Transcript

Caring for the Public Library. Interview with Marcell Mars & Tomislav Medak

http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/caring-for-the-public-library/

MM:	00:53	When we started, we kind of offered what we call the definition: public library is: a universal access to knowledge for every member of society, catalog and librarian, when everyone is a librarian, library is everywhere. It's that kind of vision where insight about how easy is to make a catalog today and then when you have people who are ready to do that together with that, but then also if they're able to share it with the world, that would be the library of today, the Public Library of today. From the very beginning that was the kind of vision which we share, and then it was about how to actually how to implement it. And our library, Memory of the World, was just like our work on that and like slowly moving. And meanwhile we were always kind of able to tell these stories.
TM:	01:55	You would say that these are the stories from the repertoriums and then the librarian will sit and tell the story from its calibre, for example. And then the stories are maybe not necessarily about the librarian, as in what are the technical things, but what are the kinds of fantastic things which are coming from these collections. And that's how we try to kind of connect these technical vision, articulation, political, conceptual, and that's how it goes.
TM:	02:29	We think that a public library as a social institution, societal institution holds the promise of egalitarianism and that equal access to some fundamental resources in society is prerequisite for democratic body politic. We have done a number of exhibitions through which we have tried to make a single point or drive home that the practice of a book sharing and sharing of academic articles and digital cultural objects is a massive practice and that it has taken many forms for reasons that public libraries themselves were not able in the digital world to provide the kind of de-commodified access they were responsible for in the world of print. Given this denial by the publishers to the public libraries for evident reasons and the limitations imposed by copyright and technical protection measures, there sprang up a number of project or platforms created by a people, hackers mostly, and then communities that have

gathered around these platforms that have provided that which public libraries couldn't. So in a way, they complimented the work of public libraries.

TM: 04:30   And this is somehow a contained within the title that we have chosen for a number of these exhibitions, that was the public library. In these exhibitions we have a featured a number of existing projects. We understood them as collections and then exhibitions as a collection as a collection of collections. Marcell has already mentioned this instrument or device that we used in these exhibitions, repertorium which is the standard form for describing a collection in an archive. And we use this as a device to narrate what is specific to individual projects. We think do that which public libraries are not allowed to do, those being library genesis, science-hub, aaaaaarg, ubu, monoskop, textz.com. We have also initiated a number of public statements actually, two public statements. And then we have the two of us written a number of texts that first tried to highlight the history of public library as an institution and bring that vision as a form of a universalizing fantasy that can bring together people and mobilize them for collectove disobedience that we advocate in our work.

MM: 06:21   I would like to add that when we tell these stories many times it's kind of like, it's focus goes in different directions. So the one which is about universal access, which is about the mission, which is about the constitution of the public library is usually addressing the crisis, which are huge these days, which are political institutional, which are kind of the world and the society which was promised the minimum of the society, which was promised by the liberal democracy, which is now in huge crisis. So we picked up a public library as something which is a good reminder that these promises are not fulfilled.

MM: 07:02   In the book Controll Revolution, with the number of the information, the flood of the information, it started with the industrial revolution, there was that problem, how to deal with that. And it seems that in the librarianship, the problem of that huge amount of information was in that sense a little bit more before than the industrial. So formalizing and making the kind of information processing machines is very important part of that. And in some way we traced that together Markus Krajewski in the book Paper Machines. We try to focus on that and show how important, how important is that. And then also to show that Google having the, the catalog of everything available on Internet is why they have their power and why they kind of like be bringing that monopoly there.

MM: 08:00   And Amazon, for example, having the catalog of everything which is available if you have money, everything available, which you can buy. That catalog is the core kind of a ground of their power in the world. And then the consequences, I just go very kind of clearly with what we are trying to say with the universal access and why our society is now in so many deadlocks. Maybe for someone would just like a, seem like, oh, let's just nationalize Google and Amazon and we are done. But then it's not that easy with a information processing machine. It's not that easy. It's very hard to replace human. It's, it's very hard to reduce it and not thinking about the labor. And then in some way librarian is bringing like all of the legacy of the feminism, of the kind of hidden invisible labor and also invisible role of humans when we bring all of that together. So that's how we try. So sometimes in different occasions we would focus more on one or another. So then they're like a number of different checks. We try to revisit, visit, think, we articulate and play and try to put in into like something which is more kind of tangible in terms of project so that it's not just the kind of writing down the ideas, but also here is the project which we really enjoy and want to share.

MM: 09:38   Memory of the World is a website where there is like a, a web server which serves the different catalogs, which is also a web application which aggregates the librarians who are sharing life. so in that sense it's also kind of a relay which is also important and a big problem in today's network topology so that, that we are not able with from our local area networks to become public. So that's the kind of the problem which maybe will be resolved with IPV6 instead of IPV4. And there are many projects which are trying to do that. So we are, we are in that area. That's what Memory of the World tries to do. So also to address that a problem of that topology.

MM: 10:26   There are like a dozen of librarians at the moment I think that it's in between hundred and 150,000 books that we were surprised they were at some moment we got like a few libraries who take care of like a 40 or 50,000 books, which we never really kind of expected that to happen. We always thought that that will be 10 times less. So that, that's kind of the idea how we were developing that?

MM: 10:55   The server is in Iceland. we, together with with few others, we were trying to find a place where where we will feel a little bit safe so that other resources that the main the server will not be shut down after the first kind of, take-down notice, things like that. It's not the, the cheapest kind of a resource you can, you can run. But this is still the resources, the series still um, supported just by, by me paying the bills, which many sys

admins and programmers will do today. it's like I don't know on the yearly basis, maybe five to 700 euros, something like that. So in a sense it is possible to run quite a substantial infrastructure which is affordable for someone, for individual living in the western, whatever the rich part of the world.

MM: 12:03   "Let's share books" is a plugin which follows up and which improves the workflow which is mainly kind of set up which is done in the Calibre software, which done by Kovid Goyali l. That's the software which started mainly to solve the problem of the file formats where people would have kindle device. And then at the time, Amazon didn't let them read like different file formats because of course Amazon had the idea that they will be the only file format for the books. And then as in many other cases that software's, which will help people to actually do what they want. So that they can do wider range of devices, things like that.

MM: 12:54   But through time Calibre also became a really a really good book management, softer with very few clicks. People are able to actually make a good catalog. I with all of the metadata for their books form their messy folders. And we made a catalog, one of the major kind of parts of that vision of what, what does it mean? And then it was really just about how to make these catalogs shared to the world and shared with other librarians. So that's what the plugin basically does. So in its first kind of iteration, it was really just making a ssh tunnel, which would connect the computer, a laptop usually, with memory of the world server. And then on the memory of the world server, there will be a web server which make up a URL. So for the temporary tunneling thing people would get the URL and that URL could be shared with anyone else.

MM: 13:57   After that, we also started to aggregate that. So in a vision, they're many. And then there is like a library.memoryoftheworld where you can just see all of these. And the plugin was basically just like showing how that can be done. And it worked for awhile. But then we started to add to that kind of workflow where you just click on start and then share. We started to work more on a not anymore temporary and really insisting on the books are only available when someone is like sharing and click on start and sharing. But we started also to support the collections which are already well prepared, well thought and well maintained by some librarian. So we also made a workflow where you can upload to the server. So then there is not like a really clear distinction in between the ones which are on the server permanently, and the ones which just come and go. And Collibra is like huge ecosystem software Kovid Goyal is able to work full time on Calibre just through the donations and are like tens

or maybe even a hundred people who would contribute more to that and our plugin is just one of many. We are not really like a part of that because they're very careful about anything, which sounds like a piracy. So they like not just shadow libraries, but they also like shadow plugins for Calibre, which are not part of their I'd say official channels of communication.

TM: 15:52 First, we have created a number of scanners, some 10 maybe. And they're all around the world. First one we made in 2012 for the first public library event in Lublijana.

MM: 16:11 Actually it was a one before in Belgrade. Okay. And then the second one?

TM: 16:18 Yeah. The one at Mama is one that is used on a regular basis. We've been able to bring together a number of people, mostly from the student occupation of s school of arts and humanities in Zagreb who went on to form a number of organizations and the left and we were able to work with them to scan mostly books that relate to the Yugoslav socialist period and cover topics as different as a history of worker movement, socialism, humanities humanist Marxism, so a broad range of topics in literature that in the 90s was mostly repressed and to a degree also removed from the shelves of public libraries across Yugoslavia with the change of the political system. But we have made also a number of other collections, which are maybe more specific.

TM: 17:36 This collection is very general. It's called a catalogue of liberated books. Together with the curatorial collective, "what, how, and for whom", we have organized a sort of public intervention calling upon the public to bring into the gallery for us to scan some of the titles that were purged from Croation libraries in the 90s under the pretext of the rights of every library writes off a number volumes each year, around 1% of their holdings because of the wear and tear of individual copies or just a book's no longer being a lend by the patrons. And under this pretext, some 4 million volumes were purged from Croation libraries in early nineties. So as a form of reaction to that, we have digitized a number of these books that people were called on to bring to the gallery.

TM: 18:50 We have done a number of others. For instance Dream Library of Herman Wallace, a Black Panther who was sentenced to a life in solitary confinement. And then an American artist, Jackie Sammer asked him what would be his dream house and in the context of that, also ask him what would be his dream library. So he sent a list of a hundred titles that were instrumental to his political education and radicalizations or we

have collected a number of existing digital versions of those titles but also digitized number and created a collection that is nowadays on memory of the world.

MM: 19:39   Our kind of approach was to tell the story and that story is always politically charged. We would find a way how to do some number of books, which is always like very kind of labor intensive. It's very hard to find people who would do that voluntary, but then they are like a number of problems with that. And usually that's the copyright and intellectual property. So maybe even if they tried and were ambitious enough, then they will just see that that's not possible because someone will come into the picture and say: "no!" Then there are, especially in the world of art, people kind of liked that object because of the sound because it how it looks like you can kind of exhibited and then somehow they always the first, always the first question is like a does it flip out automatically? And we always laugh like no, no one really did that. So they are like some videos of the book scanners switch would flip the page, but these are all experimental. No one did a workflow where the flipping pages is automatic and a which the humans are replaced. So, in a way people still think that the devices are the ones which will bring us, so there is that promise of full automatization. Sometimes it's scary, but for many it's also a very kind of, it's a great idea because everything will be done by device. It's never. Books are super messy and if you think of them just like superficially, it's like, oh, texts, that should be easier than some other kind of stuff. No, it's not. What I'm trying to say is that the world of books and scanning is super messy and then many approaches to that ambitious one, like let's do everything is just most of the time too ambitious also because of the copyright. But then if you also add the technical and like free software, then you can again come, come down. And then there is another one where you sit in front of the book scanner and then you just realize that the smallest part of lhe Labor of the scanning of the books is actually done by that device. Everything else is done by people

TM: 21:57   The first labor is coding that goes into the Internet infrastructure and let's share books, a plugin. In that sense that that's underlying labor. It's not per se a part of the librarian labor as a, within this conceptual division. but as librarians that includes a aggregation of collections, editing of metadata, upload of a collections. Um, that's one segment.

MM: 22:41   Also, I think that quite few of librarians now get requests. So that was not at the beginning, but through time, like what few of fast getting requests like regularly through Facebook, through emails, through chats.

And what is kind of like interesting is that it used to be like they would say: I know that I only contact you when I need, you know, like all of these kind of like a politeness. And now it's just like a, they just send author and title or just URL from Amazon and then the book is just there. So that's kind of in some way it kind of, it's interesting part of how that how evolves. So that's also part of that to work with what they call patrons or users of the library.

New Speaker: 23:29 Second aspect of that subset of activities is also activation. It's a concept that comes from library science or library profession. And we have first heard it from people at mayday rooms who hold deposited archives, of vulnerable Archives of left movements and sub-cultural movements mostly from England or UK. Um, and activation includes a sort of pointing people to various segments, sub-collections that are thematically organized. So that's kind of more mainstream-ish, a librarian type of activities that we have. A second segment is obviously digitization which is against sub-divided into people bring books and capturing them on the book scanner. And that's the first part of this set of activities, in the second part is post-processing and then adding to the collections and uploading. This is mostly done by me for most of most of the collections that are digitize collections at a library memory of the world,

MM: 25:07   There is also cleaning up, for example, when the like books on aaaaarg and when you see that that it's like double paged and you download it, make it one page so that it's listed. There is also like a lot of when people refer to the books, usually on Facebook, that's where everyone discusses. Then it's easy than many of us feel just to reply and just like add that book for the download. So in a way it's kind of like being aware of what's going, what's going on, and then trying to be of a service with access to books.

New Speaker: 25:44 Which opens up to the issue of custodianship, which we understand as a larger sets of activities. Um, one subset is obviously all these activities of amateuer librarianship. It's also a concept we frequently use. This would be obviously more labor intense activities that we do. But under custodianship we understand sort of a broader ecosystem of sharing of books, academic articles other digital cultural objects. And there it's from writers sharing their work publisher's leaking, they're PDFs, too all the way people are just downloading and may be saving on a hard disk. So it kind of tries to capture the entire activity of what we would understand under book sharing.

MM: 26:59   Yeah. Custodians in that sense would be the ones who care about the infrastructure and who are not naively relying on that. So in a way, even the convenient kind of appearances here and then maybe you would believe that this is how it will stay. But if you were on the Internet for more than five or seven years, you know that most of the services just like get shut down because they don't bring the revenue, they disappoint or it just like bought by the bigger players who would just shut it down and they don't have whatever vision how to how to deal with that. So in that sense, the ones who are caring and then doing a little gestures which are necessary when certain crises come and then we can rely on that, it was for us, very important.

MM: 27:54   There's this solidarity and recognition and attribution to other projects. That's what we try to do with every instance of public library when it was exhibition or whatever. We just wanted to show them that there is not like a one project that there is not there like many, and that's not just many, but also through time there like there is now like the whole history. So in many ways I think that one of the most important thing things for the, for the future is to keep with this solidarity so that when a library geneses or science hub under threat and the kind of attack that we all raised, voices that we write, the letters that we, whatever, do whatever we can. And at the same time that also we support each other when there are crises. And these crises can be all kinds of crises. Sometimes it's just like burning out. It's like when you see that some hard disk in Mexico is like dying and you are losing your enthusiasm. And then I think that part of that is that there is someone to say, no, no, no, no, we can, we can support each other.

MM: 29:05   We'd started to play with the idea that we over identify with the public library and then we try to use it in a tactical way. So what we, what we realize is that there is a, there is a promise. Every institution has a promise. And when it's like a social institution, at least in its very beginning, it had a, the the premise, how it relates to the idea of society, how this institution makes society better. And in that sense that's what for us is very important part of the institution work. It's also how we tried to remind these institutions by bringing the subject. So in that sense, this is the librarian, but this is not the, just the library. This is the amateur librarian. So the amateur librarian is here maybe to help, what is the noble promise and goal of the Public Library?

MM: 30:01   So in a way that's just, that uses the subject, it uses that idea to remind the institutions what it should be. But then it seems that there is no institution which now takes care of Internet. So in a way that's what, how

we want to start that process. And then if there will be a future institution which will take care of that important resource, which can make society better, then let's start with custodian as a subject. But it's not start with a engineer or whatever is the other idea. And of course, we don't think that it's an easy task to build that kind of institution. Whatever is the imaginary,

TM: 30:44 Obviously they are not able to articulate antagonism and existing practices as we are. They provide stability, structure, procedures, methodologies, and we are trying to provide an antagonism, a technological disruption articulation from the side of the users or the side of a demand. And that also being the demand for abolition of a copyright. And then the problem is that this is still quite contained within a larger social context. And then the question is how do we politicize beyond both their professional millieu and our sort of communitarian millieu and try to move this debate into more political antagonized direction. We are trying to instill a fantasy vision that we hope can mobilize actors towards changing to a future that we want to see. And that is that potential for universal access is no longer illegitimate as it is now.