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The Digital Library of Slovenia (dLib.si)
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The Digital Library of Slovenia (dLib.si)

Michael Biggins

ABSTRACT. The article discusses the ambitious Web site and project Digitalna knjižnica Slovenije [Digital Library of Slovenia]. It encompasses periodicals, books, photographs, music scores, posters, maps, and sound recordings. Its stated goal is to provide both global access to, and long-term digital archival preservation of, Slovenia’s national heritage. The availability in the DLS of antiquarian books, periodicals, and other formats alongside full-text digital versions of some very prominent current periodicals makes for an intriguing open access hybrid of public domain and copyright-protected materials. The author explains how this has happened.

KEYWORDS. Digitalna knjižnica Slovenije, Digital Library of Slovenia, digitization, access, preservation, scholarly publishing

The Digital Library of Slovenia (here DLS), as it is currently freely available at http://www.dLib.si, is the product of the earliest stages of a three-year project, through 2009, that is being co-financed by the Slovene government’s Directorate for an Information Society and the European Union. Both the three-year goals and the accomplishments of the project to date are impressive. At the end of its first official year, as of January 20, 2008, the DLS has made available 37 current and 11 retrospective Slovene periodicals, some in complete runs; 280 e-books; 10,000 digitized photographs of Slovene subjects; over 1,000
Slovene music scores; more than 3,800 digitized posters dating to various times in Slovenia’s history; 68 maps; and 65 sound recordings.

The DLS is Slovenia’s attempt at a Google Books-style paradigm shift in access to the nation’s entire documented heritage. The project’s current strategic plan sets highly ambitious yearly production goals through 2009, which should keep its key production staff, within the Digital Library Development Section of the Slovene National and University Library (NUK), very busy.¹ If those goals are met, 2010 should see a cumulative total of 17,500 full-text digital versions of Slovene books within the portal, along with similarly ambitious numbers of periodical issues, photos, and other formats. The project’s long-term goals beyond 2010 are several: to digitize, archive, and make publicly available the entire Slovene retrospective repertory of publications up to 1945; to establish a system whereby Slovene publishers routinely and consistently deposit all of their born-digital materials in the DLS for digital archiving; and to develop a portal that allows for one-step federated searching of the complete contents of the DLS, together with the many commercial databases and full-text resources, both Slovene and international, that NUK licenses.

In its present state, the availability in the DLS of antiquarian (mostly pre-1920s) books, periodicals, and other formats alongside full-text digital versions of some very prominent current periodicals makes for an intriguing open access hybrid of public domain and copyright-protected materials. Impressively, the DLS appears to have negotiated agreements with the publishers of close to 40 Slovene periodicals to make nearly complete digital back files of the journals freely available to the public. These journals include a large number of Slovenia’s most prominent scientific, medical, and business publications, together with just a handful of mainstay humanities publications, such as Jezik in slovstvo and Muzikološki zbornik. Nearly all of the 37 journals available in full text in January 2008 offer free access to full-text contents through their 2006 volumes, and in some cases extend open access to at least some issues for 2007. This suggests that DLS and the Slovene publishers who have signed onto the project so far have reached a JSTOR-style agreement to archive and provide online access with a “moving wall” of just one year, and in some cases even less. What is truly astonishing here is that it is
precisely the disciplinary journals that in the U.S. would function as the biggest revenue-generators of all in online format—science, technology, engineering, and medicine—that have forfeited what might otherwise be substantial licensing revenues in order to contribute to the cause of developing the DLS.

In fact, scholarly publishing in Slovenia adheres to a very different dynamic from the one that has dominated in the U.S. until now. As a condition of the government support which Slovene research institutes and scholarly societies receive to produce their journals, the government stipulates that journal contents must be made freely Web-accessible. According to DLS project administrator Zoran Krstulovič, the publishers of academic journals now increasingly see DLS as a no-cost solution for fulfilling that obligation, which they previously had to finance out of their own budgets. Winning non-academic journals over to DLS, Krstulovič admits, has required more intensive one-on-one negotiation with the journals’ publishers and the results to date have been minimal, but the promise of a one- or two-year moving wall should keep those journals’ subscription revenues secure. DLS anticipates adding two or three additional such periodicals to its archive in the course of 2008.

Of more interest to Slovenists worldwide will be the Slovene antiquarian books, periodicals, photos and other materials that are now reportedly being digitized in large numbers. Of the 261 books currently available, 226 are translations into Slovene, published from 1830 to the 1920s, of original German works. Only about thirty e-books in the collection are original Slovene works, but nearly all of these are by leading nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors: Ivan Cankar, Dragotin Kette, Josip Murn, and others. Each book (and each periodical article) is viewable in both HTML and PDF format. Besides author and title fields, each metadata record includes extensive subject headings, a brief description of the contents, the date of publication or creation, the language of the document, the publisher (if applicable), and material type. If the item is a journal article, then the source journal, volume, issue, and page numbers are also provided. Searches can be made against a number of fields, including author, title (i.e., of a book or article), source publication (i.e., the journal in which an article was published), formal subject headings, keywords (which draw on text in completed metadata fields only) and full-text searching. Even now,
for instance, the user can do a keyword or full-text search for such a culturally significant concept as **hrepenenje** [longing] and find hundreds of occurrences of the word, in articles, poems, short stories, and song titles, as well as anywhere within the texts of books and other publications. As the DLS grows, its significance as a research tool for textological and quantitative studies of Slovene literature will become enormous.

While the DLS search portal is well designed and thoroughly functional as it stands, and additional functionality is planned for various future dates, some important features should be added sooner rather than later. The path back to the main search interface should be made clearer on some of the auxiliary and informational pages. The capability should be introduced to search a character string occurring anywhere in the database in a single operation, whether in author, title, or subject headings, or within full text. Because this is the Slovene national digital repository, users should be able to limit their search results by the language of the original publication (for instance, whether German or Slovene), in order to limit search results to original Slovene works only. Users looking for photographic material should be given more information about the original photograph, its dimensions, provenance, and the current archival locations of both the print original and the high-resolution digital TIFF scan; since the photo archive consists of very low-resolution JPEG files, scholars looking to extract more (and more accurate) visual information from them than the JPEGs have captured will need to consult the originals. Some of the descriptive metadata for images (notably the supposed identities of some individuals and the hypothesized dates of otherwise undocumented photographs) is spurious or even clearly wrong. DLS should recruit subject experts—historians, literary scholars, musicologists, and others—to review metadata for accuracy.

The stated goal of DLS is to provide both global access to, and long-term digital archival preservation of, Slovenia’s national heritage. Achieving just one or the other of these goals is a major undertaking, each requiring its own specific skill sets and processes. Accomplishing both goals at the same time will be an enormous accomplishment, even for so compact a nation as Slovenia. The early results are impressive, albeit uneven in places. It will be fascinating to watch this resource grow and mature.
NOTES
