

A Country as a Free Reading Zone

Croatia as an Open Virtual Library

On the eve of St. Nicholas Day, on December 5, 2016, around 8 p.m. Central European Time, we broke the news on the Free Reading Zones: Croatia Facebook page, which had at the time garnered about 13,000 followers, that Croatia had been open for reading in its entirety. Within the first hours, the news spread to several online outlets that picked up the press release immediately. The next morning, on December 6 (the official launch day), the country's major newspaper, *Jutranji List*, which was given exclusive coverage, would make an official announcement that Croatia was a Free Reading Zone all through the holidays, courtesy of a US portal advocating free access to books and literacy in digital format. It was up to Croatia's officials and private corporations to continue supporting the project further into 2017.

This was the official press release shared globally and published on *No Shelf Required*:

Croatia Is the World's First Country to Become a Free Reading Zone

No Shelf Required and Total Boox join forces in turning the country of Croatia into an open virtual library accessible via a free application—to residents and tourists alike—without a library card or an access code. The growing collection boasts 100,000 titles by top publishers in several languages.

December 5, 2016; Zagreb, Croatia—Croatia has just made history by becoming the first country in the world turned into a Free Reading Zone (FREZ), i.e., an open virtual library accessible to all people free of charge regardless of their location. This includes not only Croatian citizens but millions of tourists from around the world who

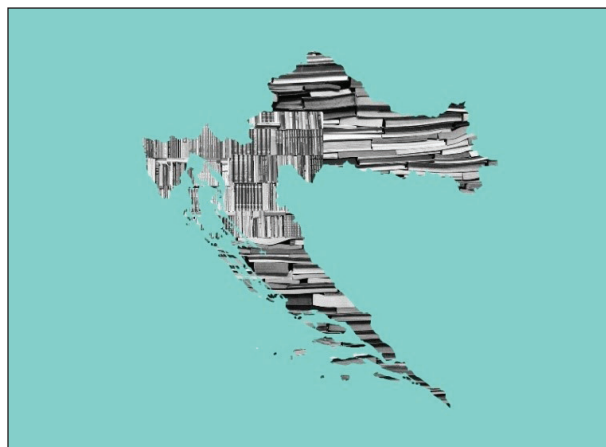


Figure 4.1
Image by *No Shelf Required*

visit the country each year, who may download a free reading app, called Croatia Reads. The app is powered by Total Boox, an ebook service known to publishers and librarians for its pay-as-you-read model, which makes ebooks instantly available—with no restrictions—while paying publishers for reading and affording readers a seamless and uninterrupted reading experience.

“As a web site advocating free access to books and knowledge for all people, *No Shelf Required* is honored to be the first sponsor of this historic project,” said Mirela Roncevic, editor of *No Shelf Required* and manager of the project. “NSR’s mission is to make access to books a right of every citizen, not a privilege tied to institutions and corporate interests, so it is fitting that we stand behind it. It also holds a special meaning to me personally because this remarkable story of books escaping the confines of book stores and library walls is taking place in the country of my birth.”

Readers may browse Total Boox' collection of 100,000 titles, which includes books in all categories of fiction and nonfiction; from popular to academic, from professional to practical. Over 250 publishers are participating, including an array of world-class brands, among them, Lonely Planet, Workman, Sourcebooks, Berlitz, Oxford University Press, F&W Media, O'Reilly, Other Press, Elsevier, Wolters Kluwer, New World Library, Marshall Cavendish, Berrett-Koehler, Lerner, and many others.

The goal of the FREZ project is to spread reading to public and private spaces and endow them with culture. The 'zones' may be sponsored by private and public institutions, corporations or government entities and can be as small as single buildings (e.g., hospitals, cafes) or as big as cities and countries (as in the case of Croatia). "With all due modesty, this is really a world's first," said Yoav Lorch, Founder and CEO of Total Boox. "It's a general open invitation for all people to follow their interests and curiosities, wherever they are, at no cost and with no limitations. It's not just about saving money. It's about making culture and knowledge prevalent, about closing the digital divide, and about allowing the people to enjoy the fruits of the digital revolution."

"With the launch of Croatia Reads, we have created a circle in which all segments of Croatia's society benefit: culture, education, and tourism," added Roncevic. "We have begun the next chapter in the story of the book—the one where the potential of the digital medium is finally used to disperse knowledge to all who want it, when they want it, and how they want it. Croatia stands as an example of what is possible with the book in the 21st century, and what is possible looks a lot like the democratization of the written word we've never seen before—the kind that will finally give books in digital format the chance to show their true potential."¹

Within twenty-four hours, thousands of people across Croatia registered to use the Croatia Reads app, half of them through Facebook, the other half manually, by supplying their e-mail address and first and last name. As was the case with Velvet, readers who registered received a welcome e-mail that briefly explained the project and the mission:

Dear readers,

Welcome to Croatia Reads, a virtual library of nearly 100,000 high-quality books available for free reading. With the launch of this application, Croatia becomes the first country in the world that is a free reading zone—an open digital library accessible to all people inside its borders, without a membership card or a special code. Our mission is simple: to enable access to books and knowledge for all people, regardless of their whereabouts or circumstances, including millions of tourists who visit Croatia every year. Owing to the generosity of the sponsors supporting this effort, we have

created a circle in which key sectors of our society benefit: culture, education, and tourism. All you need to do is read.

We invite you now to experience free and unlimited access to thousands of books from all over the world, right here in Croatia. From pop fiction and serious literature to spirituality and cooking. From poetry and travel to entertainment and sports. From arts and economics to science and technology. Your reading journey will never come to an end. To download books, click 'Get Books' inside the app. You can browse by category and filter your search results by language. You can also create Shelves to organize your personal library. If you have questions, please visit our FAQ page. If you need technical assistance, contact us at support@croatiareads.com.

From the moment the news went viral to the day the Croatia Reads pilot ended, on January 5, 2017, the phones did not stop ringing. In fact, they would continue to ring months after the pilot ended. The official press release gave people a basic understanding of how it all worked, but they had more questions, especially the media. To help as many people as possible gain as much insight as possible into the technical details, we created a universal list of Frequently Asked Questions compiled for users in Croatia as well as anyone outside Croatia to ensure that the media coverage was accurate. This FAQ, available to users in two languages, was shared with the media, and a link to it online was provided inside the app.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Croatia Reads?

Croatia Reads is an attempt to turn an entire country into an open library—a zone in which reading books in digital format (ebooks) is accessible to all people inside Croatia's borders free of charge. As long as you remain inside Croatia (and as long as the initiative is supported through sponsorship by third parties), you may download and read any of the books in the collection. You will never be asked for a library ID or an access code. Regardless of whether you are a resident or a tourist, whether you live in big urban areas or remote rural ones, you will be able to access any book instantly and read without restrictions. In short, Croatia Reads is an attempt to fully democratize the written word, make it accessible to all people, and forever revolutionize how we read books in the 21st century.

What is the basic idea of the Free Reading initiative?

When you are in a Free Reading Zone, the Zone's sponsor pays for your reading. When you leave the zone, the benefit of free reading ends. Sponsors can be private entities (like large corporations and small businesses) or government entities (like public, school, and academic libraries, Departments of Culture, Education, and Tourism, Mayor's offices, etc.). The Sponsor of the first month of free reading

in Croatia is *No Shelf Required*, a portal that advocates digital literacy and free access to books and knowledge. Zones can be physical or virtual. They can be as small as single buildings or parks and as big as cities or entire countries (as in the case of Croatia).

Which devices are supported?

We support most Android devices, iOS devices (iPads and iPhones), and Kindle Fires. If your device is not supported (this may be the case with older models), you will not be able to download the Croatia Reads app from the app store. If you can download the app, then it should work on your device.

How are publishers paid for the 'free' reading?

Publishers are paid quarterly for all the reading of all their titles in the collection (not just in Croatia), since they have a contract with Total Boox. The amount they receive is based on what people actually read; the technology measures all reading and generates reports which show how much was read on any given day. Publishers, and therefore authors, do not make money if no one reads their books, but publishers make their titles available for discovery to anyone who wishes to read them. In Free Reading Zones, Sponsors pay for the cost of reading and technology up-keep (directly to the company hosting the reading, in this case, Total Boox), so that readers don't have to.

Why am I downloading ebooks from the Total Boox website when inside the app?

This Free Reading Zones project is powered by Total Boox, the company that developed the technology used for Croatia Reads. The app is a replica of the regular Total Boox app normally used for reading in other countries, where readers pay for their own reading (or their libraries do, if they work with Total Boox). In the case of Croatia, the burden of paying for the reading is transferred from readers onto sponsors. This is why you are not asked to pay to set up a balance.

You can download as many ebooks as you want from a catalog of nearly 100,000 titles in many languages, for the entire duration of the pilot. The catalog grows weekly as new publishers come on board and new titles are added to the system.

Can I read offline?

Yes. You must be online to download books but you do not need to be online to read them.

What happens if I read offline in a Free Reading Zone?

If you go offline, you can continue reading for a while. Then you will be notified to go back online and refresh your device (we must do this for security reasons). As soon as you do that, your invisible

credit will be refreshed and you will be able to continue reading. Most people will never reach this point because they will likely go online throughout the day (while reading) so their reading credit is always refreshed. As long as you periodically go back online (and almost all people do), we will be able to see what you read while you were offline. This is how we ensure that all reading is always accounted for, so that publishers are compensated.

How do you protect my privacy?

We do not share information about your reading activities or identity with third parties. We use technological methods including encryption to protect your data. You can read more details about our strict privacy policy on Total Boox' website.

What happens if I change to a different device?

We will automatically load your books onto the new device when you install the app and log in with the same email and password. If you go back and forth between devices, your reading will automatically sync.

Can I download ebooks on my desktop?

You cannot read on computer screens but you can certainly log into your account and download books there. Some people prefer to browse on their desktops and download books that way. Your Library on your smartphone or tablet will automatically sync with what you downloaded on the desktop.

How diverse is the collection? What types of books and publishers are represented?

All kinds. From literary fiction to genre fiction; from creative nonfiction to professional literature; from children's books to young adult literature; from arts and humanities to science and technology; from travel and cooking to crafts and spirituality. Our collection is extremely diverse and there are books in it for all ages and all tastes and interests. The collection is also increasingly multilingual.

What are some key features of the Croatia Reads app?

The free reading app is very intuitive and easy to use. You can search books by keyword or you can browse by category (and sub-category). You can also filter your searches by popularity, author, title, and language. You can create Shelves inside your Library and keep them private or make them public (i.e., share with others). You can highlight parts of the books you like, bookmark pages, increase and decrease font, adjust font settings, jump from one part of the book to another through Table of Contents or by using the percentage line at the bottom of the screen.²

Lessons from Croatia Reads

The Croatia Reads project, which did not end up getting the support from the government I had hoped for (but the government remains interested in continuing discussions in the near future), meant many things to many people who got involved. It certainly wasn't about Croatia as much as it was about the power of e-books and open virtual libraries.

In retrospect, and perhaps more than anything, Croatia Reads was an attempt to present the library of the future in all its invisible glory. And this library is able to fully democratize the written word by virtue of becoming completely invisible, thus accessible to all people, all at once. This, I have often argued in presentations and in interviews, is the kind of democratization not even Gutenberg could pull off (although he gave the publishing industry a heck of a start). This is the vision I have for both the publishing and the library industry.

As already mentioned, the project did not involve Croatian libraries. Likewise, it did not involve any government (local, regional, or national) entity. It was solely funded by *No Shelf Required*, in cooperation with Total Boox, whose responsibility was to provide the technology and pay the publishers based on actual reading. An army of volunteers in Croatia joined forces to help me and my small team of volunteers turn Croatia into an open library.

Important to note: Although the Total Boox model was the first to be tested for free reading, the effort in Croatia by no means implies that Total Boox's is the only model suitable for FREZ. It did, however, prove effective because large numbers of contemporary titles were available for instant and simultaneous reading and the cost of reading was reasonable (amounting to about \$30,000 for the entire month of the pilot). Here are some stats we were able to get through Google Analytics:

- 24,000 people registered within the first week.
- On average, 1,000 new users signed up every day.
- By the end of the pilot, 33,000 people registered for Croatia Reads.
- Within the first week, 136,000 e-books had been downloaded.
- Within the first week, 23,600 books were being read.
- Within the first week, users created nearly 4,000 personal shelves.
- 20 percent of the books read were in Croatian.
- The vast majority of books read and downloaded were in English.
- The majority of reading took place in urban areas, especially in the cities of Zagreb, Split, and Rijeka, but a significant amount of reading took place in rural areas of the Adriatic islands.

User Feedback

We've learned a great deal from users of Croatia Reads during the pilot. Readers did not shy away from expressing their likes and dislikes both on the Facebook page—which remained active all through the pilot and became the place where conversations among users continued daily—and through direct contact with users who e-mailed or called us. Here are some of the takeaways:

- Digital content does not need to be guarded; readers are very savvy and able to censor the content they consume; they are also able to quickly learn how to navigate reading apps, even if they have no prior experience reading e-books.
- Readers enjoy reading e-books and are often pleasantly surprised at how easy it is to browse through them and how much the technology of reading apps has improved in recent years.
- Readers appreciate libraries and what they stand for a great deal but are happy to get e-books through other channels; above all, they want to access them freely and without a cumbersome process. Interestingly enough, a significant number assumed that Croatia Reads was an initiative of Croatian libraries.
- E-books have the potential to stimulate more reading among people who don't read much; many users said the app made it convenient for them to read on the go, which increased the amount of overall reading; some even reported the app turned them into avid readers.
- Readers do not want to pay for e-books and do not see them threatening the survival of print books in any way; most said the free reading experience would not make them turn away from print books.
- The vast majority of readers were pleased with the reading experience and the simplicity of the app and do not require a lot of bells and whistles to enjoy the reading experience.
- The majority of readers understood that Croatia Reads was a step toward democratizing the written word in digital format and encouraged our efforts to continue beyond the pilot; their support was overwhelming and at times heartwarming. When the pilot ended, their disappointment was equally overwhelming.

A wide range of regional corporations (e.g., banks, insurance and telecommunications companies) showed interest in sponsoring the reading upon seeing reading stats, as did the Croatian government. I remain hopeful that Croatia Reads will inspire government officials to remain open to the idea of keeping Croatia an open virtual library for months and

years to come (even if it means doing it through other means and other reading apps). It is also interesting to note that several Croatian cities have contacted us about being turned into Free Reading Zones in the near future. Those would be sponsored by local governments and universities. NSR's conversation with them continued at the time of this publication.

Since the country-wide pilot ended, I have had the privilege of giving presentations around Europe and in countries beyond Croatia (including the United States) that are showing interest in following in Croatia's footsteps. The cost of reading will vary greatly depending on their size and overall goals, but I believe the experience in Croatia proved that the cost of reading was miniscule compared to the benefits FREZ afforded to many segments of the society and to many people.

According to our calculations, a country like Croatia can remain an open virtual library, giving all people inside it unlimited access to a vast collection of e-books, for about \$800,000 per year. That covers 4.3 million residents as well as close to 17 million tourists.

Library of the Future

Having spent two decades of my career working with and for publishers and librarians, I am no stranger to the challenges they face with e-books and knew going into this project outside the United States—which is still, and by far, the most progressive country when it comes to innovation with e-books—would be no small task. But this project has challenged me to think outside the box and apply my experience in an uncharted territory. This is the right time, I believe, for my colleagues in publishing and libraries to not shy away from experimenting and to consider if, perhaps, our goals need to be transformed into something that transcends the physical.

Croatia Reads was, in fact, an attempt to show to those who work with books what is missing and what is possible—free, sponsored reading outside institutions, and outside the confines of all that is physical. *Outside*, of course does not mean excluding libraries. It means going beyond their walls. As successful as Croatia Reads was among users, it would have made a deeper impact among government officials had we been able to get more librarians to actively support the project.

Not having librarians on board as public advocates has, in retrospect, limited our options when seeking government support. But the prior experience with FREZ in the United States had also taught me that this was a groundbreaking idea that many libraries may not be ready for. The right ones would come along when the time was right. My hope is that this report finds its way into the hands of the librarians who are ready and for whose libraries the time is right. Even though FREZ can be pulled off without the involvement of libraries (as was the case with both Velvet Café and Croatia Reads), it can reach its highest potential only if led and organized by those whose very mission is to spread reading. Librarians are also the most experienced with seeking financial support from other institutions and promoting digital literacy.

Croatia Reads was a shot at giving the book what it wants in digital format—complete freedom—while allowing publishers and all involved to benefit from it. It was also an attempt to unveil the library of the future through the power of technology. This library is as big as a country, and it doesn't give you a card or a PIN to use with that card. It doesn't charge you late fees. It doesn't tell you what to read, how to read, or when or why to read. But it never stops enabling reading. It constantly grows and welcomes knowledge from all who want to create and share reading (big publishers, small publishers, independent authors). Its job is to encourage dissemination of knowledge, not supervise it. Its mission and responsibility, in fact, is to become invisible. Therein lies its greatest potential.

Notes

1. "Croatia Is the World's First Country to Become a Free Reading Zone," news release, *No Shelf Required*, December 5, 2016, www.noshelfrequired.com/breaking-news-croatia-is-the-worlds-first-country-to-become-a-free-reading-zone.
2. Originally published on a Facebook page that is no longer active. FAQs are currently available at: "Croatia Reads was not about Croatia [but about Free Access to Books for All Mankind]," *No Shelf Required*, May 1, 2017, <http://www.noshelfrequired.com/croatia-reads-was-not-about-croatia-but-about-free-access-to-books-for-all-mankind/>.