Scott Vine

Libraries in the Digital Age
A report from the 2008 conference

From June 2 to 6, 2008, 142 librarians, academics, and students from Europe, North America, and Asia came together in the City of Dubrovnik and on the island of Mjlet, Croatia, for the ninth Libraries in the Digital Age (LIDA) conference. This annual conference examines the environment for library and information systems and services in the digital world, looking specifically at current advances, problems, and solutions.

This year's tracks were "Reference in Digital Environments" and "Education and Training in/for Digital Libraries," the former chaired by Marie Radford (Rutgers University), and the latter by Jeffrey Pomerantz (University of North Carolina) and Anna Maria Tommaro (University of Parma-Italy).

For the first three days, participants met at the Inter-University Center just outside Dubrovnik's old city, and the last two days at the Hotel Odisej on Mjlet. These locations provided memorable settings for the multiple daily sessions, demonstrations, discussions, and social gatherings that made up this close-knit conference.

The LIDA codirectors, Tefko Saracevic (Rutgers University) and Tatjana Aparac-Jelusic (University of Zadar), opened the conference by reviewing LIDA's short history, and the longer history of its topics. They explained how LIDA aims to examine

A look at Dubrovnik, site of this year's LIDA conference.

not only what goes on in libraries, but what goes on far above and outside them, and posited that when going digital, libraries aren't abandoning traditional principles, but developing new ones. Paolo Galluzi (director of the National Institute and Museum of the History of Science in Florence) argued for disposing the distinction between digital and nondigital libraries, preferring to speak of a hybrid library, and using his organization's work on making the documents and artifacts of Galileo available online as an example. Radford introduced the reference track, reminding us that while offering these services we must try to overcome generational differences by looking to our users' service preferences and by working to exude a sense of readiness and ability.

The reference track was full of such suggestions; Kathleen Kern, Helle Lauridsen, and Caleb Tucker-Raymond all stressed, from academic, vendor, and public library perspectives, the role of the user in determining digital library services. Radford and Lynn Connaway (OCLC) shared results from their extensive research on virtual reference users, and demonstrations of collaborative

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reference, digital content, and technologies from academic and public libraries in Singapore and Croatia were offered. This track continued over the second and third days of the conference with speakers from the United States, Slovenia, Greece, France, the United Kingdom, Austria, and Ireland. There was no shortage of approaches to digital reference, from practical tips for implementation and case studies of successful use, to theoretical talks on guiding users' information-seeking behavior.

The preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage was demonstrated by Manfred Mayer (University of Graz) via the Traveler's Conservation Copy Stand, a fully portable scanner that allows a librarian to travel with fragile or highly valuable materials and digitize them without further damage. This kind of work was put into context during tours of Dubrovnik's Franciscan Monastery and Research Library, and the Dubrovnik City Archives, both of which contain many invaluable and highly fragile texts currently accessible only to the cultural and literary researchers able to come to them. One explicit need for digital preservation was revealed when the archives guide explained that since the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the majority of the city's collections remain in storage in a fort outside the city, without climate control.

LIDA conference attendees chat before a session.

A highlight of the early part of the second track was a talk given by Gregory Crane, a classicist from Tufts University. Crane is also the director of a major grant from the Digital Libraries Initiative intended to examine the problems surrounding digital libraries and the humanities. He offered an entertaining and informative walk through the issues surrounding language and digital libraries, from the concept of *memes* ("the cultural equivalent of a gene"), to Plato's challenge in the *Phaedrus* concerning writing, to the possible uses for rexa.info—a new search engine covering research in computer science, among other fields. He pointed out (and this was echoed by other speakers) that many of the people working to create new digital collections aren't themselves librarians, but specialists like himself in various academic fields, who may or may not work with libraries on their digitization projects; he called for digital library educators to do more to train their students for this work.

Thanks to the excellent organization of the conference, LIDA participants were able to catch an early ferry from Port Gruz, near Dubrovnik, to the island of Mjlet, where the latter part of the conference was held. The education track continued with discussion based on presentations regarding the teaching of digital libraries by educators and practitioners from Sweden, Lithuania, Spain and Germany, among others. The conference's Guest of Honor, Peter Ingwersen from the Royal School of Library and Information Science in Denmark, provided a detailed framework for research (and teaching) in information retrieval.

In an invited talk, Tefko Saracevic examined the general groundwork for a graduate course on digital libraries, making the point that any teacher should be able to answer easily a few basic questions about his or her class. Why teach it? What is being taught? How is it being taught? He also shared a story of primitive preservation technology, telling how in Mesopotamia (present day Iraq) two copies of each clay tablet would be created,

one baked, and one unbaked. This was done to guard against the two major natural threats of the time—fire and flood. In a fire, the unbaked copy would survive, and after a flood, the baked would remain. This, he speculated, perhaps compares favorably to our day, when we have created history's fastest growing, yet least persistent technology—the Web.

The last day featured a PhD forum sponsored by the American Society for Information Science and Technology, with graduate student presentations from Estonia, the United States. and Canada, along with smaller poster sessions from presenters from all over the world. Invited speaker Anna Maria Tammaro introduced quality models and some core values for digital librarianship and its teaching designed to reach across cultures, forming an international basis for the field.

And in a session designed to introduce one of the central topics for LIDA 2009, Natasa Milic-Frayling from Microsoft Research, UK, attempted to describe how the continued existence of libraries and librarians involves a willingness to redefine our roles and practices. She examined our urge to preserve, showing how humanity has always produced knowledge, ideas and data, and then attempted to preserve it. We now produce more information and media than ever, and she asked that, given the expense of digital preservation, we think about why we want to preserve such a large percentage of it. Choosing cultural priorities and deciding on questions of relevance are volatile issues, and according to Milic-Frayling, may be aspects of the future of librarianship. She offered the example of a particular Leonardo da Vinci codex, one copy of which resides in the British Library, with the other owned by Microsoft. When Italy wants to reacquire this piece of its cultural heritage, who decides how that happens or which organization should relinquish their copy?

Questions of this sort related to aspects of both conference tracks filled the talks given at this effective and thought-provoking five-day gathering, and attempts at answers were generated in formal and informal discussion alike. One of the strengths of LIDA 2008 (and every other year, I would imagine) was the close proximity of all its participants, allowing these conversations to move from the meeting rooms to coffee to the lovely stone streets of Dubrovnik and the restaurants of Mjlet.

The 2009 version of LIDA, its tenth anniversary, will be held in Dubrovnik and Zadar, Croatia, and will feature two different themes: "Heritage and Digital Libraries: Digitization, Preservation and Access" and "Reflections: Changes Brought By and in Digital Libraries in the Last Decade." After this tenth conference, planned for May 25–30, 2009, it is intended for LIDA to become a biannual gathering. ✒

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drop-in class in the style of their choice at the wide variety of dance studios in town. How about dropping by Velocity Dance Studio on Seattle's Capital Hill for a hip-hop class? The teachers are smart, savvy, and rockin', and the drop-in format makes the environment welcoming and, should one's expertise require, forgiving.

Understanding the wealth of cultural opportunities that Seattle has to offer necessitates that one recognize the pattern that has been established by the community of artists and their audiences. Seattle respects the next generation of artists by fostering environments where new artists can get their work shown, by supporting the training of future artists, and by maintaining an open mind toward authentic cultural diversity. And Seattle's artistic community actively seeks ways to engage their audiences beyond the performances by offering education, dialogue, and exposure to artists and their work.

So, it isn't just your imagination. No need to fantasize about the perfect season of cultural events. One needn't enter a realm of purple haze, dreaming about how all the artistic disciplines can work together to inspire, enlighten, and engage. It can all happen in Seattle. Oh, yes. Speaking of purple haze, did we mention that Jimi Hendrix comes from Seattle? ✒