

Report from Bill Johnston (bill69599@gmail.com) to Milcop meeting (29/10/26 Agenda 4.3) on the conference:

“Missions in Motion: from Service to Empowerment in the Era of AI and Digital Capitalism (KRIK)”.

The Conference was held at the University of Zagreb, Croatia, 7/8 September 2026 and supported by the Norwegian Embassy as part of the EU funded NextGenerationEU KRIK project. Aligned to the broader KRIK project (‘From service to empowerment: Critical-theoretical articulation of library profession’s role in higher education’) the conference positioned information literacy, pedagogy and library services together as sites of criticality in challenging times.

I attended the conference with Sheila Webber (University of Sheffield) as Invited Commentators. Sheila live blogged the conference and her detailed summaries are available on her Information Literacy Weblog from 7 September onwards. Consequently this report is a snapshot of my reflections.

Revising the conference programme I think the main frame of reference is the widespread view that the decades old international, rules-based order has failed, and societies are now in a period of disturbing and destabilising transition. This is characterised, in part, with breakdowns of trust in the established social and political institutions of democracy and citizen’s rights. The high profile attention given to mis/disinformation and corporatised media is a significant feature of political and social concern at these developments.

Consequently librarians, educators and Information scholars are obliged to question traditions of professional neutrality and

distance from political tensions. As professionals and citizens we are obliged to revisit our values of intellectual freedom, social justice and civic responsibility in a time of polycrisis and information dystopia.

Several interrelated areas of critical praxis are in play at this time: education, library service and civic engagement. The pedagogical challenge is to conceive learning as an arena of 'troublesome knowledge' designed to stretch learners and develop critical consciousness of inequality and power relations. For example this would challenge models of AI as a 'convenience' for learning, offering easy access not only to information, but also to fabrication of complex knowledge products. Arguably the ACRL Framework is a solid basis for a library and information literacy practice to counteract learning by such 'cognitive offload' i.e. passing the thinking over to AI.

ACRL and other professional bodies have powerful resources of research and scholarship at their backs. However library services in education and communities are faced with serious economic, political and institutional pressures. The EU, for example, values libraries for their cultural importance and social contributions. Nonetheless high-level declarations do not necessarily translate into budgets, staffing and capacity building at national, local and institutional levels. That said folk are taking action to express their cultural values through a community service ethos of inclusiveness and the co-creation of cultural spaces.

One short presentation exemplified this for me. It concerned Zagreb City Libraries formation of a poetry festival celebrating local feminist writer (Vesna Parun). The aim was to express the choice of a marginalised author as a "...political and feminist ..." act of civic commitment. The design countered any notion of a neutral service delivery to a passive audience by engaging

citizens in co-creation of the format and conduct of the festival. This included children's workshops and also presentations by emerging authors.

In summary the conference presentations, discussion and conviviality combined to yield a synthesis of theory, practice and reflection on action for our times.

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