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An Overview Of The New Media Role In Original Literature Publishing In Slovakia During The *First Decade Of The New Millennium And Shortly After*

Abstract

Public publishing space for authors of original contemporary literature in Slovakia has changed and expanded significantly in the last three decades since 1989. Due to the development and use of modern technologies and the existence of digital virtual space, nowadays the authors of Slovak literature can publish their texts in many more media than before 1989, and almost without any limitations. However, the literary, aesthetic, cultural or fundamental artistic relevance of such contributions is in many cases controversial. In the context of the publication space of new media, internet portals and online literary magazines often publish without deeper critical selection and (often even minimal objective literary-critical reflection almost everything delivered to their editorial mailbox as by ambitious writers?), as well by those whose works are lacking basic literary talent and the necessary creativity. The paper maps the situation in the area of publishing original literature, especially poetry, in Slovakia at the beginning of the 21st century in the context of the use of new media and modern digital technologies.

Keywords

Slovak literature, poetry, publishing of Slovak literature, millennium, new media, digital media, modern technologies.

For many reasons it is now possible to formulate the assumption that the time of the first decade after 2000 was not an apparently extremely benevolent period for the publication of Slovak literature, and in particular poetry, in Slovakia. At that time, there were in operation several houses publishing original literature; to a certain extent, their book production was dependent on state support (Ministry of Culture) or on various donors; however, they financially supported mainly other sectors (sport), not culture, arts, and in particular literature. In the period shortly after 2000, in most publishing houses existed the same rules for the publishing of books as before 1989. During the last decade of the communist government in Czechoslovakia it was the state power that established a set of clearly defined rules and required strict adherence to them, which of course also affected literature, where any manifestation

of pluralism was expelled.¹ A large number of regulatory mechanisms were introduced, such as lists of banned works whose authors were persecuted, or the retraction of important, but non-conforming works from past public life. These measures may have subsequently caused the breakdown of publishing activities in three directions, which created official, state-accepted and controlled literature, secret, or samizdat (underground) literature and foreign exile literature published outside of Czechoslovakia.

Although several dozens of poetry collections of different quality were published in Slovakia during the period after the millennium, it is quite obvious that a more important and perhaps more worrisome factor is the question whether someone is reading poetry today, who is its target audience, and whether poetry books can be published today without the poetry publisher knowing beforehand that he is overworking. In this context, we are using the notion that the expansion and use of new media, especially the Internet, in connection with the publication of poetry in Slovakia at the beginning of the 21st century did not start en masse, and actually the sphere of poetry was still perceived as “traditional” in terms of the preferred print outputs compared to their digital equivalents. On the other hand, perhaps it is worth noting that poetry (of course, with rare exceptions) has never been a “profitable business” for the author, and for the publisher even less so. In connection with the situation outlined above in Slovakia, shortly after the first decade after the

millennium we noticed among Slovak publishers (at that time mostly works in print form) the declared dissatisfaction of some of them, as they appeared in the media with an open protest against alleged practices existing in the book market². In a joint statement, some Slovak publishers drew attention to “the threat of monopolization of the market by one group of publishers and the financial group.”³ Publisher Albert Marenčin Jr. in his interview for the SME newspaper in connection with the publishing of books in Slovakia and their profitability in the first decade after 2000 stated: “The Slovak market is small, most of publishers live from bestsellers. Due to them [bestsellers], they can function and at the same time publish “feeding them” books, so-called dairy cows. They keep us until a bestseller comes in a year or two. But while at the German and English markets the book circulation numbers are in hundreds of thousands to millions, in our country they are only in tens of thousands.”⁴ When asked how many books a publisher in Slovakia has to sell currently in order to have the issue profitable, Marenka says: “If two thousand pieces are sold, we are at zero, if three thousand or more, we are in profit. Occasionally, however, we also publish a lossy but a high quality book, and consider it

to be a relatively cheap advertising. We can say that with such books we have made a reputation in 20 years, while with bestsellers we have reached a position on the market.”⁵ The abovementioned statements and dissatisfaction of Slovak publishers were solely related to printed books. No statement contains the use of new modern technologies, or the publication of works in digital form (e-books or even audio books, etc.). From the aforementioned information, it is also clear that a book of poetry or a collection of poems is already condemned in advance to be de facto unprofitable, as far as this kind of literature has been published in Slovakia (and still mostly in printed form) mostly with a circulation of several hundred pieces. Despite the unfavorable economic situation, the ferocious market demands and perhaps alleged public apathy towards art, literature and poetry, poems continue to be written in Slovakia in the 21st century, author readings and festivals are being organized, poems are published in magazines and on the Internet, and poetry collections are being printed. Again, we assert that poetry is not, and probably will never be, an object of mass interest, popularity, or, let say, the source of masses’ ecstasy.

Shortly after 1989, authors in the field of literary production in Slovakia had limited possibilities for publishing and presenting their works. Their creations were published exclusively in print media. The interest of print literary periodicals in this group of authors was obviously limited and insufficient. Until 2000, the situation regarding publishing text authors within the scope of contemporary

² ĎURIŠIN, M. et al.: Spoločné vyhlásenie 24 vydavateľov Slovenska. [online]. [2020-01-15]. Available at: <<http://www.omediach.com/tlacove-spravy/item/6138-spoloc>>.

³ ĎURIŠIN, M. et al.: Spoločné vyhlásenie 24 vydavateľov Slovenska. [online]. [2020-01-15]. Available at: <<http://www.omediach.com/tlacove-spravy/item/6138-spoloc>>.

⁴ SUDOR, K.: Vydavateľ kníh Marenčin: Len z kvality nevyžijem, nie som spasiteľ. (Interview with A. Marenčin) [online]. [2020-01-16]. Available at: <<http://kultura.sme.sk/c/6920043/vydavatel-knih-marenčin-len-z-kvality-nevyžijem-nie-som-spasiteľ.html#ixzz2rDqGcob8>>.

¹ ALAN, J., BITRICH, T.: *Alternatívni kultura: príbeh české spoločnosti 1945 – 1989*. Praha: Lidové noviny, 2001, p. 10 – 11.

literature did not change significantly compared to publishing in 1989 in printed periodicals. However, the natural outcome and, finally, the solution to the mentioned insufficiency is the emergence and activity of numerous digital media, which are programmatically focused on the publication of texts of artistic literature. Such digital media are active in the Internet environment and provide authors with the opportunity for immediate confrontation with the reader, or literary critics, as well as to become a medium between readers and connoisseurs, the professional and lay public in the context of publishing an artistic text and its subsequent reflection. Thus, the new media tend to be rather an alternative to print media than the substitute for them. Paradoxically, there are voices increasingly alerting on the dangers lurking amongst people in virtual spaces, the so-called virtual reality. American journalist and writer Steve Lohr quite openly admits his concerns about safety while surfing the Internet network, which he calls “terrarium”: Life in the media and communications terrarium, it seems, is becoming increasingly perilous. The predictions of demise are piling up. Phone calls, e-mail, blogs and Facebook, according to digerati pundits recently, are speeding toward the grave. Last week, Wired magazine proclaimed, “The Web Is Dead.”⁶

Even with regard to the date of publication of this article (2010), it is evident that no mass exodus of information technology and its claimed extinction is likely, rather the contrary. Lohr not

only remains in predicting the disappearance of “virtual reality”, but even offers “guaranteed” messages from the extinction of paper as a medium, a mediator of information, communication, art, and no less education, citing Nicholas Negroponte: “Photographic film is supplanted, but people take more pictures than ever. CDs no longer dominate, as music is more and more distributed online. ‘Books, magazines and newspapers are next,’ predicts Nicholas Negroponte, founder of the M.I.T. Media Lab. ‘Text is not going away, nor is reading. Paper is going away.’”⁷

However, publishing activity by means of digital media (in Slovakia) is often exposed to determining factors such as ambivalent credibility of the project from the position of the professional and lay public, and insufficient promotion or inconsistent periodicity of particular updates. We can therefore reasonably state that at present, the public publishing space for authors in the area of Slovak literature has changed and expanded significantly in the last decade. Due to the development and use of modern technologies and the existence of digital virtual space, young authors can publish their texts in a number of media almost without any limitations or determinations. The prevalingly questionable authenticity and unconvincing value of some texts with ambition to be artistic on various internet portals is also reflected by the Slovak poet and novelist Jaroslav Klus: “*The possibilities of presenting literary and artistic works are now better thanks to the Internet. There are countless literary websites where*

everyone can post whatever he wants. But quality of the texts gets worse. Since there is almost no selection on the Internet, we are overwhelmed with ballast and stupid literary attempts. Moreover, the ‘authors’ are extremely sensitive to criticism of any kind. Once in my life I wrote what I think about the text, and I won’t do it anymore. Everybody boxed me that I don’t understand anything. I didn’t say I understood something, I just wrote my opinion, and I was still tactful.”⁸

We believe that in the area of publishing literary works by young and emerging authors in the context of contemporary Slovak literature with an accent on the use of new media, two events can be considered as crucial or turning points. The first of the fundamental turning points in the possibility of publishing the literary works of writers was undoubtedly the year 1989, when change in the political situation in Slovakia finally offered the long-awaited chance and possibility of free creativity. That was the time of the supposed or expected changes that presupposed as well a response on behalf of literature, in particular its determining contribution to the historical, cultural and social realities in Slovakia.

The second decisive breakthrough in expanding the publication space for Slovak literary authors was undoubtedly the use of the Internet as a medium that provides space for the visual presentation of the works of the above-mentioned authors. As Michal Rehúš points out on the Membrana.sk web publication, “with the advent of the Internet in the mid-1990s, several artistic activities have moved into that virtual space.”⁹

6 LOHR, S.: *Web je mŕtvy, nech žije net!* [online]. [2020-01-18]. Available at: <http://komentare.sme.sk/c/5533049/web-je-mrtvy-nech-zije-internet.html>.

7 LOHR, S.: *Web je mŕtvy, nech žije net!* [online]. [2020-01-18]. Available at: <http://komentare.sme.sk/c/5533049/web-je-mrtvy-nech-zije-internet.html>.

8 KLUS, J.: Všetko tu už bolo, ale ja ešte nie.... In *Dotyky*, 2014, Vol. XXVI., No. 4, p. 2.

9 REHÚŠ, M.: *Základné aspekty literárnej*

The Internet made it possible to disseminate and communicate various content without any restrictions, Rehúš continues, and “*the only condition has become adequate technical equipment.*”¹⁰ According to Rehúš, it removed “*the problem of the demanding process of the quality of artwork assessment that preceded its publication, and the complications of obtaining funds for its public presentation have disappeared, so that the question of the inaccessibility of art to the broader social strata has fallen into the background. From now on, anyone who had access to the Internet could become a publishing writer and exhibiting photographer or painter, as well as a recipient of various artistic artifacts.*”¹¹

It is possible to agree with the given assertion to a large extent since the publishing of literary production on the Internet is not systematically regulated. The systematic character in this case represents mainly a goal-directed process of literary text quality evaluation from an aesthetic, artistic, philosophical, and not to a lesser degree, ethical point of view. It might be stated that it is feasible to publish nearly anything on the Internet in the framework of various literary portals and online magazines in Slovakia. From our point of view, in the editorial boards of most online literary magazines and portals, there are lacking personalities who, from the position of a professional (established) editor, would be

tvorby na internete. [online]. [2020-01-17]. Available at: <http://membrana.sk/art/michal-rehus/731-zakladne-aspekty-literarnej-tvorby-na-internete>.

10 REHÚŠ, M.: *Základné aspekty literárnej tvorby na internete.* [online]. [2020-01-17]. Available at: <http://membrana.sk/art/michal-rehus/731-zakladne-aspekty-literarnej-tvorby-na-internete>.

11 REHÚŠ, M.: *Základné aspekty literárnej tvorby na internete.* [online]. [2020-01-17]. Available at: <http://membrana.sk/art/michal-rehus/731-zakladne-aspekty-literarnej-tvorby-na-internete>.

able to sort out the given literary production and to direct the authors both in their further production and personal development. Then the increasing offer of literary ambivalent texts is becoming a negative phenomenon. The texts might overshadow, and in a way relativize, the quality of other texts that were published within the same platform and they obviously feature more valuable literary and artistic potential.

At present, several online magazines and portals are active for the publishing needs of young and novice writers in Slovakia (we will discuss this topic in more detail), which no longer act as substitute elements for print media but represent a fully-fledged alternative, often more attractive than printed literary media, especially in terms of statistically incomparably larger number of readers and visitors to such sites. In this respect, however, it should be noted that not all statistically recorded visits to such websites automatically reflect the real number of readers. The choice of media chosen by the recipient, the reader, or the author himself depends on many factors. However, reality is reasserting the fact that the relevance of the contributions of authors of original literature in Slovakia on internet portals in terms of literary criticism or literary studies is mostly ambivalent, and so the printed forms of literary media remain not only attractive, but perhaps in a way more prestigious.

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Marián Grupač is the author of several books of poetry and he has published collections of short stories, novels, scholarly books and papers dealing mainly with literature and the media. He worked as a literary researcher and editor in several Slovak literary periodicals, but also as a journalist. Currently he works as an assistant professor at the Department of Media and Cultural Heritage at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Žilina (UNIZA). He is a member of the Scientific Council of the Faculty of Humanities UNIZA and also chairman of the Academic Senate of Faculty of Humanities UNIZA. Grupač is also a member of editorial boards of scientific journals: *Contemporary Philosophy* (ISSN 1841-5261, e-ISSN 2471-089X), an international peer-reviewed academic journal) and *Linguistic and Philosophical Investigations* (Addleton Academic Publishers, New York, USA. ISSN 1841-2394, e-ISSN 2471-0881, OCLC number: 505834669), an international peer-reviewed academic journal. Both journals are indexed periodicals of the international scientific database Scopus.