today are printed from digital files, and are delivered to print over email, thus it is not surprising to claim that a significant amount of electronically prepared publications is stored on servers in the public service. This means that besides being required to send a number of printed copies to their national libraries, in fact, publishers send their electronic versions to information agencies as well. Obviously, agencies couldn't care less about them, but it doesn't change anything on the likely fact that, whatever it means, the world's largest electronic repository of publications today are the server farms of the NSA.

Information agencies archive publications without approval, perhaps without awareness, and indeed despite disapproval of their authors and publishers, as an "incidental" effect of their surveillance techniques. This situation is obviously radically different from a totalitarianism we got to know. Even though secret agencies in the Eastern Bloc were blackmailing people to produce miserable literature as their agents, samizdat publications could at least theoretically escape their attention.

This is not the only difference. While captured samizdats were read by agents of flesh and blood, publications collected through the internet surveillance are "read" by software agents. Both of them scan texts for "signals", ie. terms and phrases whose occurrences trigger interpretative mechanisms that control operative components of their organizations.

Today, publishing is similarly political and from the point of view of power a potentially subversive activity like it was in the communist Czechoslovakia. The difference is its scale, reach and technique.

One of the messages of the recent "revelations" is that while it is recommended to encrypt private communication, the internet is for its users also a medium of direct contact with power. SEO, or search engine optimization, is now as relevant technique for websites as for books and other publications since all of them are read by similar algorithms, and authors can read this situation as a political dimension of their work, as a challenge to transform and model these algorithms by texts.

II. Techniques of research in the humanities literature

Compiling the bibliography

Through the circuitry we got to the audience, readers. Today, they also include software and algorithms such as those used for “reading” by information agencies and corporations, and others facilitating reading for the so called ordinary reader, the reader searching information online, but also the “expert” reader, searching primarily in library systems.

Libraries, as we said, are different from information agencies in that they are funded by the public not to hide publications from it but to provide access to them. A telling paradox of the age is that on the one hand information agencies are storing almost all contemporary book production in its electronic version, while generally they absolutely don't care about them since the “signal” information lies elsewhere, and on the other in order to provide electronic access, paid or direct, libraries have to costly scan also publications that were prepared for print electronically.

A more remarkable difference is, of course, that libraries select and catalogize publications.

Their methods of selection are determined in the first place by their public institutional function of the protector and projector of patriotic values, and it is reflected in their preference of domestic literature, ie. literature written in official state languages. Methods of catalogization, on the other hand, are characterized by sorting by bibliographic records, particularly by categories of disciplines ordered in the tree structure of knowledge. This results in libraries shaping the research, including academic research, towards a discursivity that is national and disciplinary, or focused on the oeuvre of particular author.

Digitizing catalogue records and allowing readers to search library indexes by their structural items, ie. the author, publisher, place and year of publication, words in title, and disciplines, does not at all revert this tendency, but rather extends it to the web as well.

I do not intend to underestimate the value and benefits of library work, nor the importance of discipline-centered writing or of the recognition of the oeuvre of the author. But consider an author working on an article who in the early phase of his research needs to prepare a bibliography on the activity of Fluxus in central Europe or on the use of documentary film in education. Such research cuts through national boundaries and/or branches of disciplines and he is left to travel not only to locate artefacts, protagonists and experts in the field but also to find literature, which in turn makes even the mere process of compiling bibliography relatively demanding and costly activity.

In this sense, the digitization of publications and archival material, providing their free online access and enabling fulltext search, in other words “open access”, catalyzes research across political-geographical and disciplinary configurations. Because while the index of the printed book contains only selected terms and for the purposes of searching the index across several books the researcher has to have them all at hand, the software-enabled search in digitized texts (with a good OCR) works with the index of every single term in all of them.

This kind of research also obviously benefits from online translation tools, multilingual case bibliographies online, as well as second hand bookstores and small specialized libraries that provide a corrective role to public ones, and whose “open access” potential has been explored to the very small extent until now, but which I won’t discuss here further for the lack of time.

Writing

The disciplinarity and patriotism are “embedded” in texts themselves, while I repeat that I don’t say this in a pejorative way.

Bibliographic records in bodies of texts, notes, attributions of sources and appended references can be read as formatted addresses of other texts, making apparent a kind of intertextual structure, well known in hypertext documents. However, for the reader these references are still “virtual”. When following a reference she is led back to a library, and if interested in more references, to more libraries. Instead, authors assume certain general erudition of their readers, while following references to their very sources is perceived as an exception from the standard self-limitation to reading only the body of the text. Techniques of writing with virtual bibliography thus affirm national-disciplinary discourses and form readers and authors proficient in the field of references set by collections of local libraries and so called standard literature of fields they became familiar with during their studies.

When in this regime of writing someone in the Czech Republic wants to refer to the work of Gilbert Simondon or Alexander Bogdanov, to give an example, the effect of his work will be minimal, since there was practically nothing from these authors translated into Czech. His closely reading colleague is left to try ordering books through a library and wait for 3-4 weeks, or to order them from an online store, travel to find them or search for them online. This applies, in the case of these authors, for readers in the vast majority of countries worldwide. And we can tell with certainty that this is not only the case of Simondon and Bogdanov but of the vast majority of authors. Libraries as nationally and pyramidally situated institutions face real challenges in regard to the needs of free research.

This is surely merely one aspect of techniques of writing.

Reading

Reading texts with “live” references and bibliographies using electronic devices is today possible not only to imagine but to realise as well. This way of reading allows following references to other texts, visual material, other related texts of an author, but also working with occurrences of words in the text, etc., bringing reading closer to textual analysis and other interesting levels. Due to the time limits I am going to sketch only one example.

Linear reading is specific by reading from the beginning of the text to its end, as well as ‘tree-like’ reading through the content structure of the document, and through occurrences of indexed words. Still, techniques of close reading extend its other aspect – ‘moving’ through bibliographic references in the document to particular pages or passages in another. They make the virtual reference plastic – texts are separated one from another merely by a click or a tap.

We are well familiar with a similar movement through the content on the web – surfing, browsing, and clicking through. This leads us to an interesting parallel: standards of structuring, composing, etc., of texts in the humanities has been evolving for centuries, what is incomparably more to decades of the web. From this stems also one of the historical challenges the humanities are facing today: how to attune to the existence of the web and most importantly to epistemological consequences of its irreversible social penetration. To upload a PDF online is only a taste of changes in how we gain and make knowledge and how we know.

This applies both ways – what is at stake is not only making production of the humanities “available” online, it is not only about open access, but also about the ways of how the humanities realise the electronic and technical reality of their own production, in regard to the research, writing, reading, and publishing.

Publishing

The analogy between information agencies and national libraries also points to the fact that large portion of publications, particularly those created in software, is *electronic*. However the exceptions are significant. They include works made, typeset, illustrated and copied manually, such as manuscripts written on paper or other media, by hand or using a typewriter or other mechanic means, and other pre-digital techniques such as lithography, offset, etc., or various forms of writing such as clay tablets, rolls, codices, in other words the history of print and publishing in its striking variety, all of which provide authors and publishers with heterogenous means of expression. Although this “segment” is today generally perceived as artists’ books interesting primarily for collectors, the current process of massive digitization has triggered the revival, comebacks, transformations and

novel approaches to publishing. And it is these publications whose nature is closer to the label 'book' rather than the automated electro-chemical version of the offset lithography of digital files on acid-free paper.

Despite that it is remarkable to observe a view spreading among publishers that books created in software are books with attributes we have known for ages. On top of that there is a tendency to handle files such as PDFs, EPUBs, MOBIs and others as if they are printed books, even subject to the rules of limited edition, a consequence of what can be found in the rise of *so called* electronic libraries that "borrow" PDF files and while someone reads one, other users are left to wait in the line.

Whilst, from today's point of view of the humanities research, mass-printed books are in the first place archives of the cultural content preserved in this way for the time we run out of electricity or have the internet 'switched off' in some other way.

III. Monoskop

Finally, I am getting to Monoskop and to begin with I am going to try to formulate its brief definition, in three versions.

From the point of view of the humanities, Monoskop is a research, or questioning, whose object's nature renders no answer as definite, since the object includes art and culture in their widest sense, from folk music, through visual poetry to experimental film, and namely their history as well as theory and techniques. The research is framed by the means of recording itself, what makes it a practise whose record is an expression with aesthetic qualities, what in turn means that the process of the research is subject to creative decisions whose outcomes are perceived esthetically as well.

In the language of cultural management Monoskop is an independent research project whose aim is subject to change according to its continual findings; which has no legal body and thus as organisation it does not apply for funding; its participants have no set roles; and notably, it operates with no deadlines. It has a reach to the global public about which, respecting the privacy of internet users, there are no statistics other than general statistics on its social networks channels and a figure of numbers of people and bots who registered on its website and subscribed to its newsletter.

At the same time, technically said, Monoskop is primarily an internet website and in this regard it is no different from any other communication media whose function is to complicate interpersonal communication, at least due to the fact that it is a medium with its own specific language, materiality, duration and access.

Contemporary media

Monoskop has began ten years ago in the milieu of a group of people running a cultural space where they had organised events, workshops, discussion, a festival, etc. Their expertise, if to call that way the trace left after years spent in the higher education, varied well, and it spanned from fine art, architecture, philosophy, through art history and literary theory, to library studies, cognitive science and information technology. Each of us was obviously interested in these and other fields other than his and her own, but the praxis in naming the substance whose centripetal effects brought us into collaboration were the terms *new media*, *media culture* and *media art*.

Notably, it was not contemporary art, because a constituent part of the praxis was also non-visual expression, information media, etc., so the research began with the essentially naive question ‘of what are we contemporary?’. There had been not much written about media culture and art as such, a fact I perceived as drawback but also as challenge.

The reflection, discussion and critique need to be grounded in reality, in a wider context of the field, thus the research has began in-field. From the beginning, the website of Monoskop served to record the environment, including people, groups, organizations, events we had been in touch with and who/which were more or less explicitly affiliated with media culture. The result of this is primarily a social geography of live media culture and art, structured on the wiki into cities, with a focus on the two recent decades.

Cities and agents

The first aim was to compile an overview of agents of this geography in their wide variety, from eg. small independent and short-lived initiatives to established museums. The focus on the 1990s and 2000s is of course problematic. One of its qualities is a parallel to the history of the World Wide Web which goes back precisely to the early 1990s and which is on the one hand the primary recording medium of the Monoskop research and on the other a relevant self-archiving and-stemming from its properties–presentation medium, in other words a platform on which agents are not only meeting together but potentially influence one another as well.

<http://monoskop.org/Prague>

The records are of diverse length and quality, while the priorities for what they consist of can be generally summed up in several points in the following order:

1. Inclusion of a person, organisation or event in the context of the structure. So in case of a festival or conference held in Prague the most important is to mention it in the events section on the page on Prague.
2. Links to their web presence from inside their wiki pages, while it usually implies their (self-)presentation.

http://monoskop.org/The_Media_Are_With_Us

3. Basic information, including a name or title in an original language, dates of birth, foundation, realization, relations to other agents, ideally through links inside the wiki. These are presented in narrative and in English.
4. Literature or bibliography in as many languages as possible, with links to versions of texts online if there are any.
5. Biographical and other information relevant for the object of the research, while the preference is for those appearing online for the first time.
6. Audiovisual material, works, especially those that cannot be found on linked websites.

Even though pages are structured in the quasi same way, input fields are not structured, so when you create a wiki account and decide to edit or add an entry, the wiki editor offers you merely one input box for the continuous text. As is the case on other wiki websites. Better way to describe their format is thus *articles*.

There are many related questions about representation, research methodology, openness and participation, formalization, etc., but I am not going to discuss them due to the time constraint.

The first research layer thus consists of live and active agents, relations among them and with them.

Countries

Another layer is related to a question about what does the field of media culture and art stem from; what and upon what does it consciously, but also not fully consciously, build, comment, relate, negate; in other words of what it may be perceived a post, meta, anti, retro, quasi and neo legacy.

An approach of national histories of art of the 20th century proved itself to be relevant here. These entries are structured in the same way like cities: people, groups, events, literature, at the same time building upon historical art forms and periods as they are reflected in a range of literature.

http://monoskop.org/Czech_Republic

The overviews are organised purposely without any attempts for making relations to the present more explicit, in order to leave open a wide range of interpretations and connotations and to encourage them at the same time.

The focus on art of the 20th century originally related to, while the researched countries were mostly of central and eastern Europe, with foundations of modern national states, formations preserving this field in archives, museums, collections but also publications, etc. Obviously I am not saying that contemporary media culture is necessarily archived on the web while art of the 20th century lies in collections “offline”, it applies vice versa as well.

In this way there began to appear new articles about filmmakers, fine artists, theorists and other partakers in artistic life of the previous century.

Since then the focus has considerably expanded to more than a century of art and new media on the whole continent. Still it portrays merely another layer of the research, the one which is yet a collection of fragmentary data, without much context. Soon we also hit the limit of what is about this field online. The next question was how to work in the internet environment with printed sources.

Log

<http://monoskop.org/log>

When I was installing this blog five years ago I treated it as a side project, an offshoot, which by the fact of being online may not be only an archive of selected source literature for the Monoskop research but also a resource for others, mainly students in the humanities. A few months later I found Aaaarg, then oriented mainly on critical theory and philosophy; there was also Gigapedia with publications without thematic orientation; and several other community library portals on password. These were the first sources where I was finding relevant literature in electronic version, later on there were others too, I began to scan books and catalogues myself and to receive a large number of scans by email and soon came to realise that every new entry is an event of its own not only for myself. According to the response, the website has a wide usership across all the continents.

At this point it is proper to mention the copyright. When deciding about whether to include this or that publication, there are at least two moments always present. One brings me back to my local library at the outskirts of Bratislava in the early 1990s and asks that if I would have found this book there and then, could it change my life? Because books that did I was given only later and elsewhere; and here I think of people sitting behind computers in Belarus, China or Kongo. And even

if not, the latter is a wonder on whether this text has a potential to open up some serious questions about disciplinarity or national discursivity in the humanities, while here I am reminded by a recent study which claims that more than half of academic publications are not read by more than three people: their author, reviewer and editor. What does not imply that it is necessary to promote them to more people but rather to think of reasons why is it so. It seems that the consequences of the combination of high selectivity with open access resonate also with publishers and authors from whom the complaints are rather scarce and even if sometimes I don't understand reasons of those received, I respect them.

Media technology

Throughout the years I came to learn, from the ontological perspective, two main findings about media and technology.

For a long time I had a tendency to treat technologies as objects, things, while now it seems much more productive to see them as processes, techniques. As indeed nor the biologist does speak about the dear as biology. In this sense technology is the science of techniques, including cultural techniques which span from reading, writing and counting to painting, programming and publishing.

Media in the humanities are a compound of two long unrelated histories. One of them treats media as a means of communication, signals sent from point A to the point B, lacking the context and meaning. Another speaks about media as artistic means of expression, such as the painting, sculpture, poetry, theatre, music or film. The term "media art" is emblematic for this amalgam while the historical awareness of these two threads sheds new light on it.

Media technology in art and the humanities continues to be the primary object of research of Monoskop.

I attempted to comment on political, esthetic and technical aspects of publishing. Let me finish by saying that Monoskop is an initiative open to people and future and you are more than welcome to take part in it.

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Written May 1-7, 2014, in Bergen and Prague. Translated by the author on May 10-13, 2014. This version generated June 10, 2014.