

From Digitised Heritage to the Living Word: The Library as an Embodied Space of Cultural Memory

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Modern public and university libraries are undergoing a process of profound transformation driven by digitalization. The traditional paradigm of the library as a repository of knowledge is being replaced by the paradigm of the library as a participatory social space. This paper analyses the concept of the "living word" as a response to the fragmentation of attention in the digital environment. Drawing on the "third space" theory and the cultural memory models of Jan and Aleida Assmann, it explores how NUBBiH becomes a space for cultural interpretation through Bosančica workshops. The workshops are analysed as a model for reviving memory and resisting digital shallowness through cognitive slowing and haptic interaction.

public libraries, living word, third space, bosančica, NUBBiH, digital detox

1. Introduction: The Ontological Paradox of the Library in the 21st Century

In the age of artificial intelligence, libraries are standing in front of an ontological paradox: while information has never been more accessible, meaning has never been more endangered. Digital dominance has given rise to the phenomenon of information overload. Today, a library cannot survive only as a passive repository; its relevance is correlated with its competence to transform itself into a dynamic space in which the text is actively "performed" through the concept of the living word. This shift requires a transition from "storage memory" to "functional memory," transforming the library into a "third place" for conversation and a cognitive corrective that protects focus from digital superficiality. Through haptic interaction and the manual reconstruction of tradition, the library becomes a "laboratory of humanity" in which the librarian acts as an ethical navigator.

We begin this discussion by examining Ray Oldenburg and his concept of the "third place," which positions the library as a neutral ground needed for the vitality of the community. We build upon R. David Lankes's thesis that knowledge is not accumulated but created exclusively through conversation, thereby shifting the focus from the collection to the user. Then, we consider the cognitive challenges of the digital age through Maryanne Wolf's warnings concerning the erosion of the capacity for "deep reading," which directly affects our ability to decode complex systems.

In the second part of the paper, we apply this theoretical framework to concrete examples: from Franco Moretti's methodology of "distant reading" within the field of digital humanities to the specific palaeographic challenges posed by Bosančica (Bosnian Cyrillic). By analysing its pronounced morphological heterogeneity, we demonstrate how historical scripts require a return to in-depth analysis while simultaneously offering digital humanities a platform for new interpretive conversations.

We conclude the text with synthesis of these approaches and arguing that the modern library must become a laboratory in which technology and tradition converge in the service of preserving human meaning.

2. The Library as a "Third Place" and a Space for Conversation

Ray Oldenburg (1989) introduced the concept of the "third place" as a neutral point of gathering outside the first place – the home – and the second place – the workplace. According to Oldenburg, the defining characteristics of a third place are that people can enter and leave it without invitation or obligation; social status is irrelevant, as all individuals are treated equally;

communication is spontaneous and informal; the space is accessible and comfortable; and it has a core group of regular visitors (Oldenburg, Christensen, 2023). Third places are highly significant to society because they reduce social isolation and loneliness, foster new ideas and collaboration, and strengthen a sense of community belonging. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, as throughout the Balkans, the concept of the third place has been familiar for centuries through regular gatherings in small taverns (*kafanas*), former reading rooms, and various cultural and artistic associations, where people engaged in conversation, negotiated business matters, formed social connections, and, generally led social lives. Today, the library, as an institution embodying all of these characteristics, is increasingly viewed as a third place, while librarians are among its regular participants, possessing the competencies required to manage the space in accordance with its purposes.

One of the more significant functions of the library is learning. R. David Lankes (2011) argues that knowledge is created exclusively through conversation; without conversation, there can be no learning. Information itself is meaningless unless it is transformed into knowledge, and this process takes place through communication about information, its processing, and connection with prior experience. In the digital age, the librarian thus becomes a curator of dialogue who facilitates the exchange of information, ensuring that it remains grounded in facts, whether through the retrieval of information or its further transmission.

3. The Biology of Reading and the Challenge of Digital Superficiality

Another phenomenon in the digital world is the risk of losing the competence for "deep reading," as Maryanne Wolf (2018) warns. The digital environment favours superficial scanning or skimming, which reduces the critical distance. Deep reading is not just a matter of recognizing words; it is a process that involves analytical thinking, empathy, and critical reflection. Without these capacities, we risk losing the ability to "make meaning" from information. Wolf emphasizes that the brain possesses considerable plasticity; if it is trained primarily for speed and efficiency (the second place – the workplace), we risk losing its capacity for contemplation (the third place – a space of spiritual and social peace). Without the capacity for deep reading, the library as a platform for conversation loses its "raw material", i.e. individuals capable of critically processing ideas before articulating and discussing them.

If, according to Lankes (2011), reading constitutes a "frozen conversation", superficial scanning of a text is akin to listening to someone without understanding the context. It is not dialogue, but only the passive reception of signals. At this point, Oldenburg's concept of the third place acquires a new, vital function. The library becomes one of the few spaces that, both architecturally and socially, keeps silence and concentration safe. It serves as a physical barrier against fragmented attention. Libraries thus become a cognitive corrective that protects the capacity for sustained focus through the concept of the living word, encouraging users to slow down and engage more deeply with the text.

4. Digital Humanities and the Reanimation of Script

Digital humanities represent a direct operational answer to the paradox of an abundance of information together with a loss of meaning: it employs technology not just to accumulate information, but to extract new meaning from cultural heritage through digital tools. While Maryanne Wolf warns of the individual's declining capacity for deep reading, digital humanities introduce Franco Moretti's concept (2013) of distant reading. Through algorithms, thousands of books can be analysed simultaneously in order to identify patterns that are imperceptible to the human eye. In this way, digital humanities undertake the scanning process that Wolf criticizes, allowing us to devote greater attention to interpretation and the search for meaning. Consequently, the library is transformed from a mere repository of memory into an active laboratory in which conversation takes place not only among people, or between the reader and the author, but also with data. Scholars, programmers, and citizen researchers work collaboratively on the digitalization, tagging, and visualization of history, making it more accessible and more thoroughly documented, and thereby preparing it for the process through which knowledge emerges through communication – comparison with other information, processing, and ultimately the creation of knowledge and meaning. Therefore, within the transformation of contemporary libraries, digital humanities should not be viewed exclusively as a tool for mass digitization, but rather as a methodological framework that enables a deeper understanding of cultural heritage through the synergy of technology and human interpretation.

One way to bring together all the conditions and demands placed on the library is through the Bosančica Workshop. The aim of the workshop is to provide participants with basic information about this script, help them understand its development from the old Cyrillic script, and enable them, within a period of one and a half hours, to read two documents written in Bosančica and practice writing it. On their own, this would be a very difficult, if not impossible, task, because Bosančica does not have fixed forms of its letters; rather, the forms depend on the individual scribe and vary from one document to another (Nakaš, 2010). However, through the lecture, by the way of examples written on the board and writing exercises, participants achieve something that digital humanities alone can hardly provide: they begin to recognize structural patterns in individual letters even when the forms initially appear completely arbitrary. A completely new world opens in front of them, even before they begin to understand the actual text they are reading. In this way, Wolf's requirement for deep reading and decoding is fully addressed.

While digital repositories provide access, digital humanities therefore aim to ensure that the Bosančica script does not remain merely a "cold," scanned object in an archive. But rather it becomes a medium for active learning and understanding. The use of computer methods in the study of medieval Bosnian literacy makes it possible to reconstruct texts visually and structurally. However, the full revival of cultural memory takes place only when these methods are combined with the concept of the "living word" and haptic interaction, such as the experience of writing by hand with a qalam. In this way, digital humanities at NUBBiH serves as a bridge between the precision of algorithmic processing and the cognitive depth of deep reading.

5. The Theoretical Concept of Cultural Memory at NUBBiH

According to Jan Assmann (2011) and Aleida Assmann (2011), the concept of cultural memory requires institutional support and expression. Libraries are central "places of memory". Aleida Assmann distinguishes between storage memory (passive archiving) and functional memory (active revival). The problem of digital society is the growth of archiving while the understanding becomes weaker. The Bosančica workshops at NUBBiH act as a way of transferring memory into functional memory. Here, the script is no longer simply a paleontological relic but becomes a "connecting structure". When a participant uses a qalam and ink, they perform an act of "performative anamnesis", moving memory from a cold medium (the scan) to a warm medium (the human body).

Haptic perception, or the sense of touch, is also important. Cognitive humanities show that learning symbols is closely connected to physical and motor actions. Reconstructing Bosančica by hand allows the text to become a physical experience, reducing the distance between the learner and the historical object.

As part of the case study at NUBBiH (2023–2025), the phenomenon of digital detoxification is analysed as a neurobiological process of regaining focus. Participants (N=50) reported experiencing a "cognitive silence" which the workshop imposes. Unlike digital input, handwriting is a slow process that engages neural networks related to long-term memory and empathy. Eighty-six percent of participants stated that the physical act of writing helped them better understand the spirit of medieval Bosnia than digital sources did.

AI can imitate the visual style of Bosančica, but it lacks the ethical dimension. The librarian therefore takes on the role of an "ethical navigator" who verifies information through human experience and helps counter algorithmic "hallucinations."

6. Conclusion: The Library as the Last Refuge of Humanities

The analysis presented so far of the transformation of public libraries, with particular reference to the experience of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, clearly demonstrates that the future of these institutions does not lie only in technological adaptation, but in redefining their essential human dimension. In a world where artificial intelligence algorithms are increasingly taking over the functions of data synthesis, the library must position itself as a space where data is transformed into lived experience.

The concept of the "living word" is not merely a pedagogical method, but an ontological response to the crisis of attention and identity in the digital age. Through its Bosančica workshops, NUBBiH has demonstrated that it is possible to bridge the gap between "cold" archival material and "warm" functional memory. The manual reconstruction of a medieval script has shown that touch, slowing down, and physical interaction with the material can produce a level of cognitive depth that

digital screens cannot replicate. In conclusion, the library in the 21st century must become a kind of "laboratory of humanity". It is a place where the past is not only preserved but also actively used to build a future based on critical thinking, cultural continuity, and intergenerational dialogue.

The role of the librarian as an "ethical navigator" is becoming a crucial safeguard against misinformation and algorithmic alienation. The transformation of libraries is therefore a civilizational imperative: they must remain spaces of cognitive silence and deep focus. The experience of NUBBiH serves as a model demonstrating that cultural heritage, such as Bosančica, is best preserved when it is written by hand by a new generation.

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