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Report: MELCom 2025

Among the many positive experiences at my first MELCom conference, the event was an excellent opportunity to network with colleagues from across the world. I met and exchanged contact information with individuals sharing similar interests in LIS and the Middle East from France, Canada, Egypt, England, Switzerland, and elsewhere. I look forward to staying in touch with some of these new acquaintances and to hopefully seeing many again at a future conference.

Further, there were several take-aways from the conference that I hope to apply in the classroom. For example, for my course on Scholarly Communication and Open Access, I will consider including the open access archival collections of French historian André Raymond, presented by MariaLuisa Langella, and which she characterized as an "example of open science working". Similarly, the vendor presentation by Dahman Soltani of eMarefa provided an example of a tool that allows librarians to search journal articles and other sources written in languages other than English, and which that I can introduce to my students. Such tools are essential, as the academic literature notes the reputational disadvantage suffered by scholars and journals that publish in non-English languages, as well as issues with lack of searchability and availability, despite the fact that these non-English publications are often more responsive to the needs of scholars' local communities. Moreover, during our visit to the Institut du monde arabe, a museum display on "ijaza" reminded me that ijazas were historically awarded for calligraphy, a fact that I can integrate into my discussion of the ijaza system in my course on Comparative Information Traditions: Islamic Civilization.

In addition, I gained many miscellaneous insights during the conference. For example, although the details of extremely specialized presentations in areas like manuscript inks are not relevant to my daily work, they provided fascinating examples of the range of work carried out by librarians who focus on issues related to the Middle East. Meeting several librarians with research backgrounds rather than MLIS degrees (a largely taboo situation in the Canadian context) reinforced my suspicion that requiring an MLIS for all librarian positions may exclude candidates with specialized skillsets more adapted to certain positions than a generic LIS education. While not having professional implications, as a bilingual Canadian, I was intrigued to discover that the Sorbonne Nouvelle houses the largest collection of Quebec literature outside of Canada.

Despite the many positive aspects of the conference, I questioned whether select elements could be improved to make the event even more beneficial. Although various topics covered by MELCom are relevant to professors and researchers in Islamic or Middle East studies, and perhaps also to select LIS scholars, I was the only attendee focused on teaching and not directly associated with a library (or similar information institution). My background seemed to surprise many of the other participants. While it is perfectly acceptable for a conference to primarily attract librarians, there may be benefit in performing greater outreach to other professionals who would benefit from this conference and contribute slightly different viewpoints on matters at the intersection of LIS and Middle East studies.

Similarly, the domination of English throughout the conference, reinforced by Felix Wiedemann's closing presentation, raised some question marks. Though the appeal of promoting an 'international' language is obvious, there were several local francophone attendees who struggled with English. Further, there is something odd about a profession that is trying to counter a history of colonization and Orientalism imposing English, particularly in a context where so many attendees were either francophone or spoke French as a second language. (In making this observation and advocating for the greater inclusion of languages like French, I am aware of the irony that our host French institution would refuse to hire me, a hijab-wearing woman, due to the continued othering of France's Muslim population from its former colonies; however, two wrongs do not make a right.) Particularly during years when MELCom is hosted in a non-anglophone country, it may be worthwhile considering parallel sessions for certain panels that would provide attendees with the option to attend a presentation in English or in another widely understood language.

Thank you again to the organizers for facilitating the conference and for the grant that helped me attend. I hope to have the opportunity to participate again in a future year.