

Profile of an Information Community: H-Net

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Information community: a partnership of institutions and individuals forming and cultivating a community of interest around the provision and exchange of information, or knowledge, aimed at increasing access to that information or increasing communication, and thereby increasing that knowledge.

H-Net (Humanities and Social Sciences OnLine): <http://www.h-net.msu.edu>

H-Net began in 1992 and grew from a set of roughly 12 electronic discussion lists in 1993 to 122 discussion lists (each with a website) plus book reviews, conferences, and training sessions in 2000. (A listing of the discussion lists is appended to this report.) A current tally of list subscribers counts more than 76,000 people in 90 countries. A 1996 tally found that 1/4 of subscribers were non-US. H-Net was born as History-Net, then became Humanities-Net, and is now formally "Humanities and Society Sciences OnLine," but still "H-Net" to most.

The screenshot shows the Netscape browser window displaying the H-Women Discussion Network website. The browser title is "H-Women Discussion Network - Netscape". The website has a navigation menu with links for "home", "news", "gatewaycys", "interact", "about", "logs", and "contact us". Below the menu are sections for "GENERAL INFORMATION" (with links to "Subscribe!", "About H-Women", "Subscription Help", and "Editors"), "H-WOMEN RESOURCES" (with links to "Discussion Logs", "Scholars' Directory", "H-Women Reviews", "Announcements", "Syllabi & Dissertations", "Bibliographies", "Discussion Threads", "Manuscripts", and "Internet Links"), and "OTHER RELATED LISTS" (with links to "H-Frauen-I", "H-Minerva", and "H-SAWH"). A central graphic features the text "H-WOMEN" with a female symbol and a photo of five women. Below this is a welcome message: "Welcome to H-Women, a member of H-Net Humanities & Social Sciences OnLine. H-Women is free and open to everyone with a mature and abiding interest in the history of women, especially scholars, teachers and librarians. Be sure to also enter your name in our [H-Women Scholars' Directory](#). [Tell me more about H-Women!](#)". At the bottom, there are two columns of "RECENT REVIEWS" and "RECENT MESSAGES" with brief details of each.

H-Net is physically located at Michigan State University, and managed since 1994 by charter, with an executive committee comprised of 9 elected members from outside MSU and three appointed staff, two from outside MSU. Funding has come from MSU, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and other universities in the U.S., Canada and Australia.

Relying as it does on list editors from all over the academic world, H-Net is a very unique type of information community. The partnership that cultivates H-Net's multiple and related communities of interest is between MSU, the H-Net executive committee, the 122 list editors, and additional book review editors and

members of list editorial teams, not to mention those thousands who send in reviews and email contributions. H-Net manages a process of obtaining and sending out review copies of books, and the reviews are then interactive.

These observations about the aims, activities, and trajectory of H-Net are based primarily on study of the H-Net web site, papers posted thereon, and dialogue with one of the list editors.

Defining a new role for scholars: list editing. These editors, who might be called list moderators elsewhere, work an estimated two hours daily handling the posts to their lists. They do this without remuneration as part of their scholarly activities.

H-Net describes the online discussion as an "ongoing and multisubject seminar" or a "peer discussion." A short paper by list editor Melvin Page explain the art of H-Net list editing. H-Net, he writes, is in many ways "the extension into the electronic age of the academic journal and newspaper." List editing involves keeping subject lines uniform, clipping off signatures and "inspirational messages," but also rejecting posts.

Ninety percent of the rejections, according to Page, are of spam, off-topic messages, silly posts, subscription items, and personal or accidental posts. The other 10% are instances where he will "tread carefully" and suggest revisions to the author of the post, in order to best facilitate the "ongoing seminar" that is the list. He sees this as helping someone think over something that might have been written hastily, and he has never refused someone's insisting to post without revision.

Page's detailed report of the editing process reflects a core belief of H-Net: that in order for an online "seminar" with perhaps 2000 people listening (if not talking) to proceed, someone has to guide the discussion.

H-Afro-Am's purpose statement presents the H-Net concept:

As an electronic infrastructure for the field, it will establish a professional academic foundation inclusive of all ideological tendencies and schools of thought. The intended audience for H-Afro-Am is mainly academic: faculty, administrative and research professionals, graduate students, and advanced undergraduates. The focus is on the African Diaspora though mainly on the US experience, and then to the African Diaspora in comparison to the US. The editorial style will be similar to one appropriate for a journal (written text) and a round table discussion at a professional meeting (short exchanges between colleagues). The main issue is to maintain a high level of professionalism, in content and form, so that everyone has access and can benefit. This is not a plan for uniformity or consensus, but *ground rules for a dynamic exchange of ideas and information in which agreements and conflicts can be experienced and learned from as well.* (italics mine)

Perusing various discussion list logs shows that some lists live up to the H-Net ideal and others are in fact more of an announcements bulletin board. What drives the activity on each list? Can a list be developed into seminar mode if it has lapsed into announcements mode, and what impact does that have on the subscribers and perhaps on their discipline? Contrariwise, are developments within a given discipline driving activity or lack thereof on the corresponding list?

Democratic. H-Net has a strong democratic aspect. What H-Net refers to as its "inherently democratic nature" is in fact a function of its technical and organizational design. Participation across the world of scholars is very broad. The preponderance

of posts, and presumably subscribers, are from other than high prestige institutions. Graduate students, women, and scholars from afar are significant populations on-list. These groups have been generally "on the periphery" in the offline world. Several non-English lists undoubtedly help. A review of the dimensions of H-Net is helpful:

As of August 1996	70 lists	45000 subscribers, 25% overseas.
January 1997	80 lists	
May 98	92 lists	70,000 subscribers
December 1998	~100 lists	90,000 subscribers
Current	122 lists	76,000 subscribers in over 90 countries

(It was not possible to find out why the number of subscribers surged in 1998.)

H-Net sets as a goal to "remain cutting edge while meeting the need of scholars without the latest technology." This is reflected in a image-light web site, in H-Net's text-email basis, and in their offline training and discussion activities, which are aimed at the middle strata and not only the "early adopters" of Internet scholarship and teaching.

At any given school, particularly the smaller ones, faculty expertise and a student's interest may not match at all. H-Net brings that student out of isolation, directing them according to interest and knowledge rather than within their level of the hierarchy of the academy. There are frequently posts that start out "for a student in my department I would like to ask...." This levels things up, again, surmounting the problem of larger better funded institutions versus the more numerous less well funded institutions.

Another democratizing practice can be found on at least one list: H-Africa. That list's website publishes tables of contents of more than 150 journals, which is critical for scholars at less funded institutions. Perhaps because of this underfunding across Africa, the H-Africa discussion list logs are the most advanced in H-Net. They are sortable by topic -- not thread, but topic -- so that the entire discussion from 1995 on has become a most useful journal itself.

Free. A fundamental aspect of H-Net is that it is free. Anyone can join a list, use the H-Net web resources, submit posts or reviews. Policymakers and independent researchers have joined H-Net in enough numbers to be noticed. The absence of cost facilitates the democratic nature of the activities.

Enabling emergence of new disciplines and ongoing discussions of particular topics or areas. A number of H-Net lists are simply the translation of existing disciplines onto the Internet. But other lists enable scholars to reconceptualise or define new disciplines by cluster subject specialists from various disciplines. For instance: H-Minerva, which is about women and war and women and the military, has on its editorial team a sociologist, two historians, a political scientist, and two women military veterans. There are 12 lists that deal with the history of a state or region.

Producing a new kind of academic. H-Net's technical staff is primarily graduate students, so the project is also creating a new kind of academic, someone within a discipline with information skills to boot. MSU's MATRIX program offers a Humanities Computing Certificate to graduate students.

Esoteric no more. With the breadth of its communities, esoteric issues can be brought out of obscurity. If an "obscure" question is posed, with 5-6 people replying with very different references, ideas, and origins, suddenly the Q is esoteric no longer. Instead of a canon of issues or topics, each issue emerges and becomes a node in a network of ideas and the people who research or teach those ideas. This would seem to lend itself to quicker conceptual transformations within a field.

Classroom of the future. Among other H-Net activities, thirteen lists are devoted to teaching and/or technology.

EDTECH	Educational Technology
H-AfrLitCine	Teaching and Study of African Literature and Cinema
H-AHC	Association for History and Computing
H-CLC	Computers and Literary Studies
H-Film	Cinema History; Uses of the Media
H-High-S	Teaching High School History and Social Studies
H-MMedia	High-Tech Teaching, Multimedia, CD-ROM
H-Psychohistory	Research, Theory and Teaching in Psychohistory
H-Survey	Teaching United States History Survey Courses
H-Teach	Teaching College History
H-Teachpol	Teaching Political Science (Post-secondary)
H-W-Civ	Teaching Western Civilization Courses
EH.Teach	Teaching Economic History

H-Net has also funded seven other universities and one historical society to be regional teaching centers for the classroom of the future. These centers are developing prototypes and training scholars. In effect, the H-Net lists are organizing people in the humanities or social science professions to transform their profession.

According to some data, the profession is in crisis. A 1999 survey of faculty by the American Association for History and Computing (AAHC) points up widespread disagreement with college technology planning, dissatisfaction with current classroom technologies as resource and time hogs, fears about technology ignorance, and yet an "alert recognition throughout the profession" that the Internet are changing or could change "every dimension of history—from the structures of knowledge to the paradigms of pedagogy."

MSU gearing up to use H-Net's successes elsewhere. An MSU unit called MATRIX is a sort of organizational shell around H-Net, which is allowing MSU to make use of innovative techniques and principles developed by H-Net. For example, the Gallery of the Spoken Word project is digitizing audio recordings of speeches and other material.

User survey. 1997 survey of users found more senior professionals (faculty) on the lists and more university students on the web sites. The most desired material these users wanted to see more on the web was primary resource material, which doubtless contributed to H-Net's involvement in prototype projects at MSU and around the country. The AAHC survey found that 27% of history faculty were assigning students to create web pages. This same survey pointed up

Focusing particularly on Africa. With an awareness of the uneven development of the global network, H-Net conducts a variety of activities to foster African

scholarship. It runs connectivity workshops for Africans in Africa and here, and (like SI) has a contract with South Africa to digitize some portion of the anti-apartheid movement archives. The cluster of H-Net lists concerning africa are a prime way this focus expresses itself:

H-AfrArts	African Expressive Culture
H-AfResearch	Primary Sources in African Studies
H-Africa	African History and Culture
H-AfrLitCine	Teaching and Study of African Literature and Cinema
H-AfrPol	Current African Politics
H-AfrTeach	Teaching African History and Studies
H-Safrica	South African History
H-West-Africa	West African History and Culture

A particular indicator of its commitment to future scholars in Africa came when H-Net protested to the Educational Testing Service regarding ETS's plans to computerize and centralize all standardized testing it offered Africa. H-Net's proposal was that testing be available in some format within 200km of any African's home, rather than in only a few countries at only 2-3 times per year.

Outreach to librarians. Of the roughly 20 papers about H-Net published on the H-Net site, most concern historians. The only other profession singled out for attention is librarians. The author, who co-edits an H-Net list, urges librarians to participate in H-Net lists. He points out that librarians are generally well ahead of historians on the electronic information learning curve, and the ALA's history section affiliated with H-Net in 1996. Librarians, he says, need to read H-Net book reviews to aid in acquisitions planning. They need to be on H-Net lists or to browse the relevant lists to stay abreast of scholarship in their primary areas. And they can be of great help in H-Net discussions and policy-making on electronic copyright; such collaboration would help all those interested in expanding access to information.

References

H-Net: History and Social Sciences OnLine. On the web at <http://www.h-net.msu.edu>

Dennis A. Trinkle, "History and the Computer Revolutions: A Survey of Current Practices," *Journal of the Association for History and Computing*, Volume 2, Number 1, April 1999. On the web at: <http://mcel.pacificu.edu/JAHC/JAHCII1/ARTICLESII1/Trinkle/Trinkleindex.HTML>

Appendix: The 122 Discussion Lists of H-Net, April 2000

List Name	Description
EDTECH	Educational Technology
H-AfrArts	African Expressive Culture
H-AfrResearch	Primary Sources in African Studies
H-Africa	African History and Culture
H-AfrLitCine	Teaching and Study of African Literature and Cinema
H-Afro-Am	African-American Studies
H-AfrPol	Current African Politics
H-AfrTeach	Teaching African History and Studies
H-AHC	Association for History and Computing
H-Albion	British and Irish History
H-AmIndian	American Indian History and Culture
H-AmRel	American Religious History
H-Amstdy	American Studies
H-Announce	H-Net Academic Announcements
H-Antisemitism	Antisemitism
H-ANZAU	History of Aotearoa / New Zealand and Australia
H-Appalachia	Appalachian History and Studies
H-Arete	Sports Literature
H-ASEH	Environmental History
H-Asia	Asian Studies and History
H-Bahai	Culture and History of the Baha'i Faith
H-Business	History of Business and Commerce
H-California	History and Culture of California
H-Canada	Canadian History and Studies
H-Catholic	History and Culture of Catholicism
H-Cervantes	Life, Times, and Work of Cervantes
H-Childhood	History of Childhood and Youth
H-CivWar	U.S. Civil War History
H-CLC	Computers and Literary Studies
H-Demog	Demographic History
H-Diplo	Diplomatic History and International Affairs
H-Education	History of Education
H-Ethnic	Ethnic and Immigration History
H-Film	Cinema History; Uses of the Media
H-Francais	H-Net liste des Clionautes, sur l'histoire et la geographie en France
H-France	French History and Culture
H-Frauen-L	Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe
H-GAGCS	German-American and German-Canadian Studies
H-German	German History
H-Grad	For Graduate Students Only
H-High-S	Teaching High School History and Social Studies
H-HistBibl	Study and Practice of History Librarianship
H-HistMajor	Undergraduate History Major
H-HistoryDay	National History Day Forum
H-Holocaust	Holocaust Studies
H-Ideas	Intellectual History
H-Indiana	Indiana History and Culture
H-Islamart	History of Islamic Art and Architecture
H-Italy	Italian History and Culture
H-ItAm	Italian-American History and Culture
H-Japan	Japanese History and Culture
H-Judaic	Judaica, Jewish History
H-Labor	Labor History
H-LatAm	Latin American History
H-Law	Legal and Constitutional History
H-LIS	History of Library and Information Science

H-Local	State and Local History; Museums
H-Mac	History and Macintosh Society
H-Maryland	Maryland History and Culture
H-Mexico	Mexican History and Mexican Studies
H-Michigan	History and Culture of Michigan
H-Mideast-Medieval	The Islamic Lands of the Medieval Period
H-Minerva	Women in War and Women and the Military
H-MMedia	High-Tech Teaching, Multimedia, CD-ROM
H-MusTxt	Musico-Textual Studies
H-NCC	The National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History
H-NEXA	The Science-Humanities Convergence Forum
H-Nilas	Nature in Legend and Story
H-Ohio	History and Culture of the State of Ohio
H-OIEAHC	Colonial and Early American History
H-Oralhist	Studies Related to Oral History
H-PCAACA	Popular Culture Association and the American Culture Association
H-Pol	United States Political History
H-Polmeth	H-NET/APSA List for Political Methodology
H-Psychohistory	Research, Theory and Teaching in Psychohistory
H-Public	Public History
H-Radhist	History, Theory, Politics from a Radical Perspective
H-Review	H-Net Book Reviews (reviews only, no discussion)
H-Rhetor	History of Rhetoric and Communications
H-Rural	Rural and Agricultural History
H-Russia	Russian History
H-SAE	Society for the Anthropology of Europe
H-SAfrica	South African History
H-SAWH	Women and Gender in the U.S. South
H-Scholar	Independent Scholars and Scholarship
H-Sci-Med-Tech	History of Science, Medicine and Technology
H-SEASIA	South East Asia
H-SHEAR	Early American Republic
H-SHGAPE	Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era
H-Skand	Scandinavian History
H-South	History of the United States South
H-Soz-u-Kult	Methoden, Theorie und Ergebnisse neuerer Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte
H-State	History of the Welfare State, "Putting the State Back In."
H-Survey	Teaching United States History Survey Courses
H-Teach	Teaching College History
H-Teachpol	Teaching Political Science (Post-secondary)
H-Texas	History and Culture of Texas
H-Turk	Turkish Studies
H-UCLEA	Labor Studies
H-Urban	Urban History
H-US-Japan	US-Japan Relations
H-USA	International Study of the USA
H-W-Civ	Teaching Western Civilization Courses
H-War	Military History
H-West	History and Culture of the North American West and Frontiers
H-West-Africa	West African History and Culture
H-Women	Women's History
H-World	World History
HABSBURG	Culture and History of the Central European Habsburg Monarchy and its successor states, 1500 - present
Jhistory	List for Discussion of History of Journalism and Mass Communication
OZNZ.Society	Australia and New Zealand Economic History Research, Announcements
PSRT-L	H-Net/APSA Political Science Teaching and Research

Lists affiliated with H-Net

APSA-CIVED	Civic Education for the Next Century
EH.Disc	Economic History, Informal Discussion
EH.Eastbloc	Economic History of Eastern Europe
EH.Macro	Macroeconomic History, Business Cycles
EH.News	Economic History News, Announcements
EH.Res	Economic History Research Ideas
EH.Teach	Teaching Economic History
HES	History of Economics/Economic Thought, Announcements, Discussion
LPBR-L	Law and Politics Book Review - Reviews Only, No Discussion
Quanhist.recurrent	Comparative Analysis of Recurrent Phenomena