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Academia vs Forums: Official and Unofficial Knowledge – The "Case" of Cyril and Methodius

Abstract: The digital (virtual) space is the place (some would go as far as to call it the most democratic of all spaces) where ideas and opinions clash, where new meanings are being created, where new values and beliefs are being forged. At the same time, digital space is the site where meaning is shaped and defined. This paper aims at exploring possible changes in meaning when examining Cyril and Methodius via digital space. Hence, said transformations practically help forge new meanings about the past. By situating Cyril and Methodius within the context of the virtual media space, this paper aims at examining how a culture's heritage and its representation within digital time stand in direct correlation with the needs of contemporary politics and dominant discourses. Thus, the representations of Cyril and Methodius forged within the digital space breathe new meanings into old legacies, i.e., they de/construct and re/construct it. The research shows that said process, though mostly chaotic and partial, is always compatible with powerful (even if oftentimes contradictory) discourses. Along those lines, if juxtaposing the meaning of a culture's heritage with said culture's contemporality, we can in fact ascertain its function, meaning, and influence on contemporary cultural processes. Or, to paraphrase Simon During, to examine the ways in which past traces and representations enter contemporary (popular) culture.

Keywords: knowledge, cyber space, tradition, interpretation, identity

Speaking of cyberspace, David Bell defines it through three story-telling tropes that can be seen as answers to three questions: *what it is*, *what it means* and *what it does*¹. We are interested primarily in the answer to the second question: it marks a *symbolic* focus, i.e. “an imagined space between computers in which people might build new selves and new worlds”². We think that by analyzing the web-sites that store, disseminate and (re)construct the knowledge of the history of Macedonian language, we can answer the question: what is the meaning of cultural memory that is being placed in cyberspace? In this research, we deal with Ss. Cyril and Methodius, and with the battle between official and unofficial knowledge. As we know, cyberspace is a tool of so-called democratization of knowledge, that is, it provides opportunity to views that differ from official ones. As an integral element of spiritual and material cultural heritage, the lives and deeds of Ss. Cyril and Methodius are an important part of the self-identification of the Macedonian people and the construction of its identity.

There is no simple answer to Bell’s third question: *what is done* to cultural heritage (or the life and deeds of Ss. Cyril and Methodius) in cyberspace? On the one hand, in accordance with official policies, the digitalization makes the facts of cultural history easily accessible to a wider circle of people. Thus, they become part of popular culture. Just as in cyberspace identities are not set by reality and may be construed and changed, so knowledge is not fixed by dominant (official) discourses. If, at one end of the process, the “entry” of cultural heritage in cyberspace is its digitalization as a resource that allows for the dissemination of official, dominant knowledge about the facts of cultural memory, at the other end we have the forums which are often opposed to the official views and represent a form of challenge and resistance to scientific interpretations. There are many sub-variants among them, but they all together negotiate what will be accepted as the meaning of tradition and cultural memory from the viewpoint of the present. Having in mind the fact that the work of Ss. Cyril and Methodius is tied to the introduction of literacy (and, by extension, written history) into the Slavic world, meaning that it becomes strong point in the processes of construction of collective identities, the question: what do people do with the cultural memory of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in cyberspace is a question that concerns the limits of the construction of knowledge.

The analysis of this research is limited to the discussions on the topic of *Ss. Cyril and Methodius, founders of Slavic literacy*³, in one of the most popular Macedonian online forums – “Kajgana”⁴.

Objective of the Research and Methodology

To achieve the goals, we applied the following methodology:

We identified the forum “Kajgana”;

- The contents of the forum were classified by subject and statistical analysis was conducted;
- In order to secure more relevant conclusions, the statistical analysis was followed by discourse analysis; and
- The results were used to formulate conclusions that answer the following questions: what kind of knowledge is created with the help of cyberspace and what meanings are assigned to cultural heritage in view of contemporary social and political events and developments.

Analysis

A total of 377 posts were followed on the “Kajgana” Forum; the first posted on May 24, 2007, and the last on June 1, 2013⁵. It should be noted that just 67 of those posts (15%) mention Cyril and Methodius directly. The others are remarks that, although not directly related to the names of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, were caused by the set topic of discussion and, in most cases, are related to efforts to prove or deny their Macedonian or Bulgarian identity. Those remarks are dominated by labeling and occasional hate-speech. The content of discourses on the life and deeds of Ss. Cyril and Methodius indicates that, in the majority of cases, the existence of the nation is legitimized by making a direct connection with the origin (national identity) and the language of Ss. Cyril and Methodius. In view of the fact that those are usually confrontations along national background lines, in order to make valid conclusions it is important to determine the national identity of the participants

Declared ethnic background of the authors of the posts

Category	No. of posts
Macedonians	48
Bulgarians	14

Table 1: Number of participants divided by their national background

DECLARED ETHNIC BACKGROUND OF THE AUTHORS OF THE POSTS:

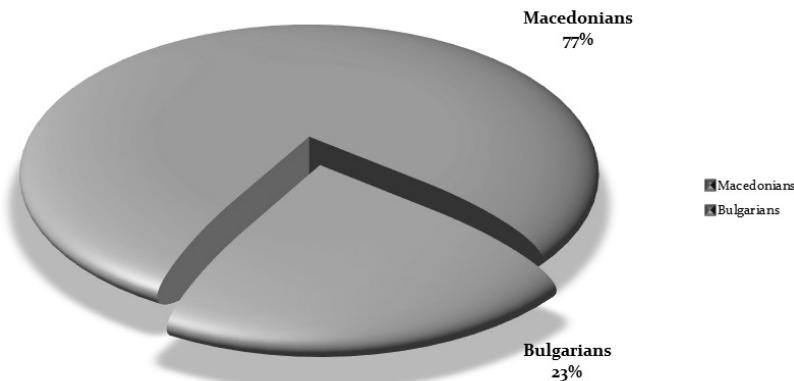


Image 1: Graphic representation of the composition of participants in the forum as percentage of the total number

The national background of the participants leads to the conclusion that Macedonians are more interested in this topic than Bulgarians. Contrary to the scientific position that there is insufficient evidence pertaining to the ethnicity of Ss. Cyril and Methodius to discuss it properly, the majority of participants in the forum have no doubt whatsoever that they were Macedonians. This thesis is supported by statements like the following:

- “The holy brothers Cyril and Methodius managed, as Macedonians, to become apostles to the Slavs. They wanted to serve for the good of all Slavic peoples and the unity of the Universal church”.

What are Cyril and Methodius by origin?

Category	No. of Posts
Macedonians	34
Bulgarian	5
Slavs	4
Greeks/Byzantines	2

Table 2: Opinions on the national identity of Cyril and Methodius

WHAT ARE CYRIL AND METHODIUS BY ORIGIN?

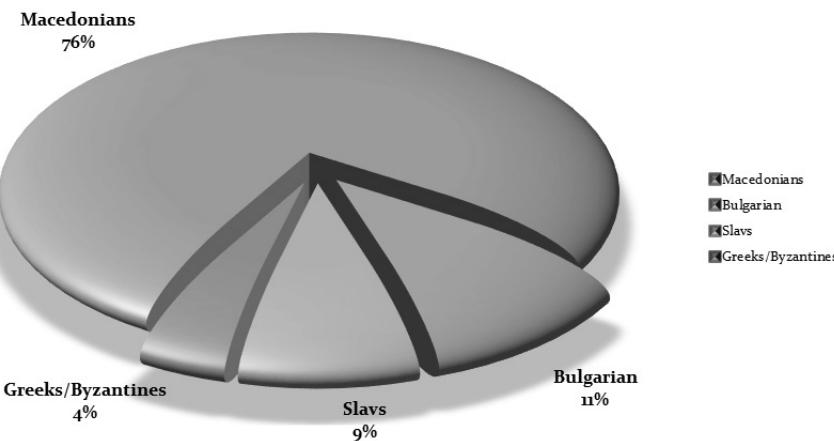


Image 2: Opinions on the national identity of Cyril and Methodius, as percentage of the total number of mentions

It should be noted that the majority of participants supports the view of the host of the forum, who presents the following argument:

First of all, we should clear it once and for all that the Holy brothers are, above all, MACEDONIAN EDUCATORS. I have to say something else, I get TERRIBLY irritated by the practice of adding the term Slavs to our ancient name MACEDONIANS. We are not Macedonian Slavs just because of the arrival of two or three illiterate tribes, if they ever arrived here, for, following the same logic, they could call us Turkish Macedonians because of the 5 and a half centuries of Turkish rule over us. We are JUST MACEDONIANS and the Holy brothers are just MACEDONIANS who conducted their educational activities in many nations.

The insistence on the definition of the ethnic background of Ss Cyril and Methodius by the participants in the forum that post in the Macedonian language activates the 19th century matrix that legitimizes states and, therefore, identities in accordance with roots and origin. For the participants in the forum that post in the Macedonian language, “proving” the Macedonian origin of the Holy brothers doesn’t only mean the “right to identity”, it also has a compensatory function.

How are Cyril and Methodius identified by those who post in Macedonian language?

Category	No. of Posts
Slavs	2
Macedonians	34
Other	2

Table 3: Number of views on the national background of Cyril and Methodius held by Macedonians

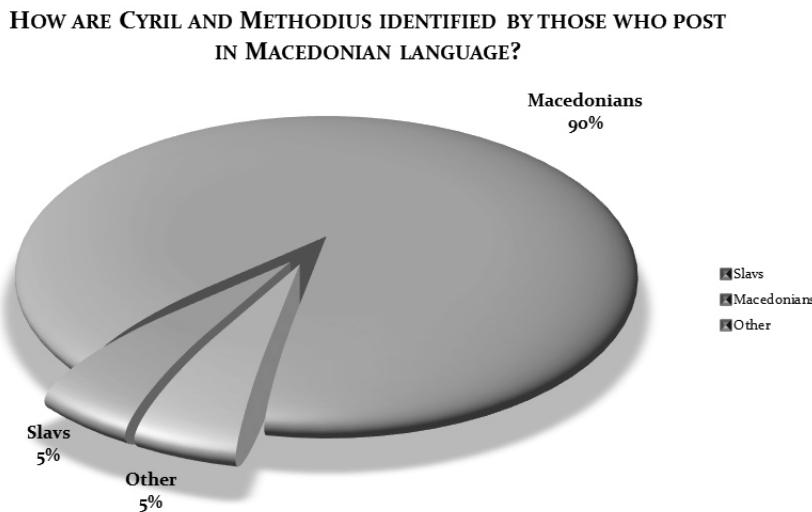


Image 3: National identity of Cyril and Methodius according to Macedonians

It points towards a conclusion that participants posting in the Macedonian language are suspicious of the official scientific positions and that they seek alternative views on this topic, related to the language spoken by the brothers.

The language used by Cyril and Methodius was

Category	No. of posts
Old Macedonian/language of ancient Macedonians/language used by Alexander of Macedon	20
Vernacular Macedonian / Macedonian	21
Bulgarian / Old Bulgarian	6
Old Slavic / Slavic	7

Table 4: Opinions of participants in the forum on the language used by Cyril and Methodius

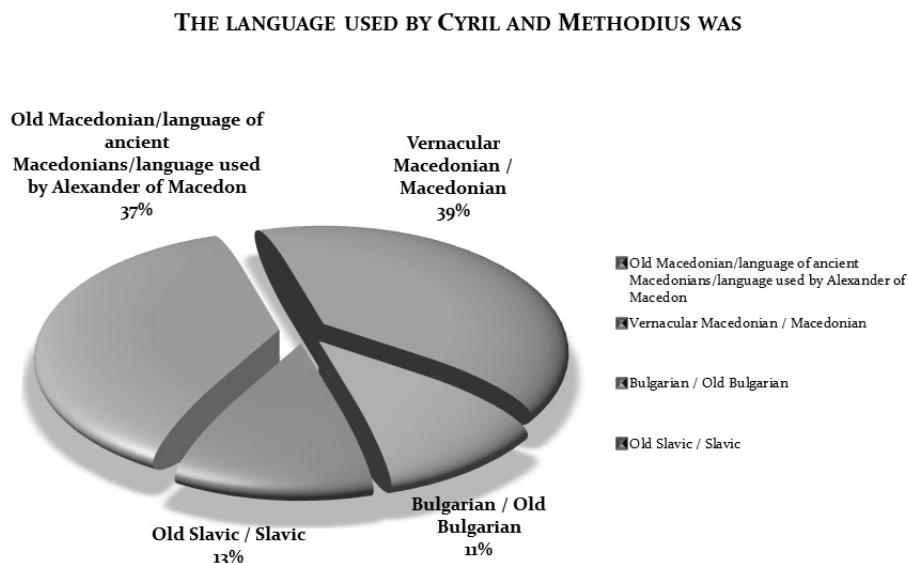


Image 4: Opinions of participants in the forum on the language used by Cyril and Methodius

It is important to emphasize the fact that the language of Ancient Macedonians is seen as the language from which the modern Macedonian language emerged, and the language of Cyril and Methodius was Macedonian, giving the Macedonians the right to believe that they belong to a nation that brought literacy to the whole Slavic world.

The opening argument is provided by the host of the forum:

Rostislav, the duke of Greater Moravia, sent a request to Byzantine emperor Michail III to send a bishop and a teacher who will teach them the true Christian faith in their own language. The Holy brothers were selected. They were almost ready for the mission, because they **had already translated the holy books into Macedonian, a language understood by all Slavs**. They completed missions in the region of Bregalnica and other areas in Macedonia, in the **fourth language of the Bible, the Macedonian language**.

If, at the beginning, one may be confused by the idea of a “revival” of the Macedonian alphabet, the issue is quickly cleared. Following are the explanations provided by the participant with the username Doctor *DOMINUS*:

First of all, Cyril and Methodius didn’t invent any alphabet! The Slavs were always literate, going back to the times of Alexander, it’s just that they used hieroglyphs then, or a demotic syllabic alphabet, while Kiro and Meto transformed the syllabic into phonetic alphabet, with every sound getting a letter. That alphabet, too, had 38 letters and was called Glagolic!

The view promoted by the majority (by a single participant, though) is further elaborated by the participants using the moniker *Martin\$ Moderator*: “It is so, the alphabet didn’t appear by chance, nothing happened by chance. You don’t just invent an alphabet. It existed, they just simplified it”. Regarding the official Bulgarian version about the existence of an Old Bulgarian language, the following argument is offered: “They use other people’s history, so what. My point was that it is not what they claim that ‘Нихата абука научиха ги сите на нивни език’ (With their alphabet they taught them all to speak their language“.

The statements listed above indicated that these are informed people who posses certain data, facts and knowledge. The discussion is not led from the point of view of that data, those facts and knowledge that were confirmed by science as valid, but from the point of view of seeking confirmation for what they want to believe in. For participants posting in Macedonian, there is an obvious need to identify Cyril and Methodius as Macedonians and their language as Macedonian. That need arises from the wish to situate one’s own national identity deep in history, which makes possible and “provable” the thesis that “The Slavs were always literate, back to the days of Alexander”. In fact, it is an attempt to re-imagine the national identity that wants to connect two points in the past: the glory of Alexander of Macedon with the glory

of Cyril and Methodius, and thus secure a “provable” and “unproblematic” identity, along criteria that extract that identity from the myth of its origins. The biggest “concession” that could be made is to move that past to the point of “discovery” of people’s culture in the early 19th century, a category necessary to legitimize the nation. That intention is evident in the following statement:

- It is interesting that bulgarians stick their fingers in Macedonian literacy (we should point out the indicative use of capital letters, our note).
- It is funny that the Orthodox Turks (bulgarians) forget that Turkish is not the same as the language spoken by the Salonikans...
- I don’t understand how the Bulgarians, with their Turkic-Altaic roots can talk about a Slavic language?!
- Today, the Bulgarians speak a Slavic, or to be precise, a dialect of the Macedonian language, in fact a distorted Macedonian! It is true that there is some Slavic root in that nation, because of the assimilated Macedonians through the ages, but they mostly stole the Slavic culture, LET ME BE CLEAR – MACEDONIAN culture! So, the fact that you assimilated some Slavs doesn’t make you worthy of discussing a culture you stole!

The following table and image investigate the question of where Cyril and Methodius are placed, in the present or in the past. The findings are presented as follows:

Cyril and Methodius are located in

Category	No. of Posts
Historical context	58
Present context	11

Table 5: Opinions of participants on the context in which Cyril and Methodius are placed

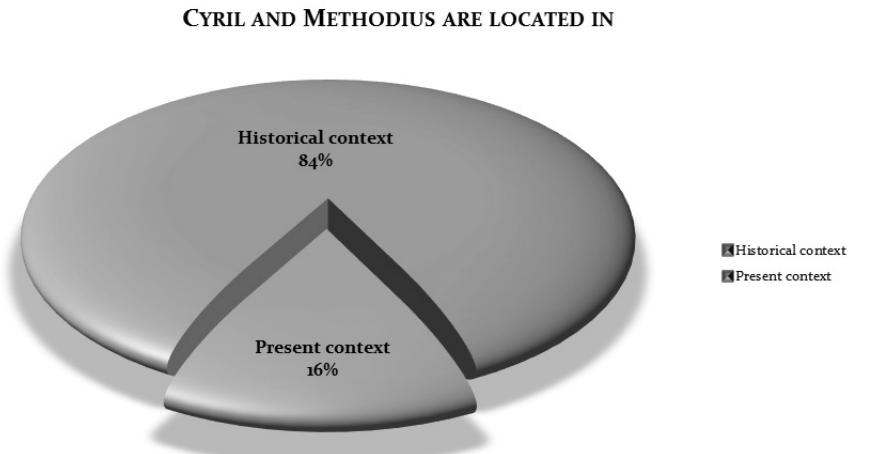


Image 5: Opinions of participants in the forum about the context in which Cyril and Methodius are placed

The whole forum discussion proceeds in such a way as to convince the other participants of the validity of the presented arguments. The context of the discussion implies that success in the presentation of the theses is directly related to the successful promotion of the nation, not in the historical, but in the contemporary context. Therefore, the findings presented in the following table and image, indicate that Cyril and Methodius are significant in the contemporary context.

Cyril and Methodius are important for

Category	No. of Posts
Construction of identity	48
Recognition of one's roots	47
Proving the superiority of the nation	45
Proving the inferiority of the Other	25
They are not important	6

Table 6: The opinions of the participants in the forum on the importance of Cyril and Methodius

CYRIL AND METHODIUS ARE IMPORTANT FOR

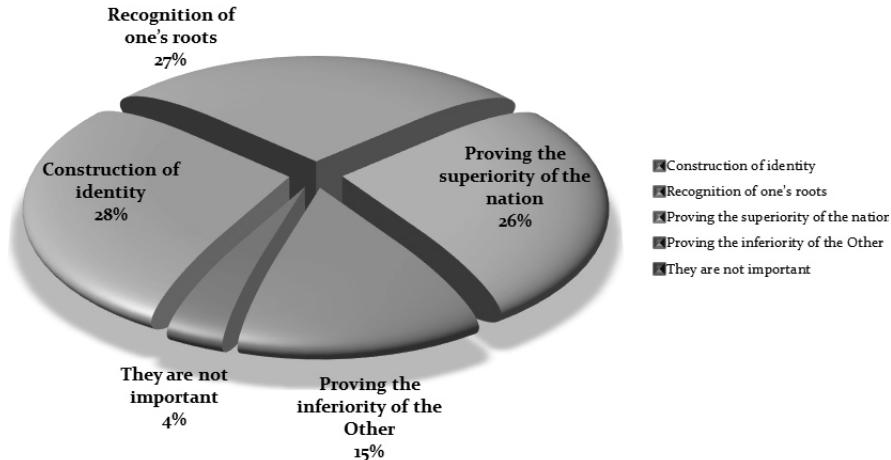


Image 6: The opinions of the participants in the forum on the importance of Cyril and Methodius

The results make it clear that an insignificant percentage of presented views (just 6 of them, or 4%) believe that Cyril and Methodius are of no significance for the identity and construction of the image of the nation. The majority of the opinions consist of a combination that emphasizes one or the other process of self-identification, the creation of auto-referential images and perceptions of the Other, as well as in the construction of identity. Of them, 48 (28%) extrapolate the identity markers directly from the life and deeds of Ss. Cyril and Methodius; 47 opinions (26%) believe that the life and deeds of the holy brothers prove the superiority of the nation.

A relatively small number of posts deal with the inferiority of the Other – 25 posts or 15% of the total. We would offer the following statement as an example of labeling:

What we presented so far makes it clear that, as in the case of the dispute of the name of Macedonia, exclusive rights over Ss. Cyril and Methodius's inheritance is sought. The following table presents that structure of opinions on the importance of their work:

Cyril and Methodius are important for

Category	No. of Posts
Macedonia	48
The Region	47
Slavic world	45
Europe	25

Table 7: Numbers of opinions of participants in the forum on the importance of Cyril and Methodius in the geographic context

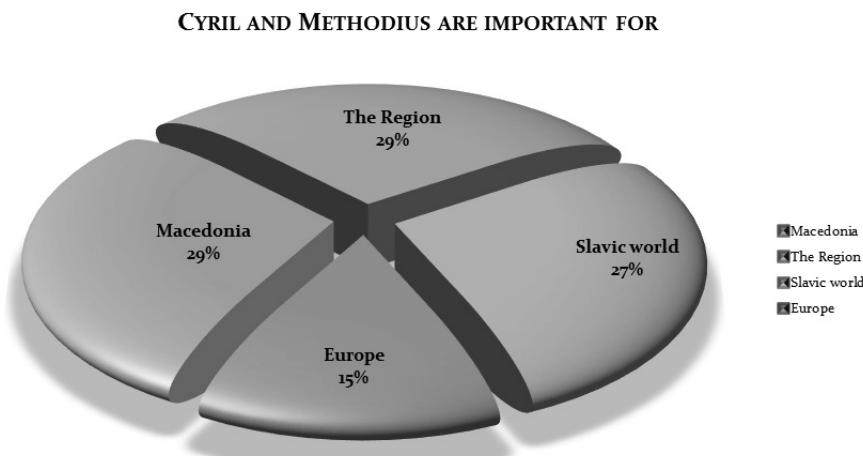


Image 7: Graphic presentation of the opinions of participants in the forum on the importance of Cyril and Methodius in the geographic context

The most numerous are the opinions that the work of Cyril and Methodius is important primarily for Macedonia because they, in the view of the participants, are connected to Macedonian cultural heritage. It should be noted, though, that those who hold the opinion that Cyril and Methodius are important in the wider context do not necessarily oppose the view that they are, above all, important for Macedonia. They are viewed as Macedonia's investment in the development of the Slavic civilization. For that reason, according to many participants, one can't dispute the separate and specific nature of Macedonian identity. The logic of the argument is that those that were first and gave birth to a civilization can't be ignored and their identity denied.

For the answer to the question of what people do with cultural heritage in the cyberspace, it is important to answer how one has reached his/her conclusions or beliefs. The following table and image present the structure of points of origin of the knowledge.

The information on Cyril and Methodius presented in the forum come from

Category	No. of posts
Existing literature	3
Various sources (oral and written)	11
Making one's own logical conclusions	58

Table 8: Numbers of opinions by used sources

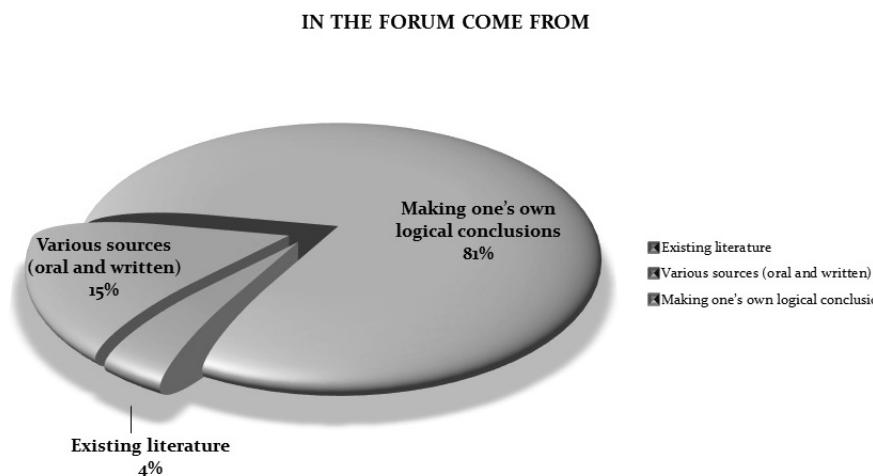


Image 8: The percentages of sources used

In spite of those statistics, it can't be said that the majority of participants are uninformed about the topic of discussion. Only a small percentage of participants make completely arbitrary conclusions, such as: "a Slav = literate; slovo – a letter. So, the people at that time were literate and that is why they are called the SLAVS".

The fact that just three of the opinions invoke the scientific literature, which is accepted as the official knowledge, while it is impossible to conclude that the participants in the discussion are completely uninformed about the topic of discussion, indicates that the majority of them may have doubts and are suspicious of the officially accepted scientific truth. As far as Macedonian scientific figures are concerned, the discussion mentions only university professor Dr. Vera Stojčevska-Antic. The following statements support the claim that the participants in the forum don't view official historical science as an authority: "yes, I do think we should stop repeating the worn out definitions – so romantically panslavic ... that are not really scientific by character, are they?".

In this context, we should make special mention of posts by the participant signed as *MAKEDONEC_PP POBEDASH*, as typical of that trend:

- Will somebody please explain to me how a handful of people that used to live on the other side of the Carpathian Mountains managed to not only move in, but assimilated the (allegedly) literate Greeks and Albanians that (allegedly) lived in the territory of Macedonia. And it's not just Macedonia, not just the Balkans, but 50% of the territory of Europe?!
- So, the Macedonian Saints proselytized in the Macedonian language that the newly arrived (Slavic tribes) accepted and were assimilated... Is that so??? It means that the culture we call Slavic is actually the MACEDONIAN culture, and the Slavic group of languages is, in fact, the MACEDONIAN group of languages...

Conclusion

The study of popular culture and online forums as a segment of that culture doesn't constitute "a waste of time on something that doesn't deserve attention". Quite the opposite – it is an important factor in the processes of the creation of meanings. The study of online forums as an integral part of the virtual media space, enables us to investigate the manner in which people understand things. This realization points towards the conclusion that, in the process of creating support points for identities, people don't take into account only officially accepted scientific knowledge, but also alternative knowledge and theories which, in some circumstances, could have a decisive influence on the creation of mental images.

It takes us to the concept of the subject (of being a subject). Unlike the matrices of the modern, the contemporary concept implies change, openness and dynamism of individuals. That, on the other hand, leads to the realization that the identity of individuals is constructed in the same way as a text is constructed.

In relation with the subject matter of our research, it would mean the following:

- Perfecting and advancing the means of mass communication, and especially virtual media space, and making available various texts to the general public, or the consumers, open possibilities to choose the identity that a subject will present to his/her environment.
- The availability of huge amounts of literature provides opportunities to the individual subject to select individual elements of cultural presentations and ways in which he/she will construct his/her identity, and the actual choices may be seen as forms of resistance to officially accepted knowledge.
- The availability of many choices allows one to find new contents that will provide pleasure and new meanings. That process is assisted by the altered view of science, caused by the realization that it can't really hold the pretence of full objectivity.

The concept of imagining, related to the manner in which people experience culture, also participates in those processes: imagination, according to Lewis, is “the space in which all our thoughts and experiences are collected in order to create our meanings (understandings)”⁶. Imagination is not opposed to knowledge, reason, science or facts, but it is related to everyday experience. However, the realization that science, which aims to be an objective and unengaged form of fiction, sensations or emotions, is another form of the creation of reality through language and discourse, certainly reduces the gap between the two.

Thus, the concept of imagining, which is related in our survey to the concept of identity, allows for a merging of different processes: rational, cognitive, epistemological (knowledge), sensitive, emotional and creative. Those processes may cause the identity support points and relations to be reconfigured and reimagined and, in different social and temporal contexts, it can lead to a reconstruction of individual and collective identity.

Such theoretical concepts lead us to several concrete conclusions:

1. Cyril and Methodius are cult figures and, as such, are deeply connected with modern Macedonians and their sense of identity.
2. The huge interest (not only in this forum that we took as paradigmatic of the whole phenomenon) in Cyril and Methodius indicates that the participants in the forum (the young Macedonian population) feels that identity can be stabilized only through a definition of its roots. Therefore, the establishment of *Macedonian roots* for Cyril and Methodius illustrates the need to introduce big and important figures to our history, to reaffirm the greatness of the national and thus legitimize it. There is dual need for that position: on the one hand, it deconstructs the Bulgarian story of the Old Bulgarian language; and on the other hand, applying the same principles, constructs the great Macedonian narrative and overcomes the sense of inferiority throughout history.
3. The replacement of Gutenberg's with the cyber galaxy or, as Smith says, the transfer from books to bytes, creates a news situation in which the official knowledge is transformed and used in accordance with one's individual needs. On the one hand, ignorance of that fact or, indeed, the manipulation of that fact by the centres of power creates conflict situations in which the Other and otherness become a threat that needs to be eliminated (for example, the moderator will delete a certain post).
4. On the other hand, the inertia and the elitist distance of the centres of knowledge transforms them into places removed from everyday life and current dilemmas; places that set well devised, clear limits and barriers between academic knowledge and knowledge of others. That is the reason for the fierce attacks and the mistrust that participants in the forum feel towards official textbooks/knowledge, which they see as imposed on them from outside.
5. The discussions in the forums (in our case, the forum Kajgana) about Cyril and Methodius as cult figures that made huge contributions to Slavic and world civilisations, offer themselves as grounds for overcoming perceived marginalisation and frustrations and for projection of one's own yearnings and feelings.

Notes

- 1 David Bell, *An Introduction to Cybercultures*, London & New York: Routledge, 2001, 7.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Available at <http://goo.gl/nCHnc>. Accessed October 4th, 2016.
- 4 Online forum Kajgana available at <http://forum.kajgana.com/>.
- 5 The situation as of June 21st, 2013; the discussion continues.
- 6 Jeff Lewis, *Cultural Studies: The Basic*, London: Sage Publications, 2002, 35.

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