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Sofiya Zahova is Researcher at the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute, University of Iceland, Brynjolfsgata 1, 107, Reykjavík, Iceland, and Research Fellow at the School of History, University of St Andrews, St Katherine's Lodge, 14 The Scores, St Andrews, FIFE, KY16 9BA. E-mail: zahova@hi.is; sdz@st-andrews.ac.uk

Romani literature and its digital forms¹

SOFIYA ZAHOVA

Since the late 1990s and particularly after 2000, Romani literature has been characterised in part by the influence of international and global developments within the Romani movement as well as the growth of digital technologies and the internet. Romani publications are going digital in different formats, including the digitisation of public domain materials, e-books, audiobooks, internet publishing and social media publishing. This article discusses how digital technologies have been incorporated in Romani literature production and proposes a typology of the digital forms of Romani literature. It also provides an analysis of the issues and challenges that are observed in Romani digital publishing, some of which are specifically related to this type of publishing, while others apply to Romani literature in general.

Key words: Romani literature, Roma authors, digitisation, globalisation, online publishing, e-books, audiobooks, digital literature

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Introduction

Since the late 1990s and particularly after 2000, trends can be identified in Romani literature that are influenced by the expansion of the international Romani movement and a rise in the discourse around the “Roma issue” among international organisations (Klimova-Alexander 2005; Sigona and Trehan 2009). These developments coincide with post-millennial changes on the global level related to the so-called digital revolution (Boone and Higgins 2003; Prain 1997). The use of ICT (Information Communications Technology) in everyday life and the widespread access to the internet have opened up many opportunities for digital literature, and Romani literature – the literature created by Roma and/or for Romani reading audiences – is no exception.

Starting with a short contextualisation from a historical view of Romani literature and the impact of the digital revolution on publishing opportunities in general, this article offers a typology of the digital forms in which authors, publishers or other stakeholders make Romani literature available. I propose and argue for the following typology of digital formats in which Romani literature is available: first, electronic books (which may be divided into subcategories depending on the format of publication, the software and media used); second, digital publishing of literary texts online that can either double as a print edition or constitute only a digital publication; and third, audio and video recordings of literary works. Based on this typology and an overview of the formats illustrated by concrete cases, I discuss the main observable trends in Romani digital publishing up until 2020. My primary interest is the historical development of Romani literature and the digital forms it takes as well as the difference digital media makes in terms of the accessibility, presentation and preservation of a literary text.

The use of ICT among Romani communities has previously been discussed in relation to language usage (Leggio and Matras 2017; Leggio 2020), identity, appropriation and representation (Akkaya 2015; Szczepanik 2015), and migrations (Clavé-Mercier 2015; Hajska 2019). The current article is a comprehensive attempt to classify digital Romani literature based on an investigation and analysis of existing materials as of 2020. The suggested typology aims to encompass all digital forms of Romani literature, while the cases used to illustrate each type of published digital Romani literature are not exhaustive but are discussed as examples. My intention in this article is to describe the types of digital literature and to briefly examine the layout and the use of multimedia elements (images, videos and audio files). However, the presentation of a comprehensive picture of all instances of Romani digital literature forms falls outside the scope of this article, and this type of presentation is not likely to be beneficial given the dynamic pace of development in the field.

Issues relating to access, readership and the choice of languages/dialects in published material are not explored in this study. The analysis, however, puts forward issues and challenges that are observed in Romani digital publishing, some of which are related specifically to digital publishing, while others apply to Romani literature in general.

Romani literature development and the rise of digital publishing

Trends in Romani literature are intertwined with the developments of the historical periods in which they take place. To be able to contextualise the digital forms the literature takes, an overview of the history of Romani literature is needed, particularly regarding its phase of internationalisation and globalisation (Zahova 2014: 59–62). This phase coincided with and was influenced by the so-called digital revolution that impacted all fields of social life, including the literary sphere (Murray 2015).

In earlier works, I have discussed a four-stage periodisation of Romani literature (Zahova 2016: 82–3) and of Romani language literature (Zahova 2020: 540–1). The first period started with the emergence of texts written in Romani, primarily comprised of religious translations and folklore, but also several instances of poems created or translated by Roma in the context of the nineteenth century Romantic nationalism movements in respective regions, at the second half of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century (Orsós 2015; Marinov, Roman and Zahova, forthcoming), followed by the interwar period in which the major occurrence was the state-wide initiative in the USSR to promote publications in Romani (Rusakov and Kalinin 2006; Shapoval 2020). The second period refers to the second half of the twentieth century with the emergence of works by Romani authors in many European countries. Throughout this period, the development of Romani literature occurred primarily within the borders of the national states and was largely dependent on policies towards the Roma in the respective states. A third period commenced in the 1980s and was characterised by an emphasis on the issue of Roma children’s education and Romani culture by European institutions. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the period after 1989 has been associated with a general rise in the discourse around the “Roma issue” among international organisations, donors’ programmes and EU institutions (Sigona and Trehan 2009). The Romani movement, with its major stakeholder at that time, the International Romani Union, has also played an important role in increasing contact between Roma activists on the international level (Klimova-Alexander 2005). And in the fourth period, starting at the end of the 1990s and continuing through today, we see the internationalisation and globalisation of the Romani literature scene and developments that go far beyond the borders of any particular country or region (Zahova 2014: 59-63). Prior to this period, Roma authors were mainly published and known within the borders of the state they lived in. Since the end of the 1990s, common features of internationalisation have emerged, facilitated by globalisation and the growth of the internet. ICT technologies and

intensified mobility have also facilitated this transformation. During this period, the Romani movement has also strongly influenced the production of Romani literature and literary works, which represents a part of the politics of identity of many Romani activists (Toninato 2014: 150–60; Zahova 2017: 376–7).

In the 1990s, due to the general rise in Romani activism and the support of initiatives to promote Romani culture, there was a great increase in the production of Romani literature. Many international events within the international Romani movement provided opportunities for contact between Romani activists who, as a part of their activism nationally and internationally, have often become writers within all genres of literature as well as publishers and distributors of Romani literature, particularly within the area of a common geographical, cultural or linguistic space (such as the territories of the former Yugoslavia, Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia). Common or similar Romani identity narratives, centred around the idea of a Romani collective representation through textual and visual descriptions, have emerged (Bakker and Daval-Markussen 2013; Zahova 2017). Romani writers have also engaged in activities to establish networks and present Romani literature as a common phenomenon at cultural and political forums (for example, poetry readings were organised as part of International Romani Union assemblies). The end of the 1990s brought true international developments including international Romani literature festivals, international Romani literature competitions, the establishment of Romani writers' organisations such as the Romani PEN Centre in Berlin (in 1996) and the International Romani Writers Association (2002-2008), and anthologies presenting Romani authors across the world (Zahova 2014: 63–4).

Despite the significant growth of Romani literature and its dynamic developments nationally and internationally, there have still been many challenges regarding production, distribution and access to the literary works. These have historically been related to the fact that publishing Romani literature has not been a commercially viable endeavour. In addition, if a

literary work is written in Romani, it is addressed to a reading audience that primarily has oral competence in the language or that is geographically spread thus going beyond the national publishing sector's targets. Among the persistent problems are: all books produced are non-commercial titles and depend on subsidies or are funded by the authors who self-publish them; the dissemination of these types of works often does not go through the publishing chain but is usually undertaken by the authors or organisations publishing the titles, at national or international events, or during meetings with other activists or experts; the limited unavailability of Romani literature titles in the book market and lack of distribution even within a national publishing market; finally, uncertainty regarding the interest and size of the Romani reading audiences beyond the "emblematic" and symbolic value of the works (Matras 1999: 498).

It was precisely during the period of internationalisation of Romani literature that the internet changed many spheres of social life, including the possibilities for the publication and dissemination of digital content as well as access to it. Digitalisation and globalisation created conditions for new ways of producing, promoting and distributing literature. Digital publishing not only opened up new possibilities for inexpensive production, it also facilitated practically unlimited distribution of content conditioned only on access to devices/internet and certain software. It also gave a new and dynamic life to the publication of literature (Boone and Higgins 2003: 133), creating an international distribution network for self-published books at a minimal cost compared to print publishing. All of these digital developments seem to offer good solutions for most of the challenges faced by Romani literature. Digitisation of earlier printed materials or digital publishing, for instance, would offer a solution for the self-published authors who address an audience of a particular interest/profile/language globally for considerably lower costs than for self-publishing and distribution of a book in traditional print form. Global access to the internet creates an audience that is by default not limited by geographic location.

And finally, digital publishing is in a way a “convergence culture” in the sense described by Henry Jenkins (2006): it facilitates an interactive process where audiences may participate in the publishing process, which presumably would be more attractive because it engages the audience.

Historically, the first appearance of the application of digital technologies in publishing was related to the digitisation of older materials that had previously been published using traditional print media. The oldest digital library was created under Project Gutenberg that was started in the 1970s and later incorporated into the Universal Digital Library (Ulib), uniting library institutions in the USA, Canada, China and India and the Alexandrina library in Egypt (Mani 2017: 224). Thus far, no Romani literature is represented within this library. A similar European-led initiative was the European Digital Library project, the internet portal of The European Library (TEL) initiative set up in 2001 by eight European libraries that gradually united over 50 national library members with the aim to facilitate electronic access to the national collections of the participating libraries with the financial support of the EU (Mani 2017: 218, 223). As part of this network, the National Library of Serbia started an initiative for the digitisation of Romani publications and materials in the public domain or copyrighted material with the permission of authors and publishers (Injac 2009: 7).

At the same time, digital technologies have been applied in the process of producing new pieces in digital-only format. Within the business domain of the book publishing sector, these technologies open the door to a variety of possibilities including print-on-demand, electronic book publishing, self-publishing, internet-based book sales (Boone and Higgins 2003; Haugland 2006) and publishing on blogs and platforms (Murray 2015). Digital publishing, which is considered particularly important for the revitalisation of minority languages, non-commercial publishing and publishing for educational purposes (Eisenlohr

2004), seemed to offer a great opportunity for Romani literature which, compared to previous periods, has started to grow progressively in all genres since the 1990s.

The remainder of this article will discuss the three main types described above – electronic books, digital publishing of literature texts and audio (and video) recordings of literature – with further information offered to exemplify each type. Lynne Anderson-Inman and Mark A. Horney (2007) apply several criteria to define electronic books. These include electronic texts presented visually to the reader and software used to display and organise the text in the format of a book (e.g. pages, design, page turning option, etc.). The main difference between electronic books and the other type of digital publishing is that these publications are designed and published as an e-version of an old or newly printed book which can often be downloaded. A permanent internet connection is not necessary to read/access the books once downloaded to a computer, though certain software might be required, such as Adobe PDF, Microsoft Reader, Open eBook or Kindle.

Digital literature refers to the publishing of literature pieces on websites, blogs and social media which is not organised in the form of a book edition (although some of the texts may have been published in books) but is organised as a hypertext and is available online (Boone and Higgins 2003). It is generally intended to be read online, it is not downloadable, and a permanent internet connection is required. Intermediality is a term introduced by Roberto Simanowski to describe a main feature of digital literature, i.e. one that builds further on traditional media by including texts, pictures and music (Simanowski 2002: 18).

Finally, the number of types and variety of digital recordings of literature pieces is growing. These include more than just audiobooks, which usually mirror a print book and are intended to support the reader in various ways (Larson 2015). There are also shorter audio and video pieces of authors or fans reading literature pieces with the intention of popularising and promoting Romani literature. Note that in this category, I consider only records of literature

pieces on CD or online that have produced and published within the different literature genres. Thus, I exclude various forms of recordings based on the dramatisation of literature (radio drama, theatre recording, animation videos) as well as recordings of story-telling or folklore produced on CDs, unless they have also been produced in written form.

The following three sections provide examples of each of the types of digital formats of Romani literature. These three types are often employed concurrently by producers and distributors of Romani literature, and this will be further discussed in the analysis.

Electronic books

Within libraries, the widespread use of digital technology was first applied in the digitisation of old books and manuscripts that are in the public domain and thus not copyrighted. The digitisation pattern for Romani literature repeats this model, although its corpus in the public domain is neither sizeable nor is there a library that digitises only Romani literary heritage. The only collection modelled according to this digitisation policy is the *Zingarica* collection at the National Library of Finland website (<https://fennougrica.kansalliskirjasto.fi/handle/10024/85841>). The materials digitised in *Zingarica* belong to the collections of several national libraries, mainly Finland and Russia along with Sweden, the Estonian Literary Museum, the National Archives of Sweden, Swedish National Heritage Board and the Finnish Heritage Agency, and the number of items in the collection amount to 224 books and 24 manuscripts. The majority of the collections consist of digitised and downloadable PDF files of Soviet-era publications in the Romani language (from 1928 to 1938). The Soviet Romani literature has been described by Viktor Shapoval as part of the “Soviet Romani Cultural Renaissance” (2020: 351), which has had an impressive and quantifiable outcome, amounting to nearly 300 book titles and 2 journals (Marushiakova and Popov 2017: 52) from the period between 1928 to 1938. This Romani publishing project

remains without comparison in terms of new literary language production and book publishing of original and translated literature by the Romani activists of the time (Zahova 2020: 542). Most of the published materials are currently available in several of the National Library of Russia's collections.

A similar initiative was undertaken by the National Library of Serbia as part of the European Library project. The idea behind the project was to form a bibliography of Romani literature titles available at all TEL members and digitise publications and materials (Injac 2009: 5–6). The Serbian National Library, in cooperation with the established Romani activist, researcher and collector of Romani publications, Dragoljub Acković, started digitising such materials in 2006 along with Roma-related and Romani language publications from earlier periods. Despite the impressive number of materials digitised (over 100 individual items), management changes in the institution in 2011 led to the failure of this endeavour, so the digital materials have never been made accessible online and only an electronic version of a bibliography is currently available on the National Library of Serbia website.

These institutions – the national libraries of Finland and Russia and partners, the Serbian National Library and TEL – were aware of the importance of Romani literary heritage and its preservation when setting priorities for the digitisation of this material. Similar to other projects, they also adopted a systematic approach and included research as a component. These projects were able to be implemented thanks to the considerable amount of older printed materials available, especially in the case of the collection of published Romani language materials from the former Soviet Union.

There are also cases of digitisation of Romani literary materials as part of creating digital libraries by scanning old publications and manuscripts within libraries' initiatives that are not specifically related to Romani material and do not create a Romani collection. Such is the case of scanning the Romani language literature materials produced in the second half of the

nineteenth century by Roma in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, who can be considered the first Romani language writers of original and translated literature (Orsós 2015). Ferenc Nagyidai Sztojka original works and letters from 1886 and later periods were made available at the Hungarian Electronic Library (<http://mek.niif.hu/>) and József Boldizsár's translations of Sándor Petőfi's poems in Hungarian language literary periodicals published in Transylvania were digitised and made accessible as part of the Digital Library collection at the Lucian Blaga Central University Library in Cluj-Napoca (<http://documente.bcuccluj.ro/>).

Apart from these large-scale, essentially top-down approaches, more grass-roots, less systematic initiatives for the digitisation of traditionally printed literature and educational materials and the upload of this material to the internet have also been undertaken by individuals, with or without the copyright to do so. This form of digitisation does not follow the standard approach and is usually published on various file storage websites or in files accompanying social network posts. The books are quite difficult to find, and access to a wider audience that is not in contact with the individual digitising the material is therefore limited.

The second main type of electronic books are those that are intended for publication in electronic format, usually mirroring a print book edition. The most common format in which Romani literature works have been published electronically and available for free download is Adobe PDF. The other format that has been used is the IDPF (International Digital Publishing Forum), which is currently used for Kindle editions. Books published in PDF format are usually the result of a project and are not intended for sale. These books are published in an electronic format to ensure widespread distribution and access to the publication. For example, the Next Page Foundation, which has supported some 40 Romani language book publications through a grant-giving scheme between 2002-2007, has allowed publishers to host a small e-library with PDFs of supported editions on its website. As a result, seven of the books were published and available online until 2019 (currently not accessible online, but screenshot of the title page can

be checked here: <https://perma.cc/TM7F-4LNC>). Likewise, other organisations with blogs and websites published their literature in PDF format on their websites. A German foundation, as part of its Holocaust Memorial activities, published the memoir by Zilli Schmidt (2020) as a print book and an e-book available in Kindle and PDF formats on its website. The e-books available in PDF format, however, often lack media attention and sustainability (in cases where websites are not maintained after the project funding ends), and access to these publications is rather limited. There are Romani journals that are published also in PDF format and contain literature materials.

A new trend in non-commercial e-book production is the publication of editions on internet platforms for mainstream online publishing and access to art works. This pattern may prove more sustainable in terms of the period the books remain available. In addition, it also creates the potential to reach a larger reading audience as the literature is found on customer-oriented platforms that promote their own content and products. Such examples are the PDF editions produced by organisations having a permanent website or blog. *Romano kher* (“Romani house” in Romani), the Romanian National Roma Cultural Centre set up in 2015 and funded by the Romanian government, is currently the most active publisher and distributor of Romani books in the country. The organisation has provided internet access to most of the books and other editions it publishes through the mainstream internet publishing website ikultura.ro. Although academia.edu has been designed as a social networking website for academics, it also hosted various editions uploaded by the organisation’s authors or by activists (for instance, the profile of the Romanian linguist Gheorghe Sarău).

Despite the fact that digital publishing has been considered a good solution for non-commercial publishing in terms of funding, distribution and access, there are still very few examples of electronic books by Romani authors offered in Kindle or other e-book editions. As English is the prevailing language for Kindle book publishing, it also is the language of the

works by Romani authors available in this format. Some of the few examples are *American Gypsy: A memoir* by Oksana Marafioti, several books offered only as an e-book edition by the Slovenian Sinti author Rinaldo Di Ricchardi-Reichard, *The Stopping Places* by Damian le Bas, *Memories of a Gypsy* by Viktor Vishnevsky, the English edition of *Color of Smoke* by Menyhert Lakatos and *Gypsy Movements* by Jud Nirenberg. The French language memoir by Raymond Guréme, *Interdit aux nomads*, is also available as a Kindle edition. The fact that Romani publishing is often done in the form of self-publishing or non-commercial publishing by small publishers or non-governmental organisations has also influenced the (un)availability of Romani literature in Kindle format.

Digital publishing: literature pieces on websites and social media

Digital literature can potentially take advantage of the full range of options offered by the digital realm. Unlike e-books, which contain non-remediated content, the publication of digital literature is not designed to resemble a traditional book (Sargeant 2015: 458–9). Its main feature is intermediality (Simanowski 2002: 18), since, along with the literary text, it utilises multimedia elements – images, videos and audio files. Hyperlinking, options to post and repost digital content, and often the option to post comments, are also features that differentiate digital literature from other forms of literature in a digital format.

The most sizeable and widely available form of digital Romani literature consists of short literature pieces published on websites and online platforms devoted to Romani culture and/or literature. These websites usually present works by authors from a common geographic, cultural and historical space, for example authors from the former Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. In some ways, the digital publishing scene mirrors the area in which other Romani cultural activities take place, including the printing and distribution of publications by authors from the area. This can be explained by the shared history of the Roma

(living in the same political formation) and thus the maintenance of professional contacts between Romani activists, cultural producers and authors, the common Romani dialects and the majority languages in which the publications appear (Czech, Russian, Serbo-Croatian).

One example is the Russian website created and maintained by Nikolay Bessonov, which contains a poetry and prose section devoted to various topics from Gypsy history, culture, research and art criticism (<http://gypsy-life.net/>). Its “Literature” section includes selected short works by over 20 Romani authors from all republics of the former Soviet Union (Kārlis Rudevičs from Latvia, Valdemar Kalinin from Belorussia, Volodymyr Bambula from Ukraine, etc.) who have written throughout the twentieth century, including several Romani authors and activists from the 1920s-1930s (Ivan Rom-Lebedev and Nikolay Pankov). An entire poetry collection by Lera Yanysheva, first published in print (2008), is now available as a digital publication on the website. The published works are primarily available in Russian, but authors’ works originally published in Romani can be found in this section as well. All published works have appeared earlier as a part of print literature editions. The texts are accompanied by pictures – usually a picture of the author is placed on the front, while pictures of covers of the author’s books, as well as pictures of art works painted by Nikolay Bessonov or documentary photographs considered illustrative for the literature piece, are placed within the text.

Another example from the former Soviet sphere is the website of the web-based *Initiative for Romany Culture Liloro* developed by Viktor Shapoval. It contains a Library section with online publications of short literature pieces in Romani, original works by Romani authors as well as translations of classics from Russia and around the world (http://liloro.ru/romany_library.htm). The online library is arranged by the authors’ surnames and contains hyperlinks to individual author’s works in e-book format or a digitally published version on the same website. Pieces written in Romani from the interwar period in the former Soviet Union are published digitally in the original language or as translations. Contemporary

works, published after the 1990s, are presented through hyperlinks to the e-book in a PDF file or other text format. And finally, the website contains an audio library with recordings of 12 Shakespeare sonnets translated into Romani and read by the translator and webmaster himself. Thus, this website applies all three types of Romani literature digital formats: e-book publishing, digital publishing and literature in audio forms. In terms of layout and design, the digitally published literature comprises plain text. No other intermediating forms are utilised.

In terms of content, the main difference between the two websites discussed above is the language of publication of the literary pieces: primarily Russian on the website *gypsy-life.net* and Romani on *liloro.ru*. This is likely determined according to the target groups of the websites – the former presents and popularises general information about Roma, while the latter is directed at a more specialised audience that is interested in Romani culture and has knowledge of the Romani language. In this respect, it is worth noting the role of the personal agency in publishing platforms developed at the grass-roots level: Viktor Shapoval's interest in Romani language publications and translations determines the Romani language content of the material.

Kher.cz is an online platform created by the publishing house of the same name that was established in Prague in 2012 to support, publish, represent and distribute contemporary Romani literature. The aim of the platform is to introduce the diverse array of Romani literary works to Romani and non-Romani readers by making this work accessible through electronic media. Under the platform's header "Books", e-books are downloadable in various formats (several of them also have a print edition), while the "Library" header contains a rich collection of digitally produced literary pieces, most of them only published online, each accompanied by an illustrative picture. The platform builds on the Romani literature productivity that started in the former Czechoslovakia decades earlier (Sadílková 2009: 183–6). It is constantly being updated and enriched, a process mirroring one of the most vivid contemporary Romani literary scenes (see the discussion in Ryvolová 2020).

A Hungarian Romani literature blog, <https://rikk.blog.hu/>, was created in 2019 by several Roma authors to present their poetry works as well as news and critical texts related to Romani literature. The platform primarily presents works that are unpublished in print form, along with works by established Hungarian Roma authors. It is inclusive and encourages young authors to send their poetry; there is therefore a variety of topics ranging from religious verses to rap song lyrics submitted by teenagers. Pictures of authors usually accompany the digital publication.

Sarajevske svezke, an established literary journal with a decade-long history in the Yugoslav space, published a Romani poetry anthology in several forms – print, downloadable PDF and a web publication – all edited by Dragoljub Acković (<http://sveske.ba/en/content/antologija-romske-poezije-srbija>). The digital web publication is organised as a hypertext consisting of a solid base of poetic works almost entirely by Romani writers from the region that was the former Yugoslavia, building on the prolific output of poetry since the 1960s (Acković 2014: 291–333). It includes 14 poets each presented by a short biography and selected poetry works in Serbian using no other multimedia. It represents a good practice in the context of post-Yugoslav literature space where both Roma and non-Roma speak mutually comprehensible languages and dialects in the region. Romani and mainstream publications can multiply the audience of print editions by creating electronic versions to overcome the distribution hurdles that have emerged after the creation of new political borders and the migration of Romani and Yugoslav authors to countries within Western Europe and the EU.

The use of digital self-publishing is becoming more widespread. Ilona Makhotina and Kirill Kozhanov (n.d.) point out that digital literature production is a popular choice for publishing among Russian Roma authors, either on Roma-related or on mainstream platforms. These authors are publishing on the websites of the Federal Romani National and Cultural

Autonomy or the International Society for Romani Cultural Studies (<http://www.kulturom.ru/literature/>), and there are self-publishing Romani authors whose works are found in the literary websites such as www.proza.ru and www.stihi.ru (Makhotina and Kozhanov n.d.). These latter works are usually published only in digital format, and apart from texts, some authors also utilise pictures to illustrate their texts.

Individual examples of literary works that are published on websites that are not focused on the presentation of literature are numerous. Many online Romani media or non-governmental organisations occasionally publish literary works. A recently launched website, romarchive.eu, contains examples of the digital publishing of works by Romani authors, although its primary focus is the authors' own presentation.

A completely new form of digital publishing, which emerged with the expansion of social networks, is the publication of short literature texts as posts by authors or other individuals (Romani culture experts, Romani activists) where each publication can be liked and commented. This form of digital Romani literature is the most interactive, and some authors/publishers employ multimedia features, mainly photo publishing. The predominant trend, however, is the publication of a text as a Facebook post. Karoly Olah, a Hungarian Rom, is very active in publishing his poetic works in Hungarian, which sometimes include lyrics, philosophical verses or even poetry created spontaneously online to reflect the daily encounters of the author, which may be, for instance, a meeting with a friend or a family member. All literary posts by Olah are illustrated with a picture, often of the author himself or a photograph circulated on the internet, usually an image of vulnerable, poor Romani children or a female dancer who embodies the widespread mainstream image of the Gypsy woman, both exotic and marginal (Silverman 2012: 9). As the author has nearly 4500 Facebook friends, some of his posts that combine a poem and a picture are liked by over 400 people.

In addition to established authors, many Roma, who have not published works in print format before, produce their works digitally as Facebook posts. An interesting example in this respect is Mana Memaj, a Kosovo-born Romni living in the USA. Although Memaj was included in a couple of anthologies of Romani authors, she does not have a book of her own published so far. She exclusively publishes online on her Facebook page within the genres of poetry and short stories, marking the end of every post with her initials and the Copyright © symbol. Georgji Tsvetkov, a Russian Romani author of short stories, has also posted pieces on his Facebook page.

Romani literature in various digital formats has been also posted on Facebook by Romani experts, for example Iлона Makhotina, who publishes works by Romani authors and works written in Romani, including literature, through her social media profiles. She often makes these pieces available on other platforms, placing both short posts and making PDF files available for download. Social network groups devoted to the Romani language (such as *Cyganskij jazyk dlja vseh ~ Romany chib vash sareng* [Romani language for all] in VKontakte or *Romani Čhib Čhib Romani* [Romani language] in Facebook) have posts and reposts about Romani publications nearly every day, including pieces by various Romani authors.

This type of digital publishing is remarkable and has tremendous potential as well as certain shortcomings. Considering the increased ICT use in combination with increased mobility (many Eastern European Roma authors live migrates migrants) and Facebook use, there are many benefits in publishing in this way in terms of strengthening the sense of identity, knowledge about and access to Romani literature for audiences across the globe. Social media publishing offers enormous possibilities in terms of readership and distribution through the sharing of posts and other means. At the same time, however, it has certain limitations – posts are intended and used for rather short paragraphs and texts (not for longer works of literature), and long posts are believed to be ignored. In addition, social media publishing is too dynamic,

intended to reflect on daily events where only the most recent posts find their way to the top of the page. This can reduce the visibility of texts as well as opportunities for easy access and reader's choice.

Literature content in audio and video forms

Audiobooks are another example of the encounter between traditional forms of publishing and the new digital technology (Larson 2015). Audio recordings on CD have been applied in the production of Romani teaching materials, but there are not many examples of audiobooks. Thus, this type of Romani publishing could be rightfully called underdeveloped, although it could potentially suit both adult Romani speakers who read and write in another language and children who can use the audio editions as a first or supplementary format for access to written Romani language editions. Because of the non-commercial nature of Romani publishing, these books usually need subsidies to be published, and an audio production would make them even more costly. Another possible explanation might be that audio book production would require a professional (audio) book publishing enterprise, which is not the case with most of the Romani books that are produced by non-governmental organisations, small publishing houses or Roma authors themselves.

A distinction between the following types of audiobooks can be made: audiobooks that double a print edition, usually accompanying the print version on a CD or sold separately; audio editions accompanying, but not mirroring, books; uniquely audio literary production and digital recordings of short literature pieces available online. In addition, there are also video-and-audio recordings of authors and readers reciting/reading literature pieces, and these should also be considered here.

The first type of audiobook is the most common, and the number of such productions is growing. Many examples come from Sweden where the Swedish National Agency for

Education (Skolverket) funds a number of Romani language materials annually and stimulates the application of state-of-the-art publishing technologies. Digital books are considered a good option for younger children and for speakers with limited reading abilities in Romani. Therefore, books of fairy tales and children's literature have been produced along with CDs that fully double the Romani language text of the editions (Taikon-Melker and Eriksson 2010; Kaldaras Nikolizsson 2014).

There are several examples in commercial publications that contain a book and accompanying CD read by the author. In addition, there are interesting instances of bilingual publications in which a non-Romani language edition is accompanied by a Romani audio version on a CD. The US published book *The Magic of Power of Life: Spiritual and Supernatural Stories of the Lovara Gypsies*, by Victor Vishnevsky (2008) was written and published in English together with an audio CD prepared at the request of the publisher (Salo Press): the author reads six of the stories from the book in Lovari Romani against a background of music composed and performed by the author's son. Peter Ingram's *Wagtail Tale: Gypsy Life of Bygone Days* (2014) is also available with a CD containing Romani language samples and the songs of Welsh Border Gypsies by Peter Ingram, with Cathy Watkins playing the fiddle.

In other cases, audio recordings on CD were released separately. An earlier poetry collection by Gjunler Abdula (1995) was issued on a CD rom as a musical accompaniment by the Parne Gadje band (Abdula and Parne Gadje 2006) and has been re-released several times since then (also available on Spotify). The autobiography of the Holocaust survivor Zoni Weisz, originally produced in print in Dutch (Weisz 2016a), was digitally published in German the same year as an audio CD accompanied by a PDF e-book (Weisz 2016b).

Finally, there are audio-only editions of literary works that do not double or accompany a print edition. Although the well-known book series *Katitzi* by Katarina Taikon has not been published in Romani so far, a five-volume CD collection with selected parts of Taikon's semi-

autobiographical short stories, read in Romani by Hans Caldaras, has been released by Podium publishing house in Sweden (Taikon 2009). In 2001, the Hungarian Romani writer Tamas Jónás produced CD multimedia content available only online on the soundcloud.com platform (under the title *Elmondom én* [I will tell]) with recordings of his own performance of selected poems and prose combined with music and singing.

The number of short literature forms available as tales, stories and poetry produced digitally through audio recording and video/visuals is growing. Portions of Swedish children books translated into Romani and stories published by Romani authors were recorded by Radio Romano, the Romani language section of the Swedish national radio (Radio Sweden). They were broadcast on the radio and also made available for listening on Radio Sweden's internet site and Facebook page. Additionally, several recordings of Balkan authors reading their poetry or prose pieces were uploaded at the website romarchive.eu.

Other types of recordings are videos of the work of Romani authors, where the authors/fans read or recite literature. Although most living authors have a Facebook profile and are considerably active on Facebook, only a few have made and posted videos of readings, two of whom are Agim Saiti (Kosovo-born Roma living in Italy) and Jorge Nedich (from Argentina). In 2018, on the occasion of April 8, the International Romani Day, the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC) encouraged their supporters to record themselves reading a favourite piece by a Roma author. Nearly 30 videos of ERIAC associates and supporters were recorded and uploaded on the organisation's YouTube channel. The most popular pieces were the video recordings of two poetry works written by the renowned Serbian Romani author living in Germany Jovan Nikolić – “A guest from nowhere” and “The magic of sound” (European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture).

The recordings mentioned above contain only literary works, and they were created and released for the sake of literature production and popularisation on social media and online

platforms. There is also digital content in which Romani literature makes up only a portion of a larger collection of digital recordings, within which the production of digital literature is a by-product rather than a primary aim of the respective recording. These are recordings of events that have been created for archival purposes, not for literature distribution and promotion. They are neither available online nor labelled as Romani literature digital content. Such instances are recordings of book promotion events or Romani festivals at which Romani literature readings take place as part of a larger programme, such as the recordings from all the festivals of the Amico Rom competition, the oldest and most sustainable Romani literature event, which has been held in Italy since 1994. An example of the recordings from larger events during which literature pieces were read are the sessions for the reading and reciting of poems at the Congresses of the International Romani Union. Readings of the Romani poets and activists Leksa Manuš and Rajko Djurić were recorded at the Fourth World Romani Union Congress in Poland, and the audio recordings are archived at the Heinschink Collection in the Phonogrammarchiv at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. In a contemporary world dominated by social media, such events are streamed online and made available online afterwards.

Trends and challenges

In analysing the history of the digital publishing of Romani literature against the background of global tendencies, we can identify certain trends and issues. The digitisation of old materials in the public domain has started but is still underdeveloped. This is related to the fact that many national libraries are prioritising digitisation of the written heritage of the majority culture in the respective nation, while the digital heritage of minority cultures and of Romani books or periodicals in particular is not a priority. Even in cases where the ambition of a national institution exists, as in the case of the Romani digital collection as part of the TEL led by the National Library of Serbia, there can be issues with physical preservation, for example the

interwar Romani newspaper published in 1935 was not available in the National Library of Serbia in Belgrade due to the destruction of some collections during the bombings of the city during the Second World War. There are often issues with the physical preservation of printed materials, as is the case for Romani books and periodicals published in the interwar period in the former Soviet Union. These are not kept in a single location but are dispersed in different places, and not all of the publications have been preserved. The same applies for contemporary Romani literature publications, for instance from the former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, which due to the fact that they are often self-published, are hardly available in institutional collections. All of these challenges and circumstances once again reaffirm the necessity for the digitisation of these materials.

In addition, there are instances of early Romani literature pieces and recordings that have not been published and, after archival research, can be made available through the digitisation of manuscripts. For example, there are manuscripts by Svetozar Simić, one of the most active and educated Romani activists in Yugoslavia in the 1930s, preserved in the personal archive of Dragoljub Acković (2014: 357–61). Such manuscripts exist, but they are scarcely preserved in official library and archive collections, barely researched and practically unknown. The Romani periodical press in which Romani literature pieces have been traditionally published has also been overlooked, although some examples of the digitisation of such materials in the framework of research projects exist (Marushiakova and Popov 2016). A recent in-depth research project on Romani literature and media publications in the interwar period revealed that there is a sufficient number of literary pieces within a variety of genres published mainly in periodicals by Romani organisations or that exist only in manuscript form, especially in countries like Romania, Hungary and Finland (Marinov, Roman and Zahova, forthcoming). There are examples of publications from the early stages of Romani literature, from the nineteenth century to the Second World War and thus in the public domain, that have been

unexplored and/or poorly preserved. As a consequence, they have been ignored as Romani literature works suitable for digitisation and also overlooked in research on Romani literature.

Another problem arises from the fact that Romani literature developed predominantly in the second half of the twentieth century. Most of the Romani works are copyrighted, and this poses a serious problem for digitisation for those libraries that are focused – due to copyright legislation and preservation priorities – on making older materials digitally accessible. Some digitisation projects have proved successful, but the availability of the materials depends on various circumstances, among them financial resources. Even when the initiative for the digitisation of Romani literature is an institutional project rather than a single-person grass-roots endeavour (such as the TEL Romani library), the sustainability and availability of the materials is questionable.

Despite the global tendencies and universalisation of the standards of digital technologies, the type of digital publishing applied to Romani literature depends on the local circumstances of the country in which it is published. In the US and the UK, where Kindle editions are popular, there are book editions by Romani authors available in this format. In Sweden, there are many audio books available, again due to the development of such formats and the high quality of and financial support for Romani publishing in the country in general. The publication of books in PDF form on websites and platforms seems to be quite widespread in most of the Eastern and Central European countries. In the area of former Yugoslavia, there are still limited attempts to apply the new technologies in publishing despite the fact that there are a significant number of books published in the Romani literature genre. Thus, while there are many similarities in topics, trends and narratives that let us speak about Romani literature as a common, still multi-faced phenomenon, the trends in Romani literature production in digital format, as well as digitisation endeavours, remain regional and/or national.

Although Romani authors generally do not make a profit from royalties and copyrights, many are still unable to publish on the internet due to a lack of access to technical facilities, for example they are not able to format and upload their books through internet publishing. The authors may have a fear of plagiarism, or even conservatism – due to the sentiment that a proper book is one you can hold in your hands and is read only in print form. Romani publishers have not yet taken advantage of self-publishing through digital formats, which is considered an essential and effective solution for publishing minority literature.

There are no clear strategies in digital publishing nor are there promotional campaigns to reach readers. Only the team of the platform discussed above, kher.cz, and Fred Taikon (personal communication), a Swedish Romani activist, author and publisher, have clearly indicated their aim to incorporate digital publishing as a strategic goal. Despite the general lack of plans for promotion and distribution, my research on digital Romani literature shows that it has a good outreach. Many literature pieces posted by authors on the internet have over 400 views. Note that this is a number which exceeds, for example an average poetry collection print run in Eastern Europe. Video recordings are very scarce but particularly popular, probably because they are done by the authors themselves who incorporate other media into their performances. But even videos produced by fans are very successful, and the most popular of these, the reading of the German version of the poem “A guest from nowhere” by Jovan Nikolić, has accumulated 4,825 views on YouTube for the period between April 8, 2018 and August 10, 2020 (not necessarily by different viewers).

The attractiveness of video recordings shows that the incorporation of other media effects into the digital production of literature makes a difference (Gendolla and Schäfer 2007). It is discouraging that such effects have been underestimated and underused in digital forms of Romani literature, especially in online publishing, which usually benefits from this possibility. Digital publishing and digital forms of literature can combine different media and interactive

features as skeuomorph ornaments, audio and interactive illustrations (Sargeant 2015). In the realm of digitally produced Romani literature content, however, only a few features are used – simple pictures illustrating the content, photos of or by authors and musical accompaniment. Very often a digitally produced text simply resembles the static form of a printed work, and the only difference is the fact that it is published online. Posting, reposting and sharing are typically not features that accompany such texts on online platforms and blogs, and the only exceptions are Facebook literature publications where such options are part of the social media posts' features.

At the same time, Romani digital publishing faces many of the issues related to Romani publishing in general: lack of promotion and distribution strategies; limited reading audiences due to unawareness of its existence among wider circles and limited reading ability in Romani; differences in dialect or orthography of publishing; prevalence of publishing in the languages of the majorities, especially in the prose genres, which are thus inaccessible for Roma from other countries.

Conclusion

The era of digitalisation may offer great possibilities to solve certain challenges in Romani literature publishing. One of these challenges is the preservation of Romani literary heritage, as there are manuscripts and early publications already within the public domain, as well as titles by Roma authors that are in circulation but not properly distributed and deposited in libraries to reach wider audiences. At the same time, digital or more interactive forms of publishing may stimulate an interest among younger generations who read and write in Romani on the internet in forums, social media and in communication with their relatives and communities world-wide (Leggio 2020). Much like their peers, most of the young Roma today are “digital natives” (Palfrey and Gasser 2008), using and integrating contemporary technology in most aspects of

everyday life, who are also interested in sharing digital content with Roma/Gypsy representations across the world. New ways of presenting Romani literature digitally may expand the audience for Romani literature by reaching these Romani digital natives.

The development of Romani literature in terms of topics, narratives, genres and cooperation between authors can be called a common yet multi-layered phenomenon. Digital technologies have contributed to the internationalisation and globalisation of the Romani literature scene, making communication across borders easier and faster. Out of the three types of publishing presented – electronic books, digital literature and audio/video records of literature works, the most widespread is the publication of digital literature online. In this respect, Romani publishing replicates the global trend in the development of digital literature.

Digitisation of old and non-copyrighted materials has occurred, with the biggest achievement being the *Zingarica* collection of the National Library of Finland. Other efforts have been rather unsystematic, driven by projects or by individual activities and thus with limited access and questionable sustainability. Despite unlimited opportunities in terms of access to literature offered by internet publishing, the online platforms uniting Romani authors are comprised of Romani digital publications from the same cultural and geographic space. The dissolved political spaces to which Roma still feel a sense of affiliation, such as the former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, somehow continue their existence through different cultural activities, one of which is the creation of print and digital publications that present authors from these regions.

In some cases, online forms and digital publishing mirror a rather active print literature scene in general (Czech Republic, Sweden) or an active project in publishing (*Romano Kher* in Romania). In other instances, however, online publishing seems to be more active than print forms and goes beyond mirroring print editions by publishing content that is available only online (Russia and Hungary for instance). And finally, in certain cases (countries formed from

the former Yugoslavia), despite the comparatively active Romani literature scene in print, digital forms of Romani literature have not been developed so far by individual authors and publishers. In this respect, digital publishing is mainly determined by the tendencies in the region or country of its production, but also depends on personal agency.

In the mainstream publishing industry, writers who are now being published digitally have already been published in print and thus come with an established audience. In Romani literature, however, most of the established names have rarely been published digitally so far. Romani authors and producers of print literature have recently started to search for online audiences. Also, new Roma authors have published their first pieces digitally before putting their works into traditional print.

There are still many challenges in Romani digital publishing – intermediary and multimedia forms that make the digitally published texts more attractive and user-friendly are barely used. So far, there are no festivals, competitions or promotional campaigns to highlight digital writing and publishing. Nevertheless, the peak in the digital life of Romani literature is still to come, and we can expect more authors to share their texts and reach out to the online community, educate readership and engage in digital literary activities. As of 2020, I dare claim that digitally available Romani literature is already more successful than traditional print literature.

It appears that internet technologies and social media have penetrated and changed the life of many Romani communities worldwide to a significant degree. The intensity and mediums of communications are quite different compared to a decade ago: there is internet communication on various occasions related to the festive and everyday life of Roma, live streaming and recordings of church services, traditional forms of court (*kris*), various videos with statements and greetings by Roma on Facebook. Still, the Romani publishing initiatives do not seem to take full advantage of what is offered by internet technologies, digital formats

and social media. Nevertheless, the digital forms of Romani literature are growing significantly in all instances and forms and appear to be a source of pride and self-representation.

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