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Leveraging East European E-resources to Foster Access for Libraries

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Leveraging East European E-resources to Foster Access for Libraries

From Wess

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Introduction

While the materiality and aesthetics that surround early book-making remain essential, whereby a letterpress makes a resounding impact on a paper to leave the traces of authorial intent, in the age of digital printing, it is crucial to deconstruct a "book." This deconstruction involves defining "book" from a minimalist perspective as if it were either an analog or a virtual object made solely to convey information. Thus, the book remains a container for a discrete set of data. The analog nature of a book means that there are costs associated with limiting access to information for its users since typically one copy means one user can access it at a time.

We can observe the above factors at play in the way electronic books, or e-books, have been created, disseminated, and licensed or purchased by global institutions. In this introductory article, I will interrogate how making e-books "open access" (that is, freely available online for download, copying, distribution, and the like, without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than accessing the Internet, itself) has operated within Eastern Europe—including the mounting budgetary constraints shaping their availability and the ramifications for the collection of physical copies of the same titles. One must note that just because a particular book is available along the open access (OA) model, it does not mean that access to a specific e-book will be available in perpetuity. That said, I argue that OA e-books can potentially be used to create a type of distinguished collection that is not locked in some library cabinets but set free to be consumed to produce knowledge.

Scope and Limitations

There are several things to keep in mind. First, I am not promoting regional OA platforms for e-books. I am only showing different options that librarians can leverage to enhance access to information. Secondly, I must say that while analog books, especially in the context of their artistic value and rarity, often are considered a part of the library's distinguished collections, e-books are sometimes frowned upon as simply utilitarian and practical (i.e., not of the caliber of the print version). Thirdly, the e-books that I am talking about are the ones that are likely to be used by both our graduate and undergraduate students in the fields of Humanities and Social Sciences.

I have also refrained from an ideological discussion about the geographies of what is Central or Eastern Europe due to the lack of space for this article. The article does not take an ideological position on which format is better or worse. It merely describes several lesser-known access options in the present-day North American context. The other limitation is the fact that

I was unable to gather credible usage data from the OA sources that I discuss in this article. The lack of usage data for OA e-books does not mean that it does not exist, but I found it to be out of scope given space limitations.

Since the dissolution of the former Socialist bloc decades ago, the geopolitical realities of Europe have changed. Despite the overall goals of economic stabilization and political integration of former satellite nations, one can see regional differences and the rise of authoritarian governance in several countries in the European Union. Key decisions in academic circles, like shuttering the Central European University in Hungary or closing the European University of St. Petersburg, suggest that scholarly publishing will likely change throughout the region.[1] As a result, it is possible that content produced by specialists will develop along the Open Access route.

Most intellectual works today are born-digital, and Open Access publishing remains a robust approach to scholarly communication.[2] It is also a strategy that is supported by the EU's OA policies, wherein publications resulting from research supported by EU grants must be made publicly available, per the Horizon 2020 report.[3] The report notes that 60.8% of peer-reviewed publications from Horizon 2020 countries are Open Access. The OA mandate has meant that many East European nations now participate in making publicly funded research freely available. To this end, I want to focus briefly on several OA e-book platforms in Central and Eastern Europe.

Poland

In Poland, OA e-books are available on multiple platforms. I will briefly discuss two of these platforms.

The Otwórz Książkę (http://otworzksiazke.pl) , or Open Books Project, is hosted by the Interdyscyplinarnym Centrum Modelowania Matematycznego i Komputerowego Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, or Interdisciplinary Center for Mathematical and Computational Modeling of the University of Warsaw (http://icm.edu.pl/en/) (ICM UW). At the time of writing this article, 543 e-books were available on the site. According to the site, the purpose of this project is to support the Open Science Platform as stipulated by the Polish Academy of Sciences.

Image 1: The landing page of Otwórz Książkę
(http://otworzksiazke.pl/)

Below the search box, there are subject terms that allow the user to narrow a search for specific subjects. Many of the books that are hosted on this platform, however, are not necessarily the latest imprints.
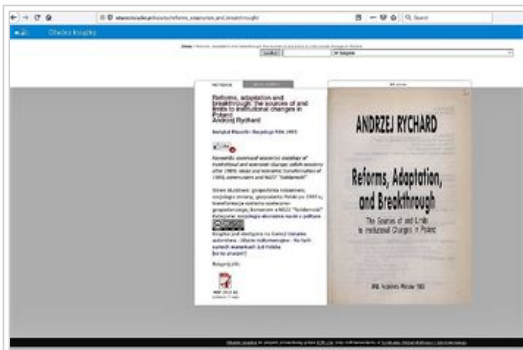
Image 2: A 1993 edition of "Reforms, Adaptation, and Breakthrough," by Andrzej Rychard on Otwórz Książkę

The other equally interesting database is that of the Biblioteka otwartej nauki Biblioteka otwartej nauki (https://bon.edu.pl/) (BON) or the Open Science Library. The library provides access to humanities e-books.
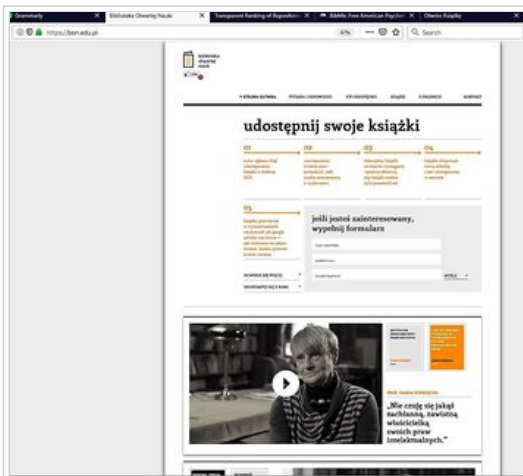

Image 3: The landing page of Biblioteka otwartej nauki (https://bon.edu.pl/) (BON)

Users can also access interviews of the authors as well as their deposited works. The site guides Polish authors who intend to store their works in the repository through issues related to copyright, scanning the work, and making the work publicly available, as stipulated by local Polish regulations. These openly available works are then indexed in Google Scholar or Scirus. I note that some text on the BON (https://bon.edu.pl/) site is not up to date to reflect the fact that SCIRUS was retired as an indexing service in 2014.

Image 4: The page of Biblioteka otwartej nauki (BON) that shows SCIRUS indexing active.

The Polish Academy of Sciences periodically releases comprehensive reports on the state of Polish Open Access (https://otwartanauka.pl/in-english/reports) .

Ukraine

One of the widely recognized repositories for Open Access books in Ukraine is the Elektronna biblioteka "Kul'tura Ukraïni" (http://elib.nlu.org.ua/) . This digital repository of Ukraine's National Library (http://nlu.org.ua/) provides access to major Ukrainian creative literary works. On the landing page, under the section, "Pro proekt," or "About the project," one sees that the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine approved the project in 2011.[4] And, as the page states, "The concept of the new integrated resource - the electronic library "Culture of Ukraine" - is aimed at substantiating the main directions of development and the principles of organization of the electronic library "Culture of Ukraine" (from now on - the EB)."[5]

The site has a partial interface in Ukrainian, Russian and English. The catalog in its entirety is in Ukrainian. At the time of writing this article, there were 7,313 individual digitized titles in the database.

Image 5: The landing page of the "Elektronna biblioteka "Kul'tura Ukraïni"

The site has authors arranged by alphabetical order.

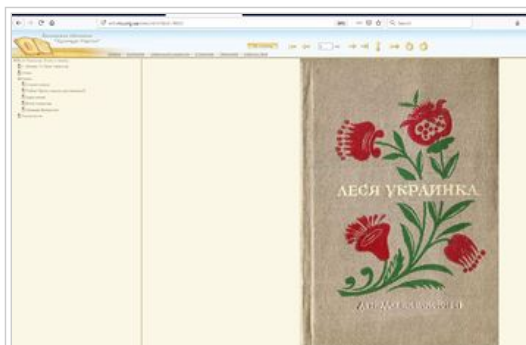
Image 6: The alphabetical catalog of the Kul'tura Ukraïni.

Image 7: The e-version of Lesya Ukrainka's poems (Ukraïnka, L. (1941). Stikhi i poėmy. Moskva: Izd-vo detskoĭ lit-ry.)

The "Culture of Ukraine" electronic library is one example of an online resource that allows us to leverage existing resources from Ukraine, without really engaging in collection development related to physical books on the humanities. There are similar resources at several institutions of higher education, as well as at the National Libraries in all of the East European countries, like Bulgaria (A repository of the Sofia University, Bulgaria (https://research.uni-sofia.bg/)), Croatia (The digital repository of the Institute for Ethnology and Folklore (https://repozitorij.dief.eu/)), and Latvia (The National Digital Library of Latvia (http://gramatas.lndb.lv)).

Russian Federation

The Russian Federation, by its sheer size and the diversity of open-access resources, deserves a separate article, but I will try to highlight some platforms that provide access to their OA e-books. Before describing these platforms, I would like to highlight several specificities related to the Russian e-books market. In Russia, ЛитРес (LitRes) (https://www.litres.ru/) is the major aggregator of e-books. The aggregator (http://www.publishyourownebooks.com/ebook-aggregators-comparison-chart/) is an entity or an agent that works with ebook authors without an intermediary, and interfaces between them and ebook retailers. LitRes also has an electronic library platform that also provides access to the free editions of individual books. The registered user can download out or "check out" these books for fourteen days.

Image 8: Free e-books by LitRes

LitRes coordinates its activities with AZAPI (http://azapi.ru/) - The Association for the defense for intellectual property rights of authors.

Since 2018, there have been several developments when it comes to policies that govern the future of OA in the Russian Federation that merit a brief discussion.

The digital platform Noosfera (Цифровая платформа "Ноосфера")
The digital platform "Noosfera" was a winning proposal at a competition by the Presidential Grants for Civil Society Development Foundation (https://президентскиегранты.рф/public/application/item?id=be55947f-5014-4860-8ced-0ab4ffbce7f4) . The reason for this competition was to allow different private companies to come up with proposals that would aim to create an integrated digital platform that would support the Russian Federation's Open Science direction. To this end, the following goals were envisioned:
1. Providing open access to Russian historical heritage, knowledge and cultural values.
2. Creating a system of continuous replenishment of arrays of open works, which is technologically capable of fulfilling the role of public memory in the future.
3. Development of new tools for the interaction of Internet users with the cultural heritage of the country.[6]

And, the following tasks were delegated to competing companies or institutions: [7]
1. Technological development of the platform to provide more convenience for both users and organizations.
2. Involvement of organizations that specialize in collecting, storing and organizing access to knowledge and cultural values.
3. The popularization of arrays of information, knowledge and cultural values hosted on the platform, and the education of its users.
4. Involving the public, all interested individuals and organizations in the work of opening access to knowledge and cultural values.
5. Creation of accompanying information materials and instructions to facilitate participation in the project for all users.

The first winner of the competition was announced on 28 September 2018. Цифровая платформа "Ноосфера" (The Digital Platform-"Noosfera")."[8] The journalist, Ivan Zasurskii, in his lecture at the Moskovskij Gosudarstvennyj Universitet's Department of Journalism elaborated that Noosfera is an extension of Vernadsky's theory of Geo and Biospheres.[9]
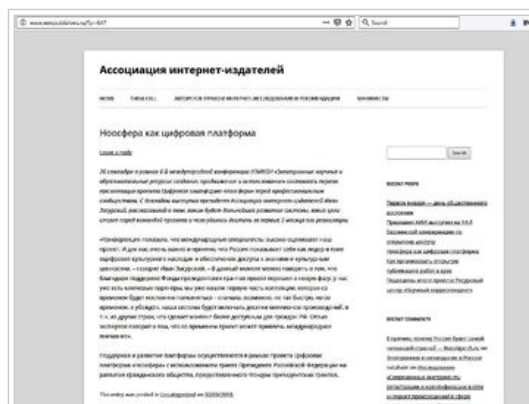

Image 9: A screenshot from the Association of the Web Publishers of Russia announcing Noosfera as a digital platform.

In tandem, a conference on OA called Libkom-2018: Open sciences and open data (Либком-2018 (http://www.gpntb.ru/libcom2018/docl.php)) was inaugurated in November 2018. During this conference, a special seminar "Open Access and Open Data" was held, at which experts presented and discussed current initiatives in the field of open science and Russian projects aimed at its development.[10] The papers of the conference are here (http://www.gpntb.ru/libcom2018/docl.php) .

Open-Science.Ru (http://open-science.ru/)
Another platform that is of interest is that of the Open-Science.Ru or Otkrytaia Nauka.
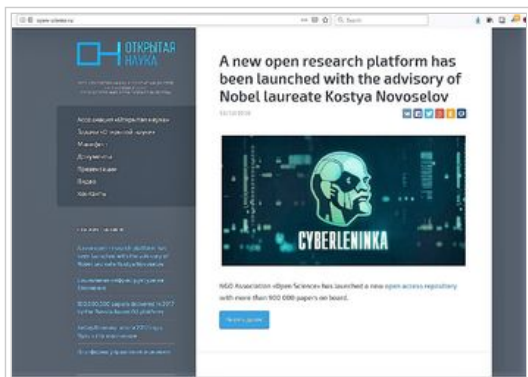
Image 10: The landing page for Otkrytaĭa Nauka (Open Science) platform.

The site states that it is a non-governmental, non-profit organization. The goal of this association is as follows, "to assist its members in carrying out activities aimed at developing and promoting the concept of "Open Science", which is to increase the transparency of more open data on the activities of the scientific community, in particular, public quality control of scientific publications, the development of the modern institute of scientific qualification and improvement of Russian-speaking science citation."[11] In image 11, one sees that there were 100 million papers that were "delivered" in 2017 by the Russia-based OA platform.

Image 11: Open Access Platform in Russia.

While we see significant governmental and non-governmental initiatives that will foster future Open Access and Open Data work in contemporary Russia, it is also important to note and describe some of the existing resources. One of these sources is the National Electronic Library of Russia.

The National Digital Library of Russia (https://нэб.рф/)

Image 12: The landing page of the National Electronic Library of Russia.

This web-site allows its visitors to search for works in a faceted manner, i.e., by the name of the author, by titles, or by subject parameters.
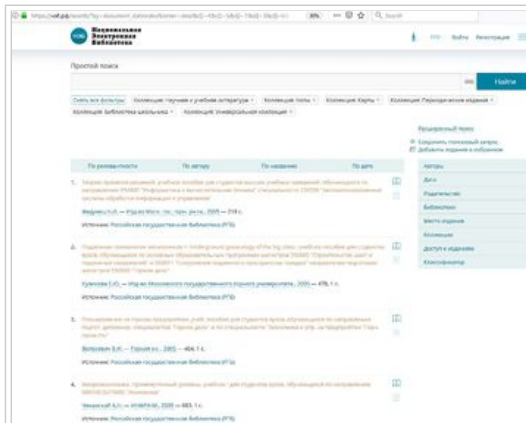

Image 13: The catalog of the National Electronic Library of Russia with a faceted search feature.

The Russian State Library (http://elibrary.rsl.ru/?lang=en) (RSL)
The RSL's digital library provides a brief rationale behind its creation, along with a historical overview of the development of libraries in Russia. The library's site began as a depository of nine hundred thousand dissertations.[12] The landing page provides access to both the Russian and English versions.

Image 14: The digital library component of the Russian State Library.

The image below is that of the Aleph-powered catalog. The Aleph-powered catalog allows its users to search for items that are open access.

Image 15: The Library Catalog of the Russian
State Library

Electronic access to open access materials allows the user to read the item online. However, in order to download any item from this website, the user must have an active account with the Russian State Library. In many cases, it is not possible to access the full-text of current dissertations. Instead, one gets access to the full text of a synopsis, or *Auto-Referat*, as shown in the image below.
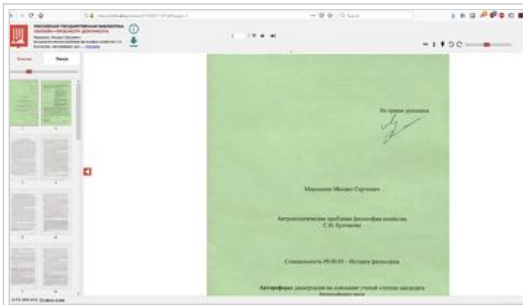

Image 16: The synopsis of the dissertation by
Miroshkin M.S.- "Antropologicheskie
problemy filosofii khoziaistva S.N.
Bulgakova.

Russian National Library (http://www.nlr.ru)
The Russian National Library is located in St. Petersburg, and its online catalog provides access to several important digital collections. There are several catalogs accessible online for the collections of the library, as shown in the image below.

Image 17: The online catalogs of the Russian
National Library.

Besides these catalogs, the library also uses ExLibris's Primo (http://primo.nlr.ru/primo-explore/collectionDiscovery?vid=07NLR_VU1) as its second generation search engine. The catalog interface can be switched from Russian on-demand to English, Spanish, French or German. The library allows the registered user to create a personal account.
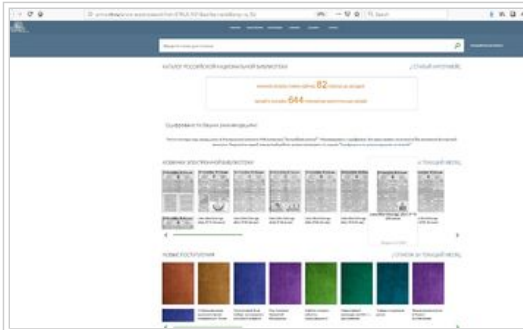

Image 18: The Primo (ExLibris) catalog of the Russian National Library.

The site also allows users to look at several digital collections. As shown in the image below, currently forty-one interesting thematic digital collections (http://primo.nlr.ru/primo-explore/collectionDiscovery?vid=07NLR_VU1) vary, including items related to the 1917 Russian revolution, the Russian Avant-Garde, and Russian Literature.
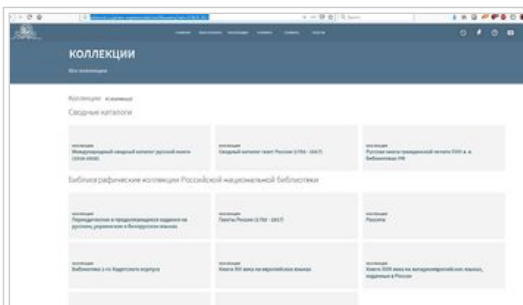

Image 19: The thematic collections of the Russian National Library

The Russian Avant-Garde online collection (http://primo.nlr.ru/primo-explore/collectionDiscovery?vid=07NLR_VU1&collectionId=dgtcol39) can be leveraged to teach about Art, Art History, the History of Avant-Garde in Russia and other relevant subjects. At the time of writing this article, the Russian Avant-Garde collection contained 457 critical primary sources.
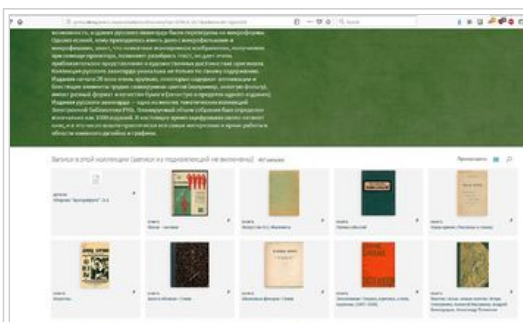

Image 20: The Russian Avant-garde digital collection.

Below is the bibliographic record of David Biurliuk's 1929 book, "Novelly."
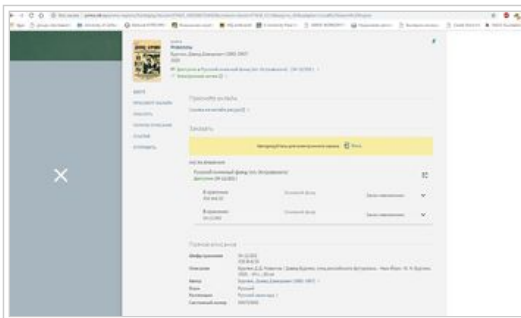
Image 21: The bibliographic record of
Novelly.

The record allows the user to view the item online, provided the user is registered using one of several different social media platforms. This is an alternative to registration within the library system (see image 22). In this specific scenario, one recognizes that not all of the books that are part of the Avant-Garde collections are openly available.

Image 22: The access barrier to the Avant-
Garde digital collection.

Besides these comprehensive resources, several other platforms merit some attention. One of these databases is Runivers.

Руниверс (Runivers) (https://runivers.ru/)
Runivers is one of the leading projects on the history of Russia on the Internet. Runivers is a unique database containing facsimile page images of more than 3000 volumes published in Russia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a unique collection of 3,900 maps, and over 20,000 historical illustrations and photographs. The site also has multiple alternate web addresses, such as www.runivers.com; www.runivers.org; ввв.руниверс.рф; ццц.руниверс.рф.

Image 23: The subject based catalog of
Runivers.

The Electronic Library "Scientific Heritage of Russia" = Электронная библиотека «Научное наследие России» (http://e-heritage.ru/index.html)

The Electronic Library "Scientific Heritage of Russia (http://nasledie.enip.ras.ru/unicollections/list.html) " exists within the framework of the similarly named program of the Presidium of the Russian Academy of Sciences with the aim of ensuring safety and providing public access to the scientific works of famous Russian scientists, and foreign scientists and researchers working in Russia.

Image 24: The subject page for History-related online sources at the Nauchnoe Nasledie Rossii.

Bibliotekar.ru (http://bibliotekar.ru/)

This is the electronic library of non-fiction literature on Russian and world history, art, culture, applied sciences. It includes books, periodicals, graphics, and reference and technical documentation for students of secondary and higher educational institutions 16+. The site provides full-text access to several critical Russian imprints.

Image 25: The landing page of Bibliotekar.ru

CyberLeninka (https://cyberleninka.org/about)

Slavic and East European Studies librarians often refer to another well-known site as a potential treasure-trove of open-access materials. The site describes itself as follows, "CyberLeninka is a small step by the NGO Association "Open Science" to build global cyberinfrastructure. We want to shift community from the web of information to the web of knowledge. Openness is the key to that process because information becomes knowledge when the majority of people perceives it without any borders." [13]

Image 26: CyberLeninka's about page.

It is interesting to see from image 27 below that CyberLeninka acknowledges several "ideologues" as inspiration such as Ms. Elbakyan of Sci-Hub and Anurag Acharya, citing the importance of information equality. Of note: I am not proposing that Sci-Hub is a legal option towards liberalizing access to "academic" information.
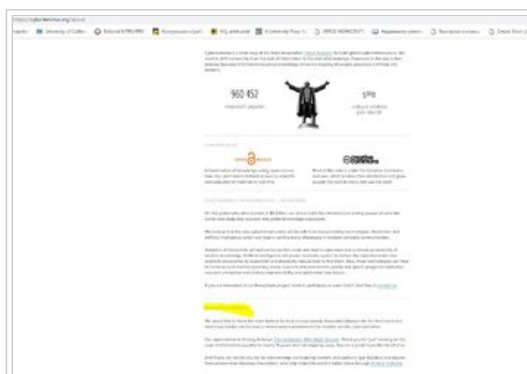

Image 27: CyberLeninka's acknowledgement of Ms. Elbakyan's contributions to "Open-Access"

However, it is important to note that due to its ability to bypass the university's authentication infrastructure using a unique protocol or series of protocols, it might be used by those who do not share the same values and legal framework of Intellectual Property by which librarians and libraries are bound by. However, it is my understanding that the site does not provide access to "free" e-books.

Lastly, I would like to briefly provide information about an important project that will aid Humanities or Russian Studies librarians with finding key literary resources that are online. The project is titled "Fundamental electronic library "Russian literature and folklore" (FEB)."

Fundamental electronic library "Russian literature and folklore" (FEB)." (Фундаментальная электронная библиотека "Русская литература и фольклор" (ФЭБ)) (http://feb-web.ru/) It is a non-profit organization whose goals are to disseminate information about Russian Literature and Folklore. The project is also sponsored by the Institute of World Literature, A. M. Gorky, and the Scientific and Technical Center "Informregistr (http://inforeg.ru/) " of the Ministry of Information Technologies and Communications of the Russian Federation. [14]

Image 28: The landing page of the FEB.

The library provides access to critical editions of literary works of several key Russian writers and poets. Also, the library provides access to several key Russian language encyclopedias. Full-text access thus relieves pressures from the library to collect comprehensively in these area. Despite the fact that several of these editions are Soviet-era editions and bear some marks of ideological viewpoints, the editions and their texts still remain fundamental to our understanding of literary processes in Russia.

Conclusion

In contemporary times, for many public universities, when the institutional sources are stretched, and the ability to preserve data in analog formats like books comes under scrutiny, our mission to provide access to information remains critical. To this end, e-books, open-data and open-science-related information objects acquire unique importance. Open Access e-books, whether these part of government initiatives or organizational prerogatives, allow librarians to create a unique set of distinguished collection of electronic books.

This cursory survey of several open access e-book platforms from the region foretells of technological disruptors and forthcoming changes in the way information is packaged and likely consumed. Like the book as a stable medium for conveying that knowledge gets deconstructed, and "re-born" in its digital iteration, the ability of librarians to creatively utilize these existing resources from Central and Eastern Europe can lead to an enhanced user experience and ensuing knowledge creation. In the future, our ability to provide access to information through e-books and other analog print books, while constructing a "distinguished" and "heavily used" collection, will acquire particular importance.

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