



"H-Net Ten Years On: Usage, Impact, and the Problem of Professionalization in New Media," presented at the annual conference of the American Historical Association by Mark Lawrence Kornbluh, Executive Director, H-NET and Peter Knupfer, Vice President Networks, H-NET

Good morning. It is a pleasure to be with you this morning to talk about H-Net. As many of you know, this month marks the tenth anniversary of the creation of H-Net. For professional historians, as well as the general public, events such as anniversaries that end in zeros, often occasion the opportunity to take stock and evaluate a moment of historical change.

For those of us deeply involved in running H-Net, our concerns, we should make clear, are far from disinterested. (Peter and I both joined H-Net as editors during its first year and have been deeply involved in all aspects of the organization for most of the last ten years.) Our goal is two-fold. To try to understand how H-Net and other similar endeavors in networked scholarly communication have changed the profession and the nature of what it means to be a historian, as well as to use this information to help direct the future development of H-Net.

Our paper this morning, like H-Net itself, is a collaborative effort. In it, we try to lay out what we see as the main questions and challenges in beginning to evaluate and understand H-Net's development. We will go back and forth in presenting this paper and are eager to hear your responses.

Ten years ago, most computers had small green screens, big floppy drives and were still far from ubiquitous in the humanities. Word processing was winning over the profession, but departments still paid secretaries to type for faculty. The World Wide Web had yet to be invented; indeed, very few historians had even heard of email or the Internet.

The announcement of H-Net in January 1992 on usenet bulletin boards immediately attracted attention of many historians who were early adapters of email. The idea of developing edited communities of discourse that focused on professional concerns, but cut across national, disciplinary, and professional lines thrilled many of us. That these concerns should include the scholarship of teaching as well as research was an undeniable part of the appeal. Within a year, H-Women, H-Urban, and HOLOCAUST had been joined by H-Labor, H-LatAm, H-Law, H-Teach and others. H-Net had grown from the original 3 discussion lists to nearly 20 lists, 10,000 subscribers and almost 50 editors.

Growth demanded development: policies, structures, procedures, services, and above all, a sense of direction. It is arguable that the history of the organization from 1994 to the adoption of its constitution and bylaws in 2000 followed lines familiar to historians of professionalization, moving from discourse to discipline; from informal exchanges of information to highly organized individual networks gathered within a self-governing structure of bylaws; from a loose collection of list-based moderators working through a server at the University of Illinois Chicago, to a scholarly society headquartered and supported at Michigan State University's MATRIX humanities technology center; from moderators who simply brokered discussions to editors who anthologized them into massive, unique web archives; and, from broadly-defined online communities reaching across broad swaths of disciplines and fields, to segmented, specialized offsprings networks dedicated to specific issues and content.

This course was not always self-evident, nor is it yet clear to us what

particular pressures produced it. During its early years, H-Net's internal communications literally hummed with excitement, energy and debate as moderators and directors struggled to define and make sense of what they were doing. Many of these early discussions featured "reports from the field" as moderators surveyed their subscribers and each other as they groped toward whatever boundaries might exist in this new medium. We frequently referred to ourselves as pioneers who not only were early adopters of new media, but also the new guys on the block, outsiders who were challenging the stodgy, resistant mainline scholarly organizations like the American Historical Association, Organization of American Historians, and the African Studies Association to take this new form of scholarly communication seriously. Small learned societies also were concerned about us in turn, fearing that new media would undermine their business models, steal their content and audiences, and merge them all into a hodge-podge of barely digested cut-and-paste banality

H-Net's early growth strategy naturally heightened such concerns, since the early lists and networks encompassed entire disciplines, gathering literally tens of thousands of readers that most humanities and social science journals went begging for. Within four years, the average list had over a thousand subscribers, some double and triple that number. H-Soz-u-Kult, on sociocultural method and practice in German topped 6500 subscribers, while area-studies networks in Asia, Latin America, American Studies, women's history, and foreign affairs linked historians to educators and the interested public in unprecedented numbers, averaging 2000 subscribers each. These and many other networks quickly tapped into existing scholarly communities and connected them to new audiences. In the relatively cloistered world of scholarly publication, these numbers demonstrated a significant demand for information that the conventional outlets (conferences, journals, and newsletters) could not meet on a continuing basis.

H-Net's early tendency to describe itself through metaphors to the print world--that its edited messages; its use of advisory boards; and, its posting of essays and more formal academic writings in addition to discussions constituted a free-form yet disciplined variant of the traditional journal--fed these worries about competition and the reach for "market share."

While we saw ourselves as pioneers in 1993--blazing a new trail of communication and cutting through boundaries that had limited discussion---none of us ever imagined the scale that H-Net would grow to in just ten years. At the end of 2002, H-Net now has over 150 edited networks (and will launch another half dozen this month) with over 500 editors worldwide. (Virtually every week, we get inquiries from a new community of scholars within the humanities or social sciences that is interested in starting an H-Net network.) We have sent out over 1 million individual messages on our various listservs during these ten years (every one of which is available on the web). The H-Net Job Guide, which began as an effort to democratize the job market, now posts over 2500 positions a year. During the season, over 20,000 individuals connect to our website to check on openings each week! Moreover, H-Net Reviews in the Humanities and Social Sciences is the largest on-line publisher of scholarly book reviews. We publish nearly a thousand reviews a year, reviewing books from all parts of the world.

The technical capacity necessary to run H-Net has grown geometrically as well. When we began we never imagined what it would take to support the communities that we were building. We thought that we could be a "virtual organization," living off the beneficence of university computer centers. Today, H-Net runs over a half dozen servers. Four machines alone are necessary to efficiently handle the over 800,000 pieces of email that we deliver on an ordinary academic day. Sophisticated database programming makes it possible for us to manage a website that averages over a half million discrete connections each week. Most of those connections come

from the dominant search engine, Google, as the scale, scope, and usage of H-Net results in very high rankings by Google's algorithms. This means that in addition to serving a vast subscriber base, H-Net acts as a portal to the profession on line. Using Google to search for any substantive topic in the humanities and social sciences, one almost always finds a link to H-Net resources within the first page of search results. The fact that visits to our website average over 10 minutes a piece--an eternity in cyberspace where clicking in and out is the norm--indicates that people are actually reading many of the pages that they find. We are committed to maintaining all of H-Net resources on line (at the same url) in perpetuity. As a result, we are engaged in ongoing research and development, and are moving to an xml-based repository. To do this in tandem with maintaining a low-bandwidth flat ascii delivery system, that is open to everyone worldwide, is a constant challenge.

Quantity, of course, does not automatically translate into quality. To say that H-Net is huge, does not speak to that question. Nonetheless, the quantity of usage does mean that individuals are finding something of value to them in H-Net. Editors would not devote the time they do to their networks if this did not bring them some value. Scholarly societies only link up with H-Net lists because it makes sense for them. And subscribers, over 150,000 of them, would not invite H-Net list messages into their over-flowing mailboxes if they were not getting something in return. Nor would website visitors stay more than a few seconds unless they found material of value to them. In sheer market terms, demand and usage indicates value. The challenge is to identify exactly what that value is. Quantity does not make quality, but it does indicate that the profession is using H-Net, indeed H-Net networks have become a central means of communication for history and many related disciplines. This is all the more reason to ask, what H-Net's impact has been.

H-Net has tried fitfully over the years to measure this. Required first by our charter and then by our constitution and bylaws to review operations periodically, we have repeatedly been stymied by the sheer scale and the porousness of H-Net, which mitigate against measurable, verifiable gathering of data. Aside from statistics about numbers of subscribers and visits to our website, all of our information has been impressionistic, anecdotal, and therefore inferential--conversations at conferences; conclusions gathered from subscriber complaints or requests for specific services from editors; backchannel intelligence that this or that editor was hired or fired because of participating in H-Net; etc. As early as 1994, the executive committee had attempted an enterprise-wide review by assigning groups of lists to committee members for review and analysis. In addition, editors were surveyed about their work and were asked to discuss their lists' services with their subscribers. Most of our early lists also screened subscriptions with individual questionnaire forms that provided a snapshot of the list's audiences. But after about 1996, many of our lists and networks, old and new, abandoned the screening of subscriptions, while our porting of discussions to the web expanded readership to legions of unknown non-subscribers. It is ironic then that in an age of information overload, data on our subscribers, our circulation, and usage rates of our material are fragmented and incomplete.

Indeed, we learned rather quickly that we were growing beyond the ability of a single energetic individual (in this case, our first executive director Richard Jensen, who subscribed to and followed all the lists) or even of teams of editors to assess the lists comprehensively. The early reviews produced largely favorable commentary about the value of H-Net for information exchange and basic networking, but they also provided precious little information about our readers or how they were using the networks at the workplace, in research, or in the classroom. They also documented how far short we had fallen of some editors' initial ambitions for H-Net as a publisher for formal academic content (commissioned essays, online journals, conference papers, etc.). It appeared at first that the primary motivation for contributions to our networks was simply to talk and to

be heard, as opposed to publishing in the conventional sense.

Some of these early analyses of our operations reinforced our belief that H-Net began by appealing largely to younger, pre-professional or marginalized scholars and teachers for whom conventional means of reaching their peers through publication and conference participation were unavailable or extremely hard to use. Many (but not all) of our first generation of moderators were drawn from this population of graduate students, adjuncts, teachers at smaller or peripheral institutions, as well as new entrants to the professoriate. Working as editors in conjunction with advisory boards of senior scholars in the field connected these people to the profession in new, exciting and challenging ways, and exposed them to the rigors of gatekeeping much sooner than their programs of study or their status would have allowed.

Short of a full-blown, comprehensive survey of H-Net undertaken at all levels of the organization, we do think that the basic structure of H-Net's network model, which we require in order to launch a network (i.e., an editorial team, an advisory board of six members, a mission statement reflecting knowledge of an audience to be served and the resources that could serve it) has proved successful. Indeed, the following points do in some degree of combination describe "success" for an H-Net network:

Persistence: Only a few of our lists have ceased publication for lack of an audience or an editor to tend it. Most H-Net lists are over two years old (an eternity in cyberspace) and have recruited a second generation of editors. Their flexibility has been important to their durability as new editors and content emerge through experimentation and experience. Lists that are dominated by the personality or style of a solo editor eventually reach a crisis where new editors must be recruited or the list itself is forced to succumb.

High participation rates: Although quantity does not create quality, it does often reveal it. The fact is that high-traffic networks also tend to have high substantive participation rates that produce consistently useful, new, value-added material. H-War, H-Diplo, H-Women, for instance, are posting an average of fifteen to twenty-five messages per day, while their subscription rates remain steady. No one is leaving because of all this traffic. Much of this discussion includes extensive narrative and expository treatments of major and emergent issues in the profession, spiced with citations and references to existing sources, and, of great interest, pointing to new online sources in advance of notice in the print media.

Clear, consensus-driven editorial standards backed by an active editorial team and advisory board: It is a rare list that has both active editorial management and poor levels of communication with subscribers. H-Sox-u-Kult, H-Urban, H-Asia, H-Africa, H-Women, and H-Ideas are staffed by teams of editors who stimulate discussions; build new materials at the network website; recruit new editors and board members; and, advocate their networks at professional conferences and meetings. They publish and enforce standards of _netiquette_ that have helped make moderating and editing of academic lists the accepted norm in our profession. In ten years of moderated and edited discussions, not a single dispute between a subscriber and an editor over editorial decisions has reached H-Net's highest level of appeal, its Council. Although some disputes have been severe and potentially very damaging, all have been resolved in one way or another by local editors, subscribers, advisory boards, and members of H-Net's directorate. Perhaps two dozen serious disputes have arisen in that time--remarkable testimony to the general acceptance of professional-quality editing and gatekeeping. Perhaps more important, in at least two instances where the disputants "seceded" to form their own, rival lists to publish material that they believed was being censored at H-Net, the new lists withered and disappeared within a few weeks.

Production of value-added material beyond list discussions: In addition to book reviewing (to be discussed in a moment), a number of networks build upon discussions through features and value-added material of interest to the profession. H-AmIndian's news summaries and teaching recommendations in native American history (<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~amind/>); H-Urban's extensive syllabus archive (<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~urban/teach/index.htm>); H-Demog's working and conference papers on mortality (<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~demog/mortality.html>); H-Bahai's Digital Publication Series (<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/index/pubs.htm>), which includes a library of fugitive Bahai and Babi-related texts in Persian and Arabic--the largest of its kind anywhere; H-Africa's and H-Women's comprehensive thread anthologies collected and stored by editors (<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~africa/threads/>) and (<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~women/threads/>); H-Idea's twentieth century "A Century's Retrospective," which commissions review essays of critical works in the field (<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~ideas/retro.html>); and, H-Polmeth's preprint paper server (<http://web.polmeth.ufl.edu/papers.html>) are all examples of materials that editors and subscribers collect and contribute.

Affiliation with scholarly societies: although H-Net urged its networks to establish formal relations with learned societies, H-Net's image as an outside rival to traditional avenues of communication made it this difficult to accomplish at first. In addition, some editors purposely cultivated their own independence from professional societies at the same time that the latter began to launch their own online services. Yet within the past two years, more of the new applications for networks come in as proposals from learned societies, a sign of increasing acceptance of H-Net's professional status. Thus, H-SHGAPE, H-SHEAR, H-History-and-Theory, H-German, PSRT-L, Jhistory, most of the public and local history networks, H-Education, H-Environment, H-GAGCS, H-LatAm, and several dozen other networks are formally connected to professional societies, either through incorporation into bylaws or by other formal agreement. In some cases, the pre-existence of a tight-knit community of scholars (such as the case with H-SHGAPE, H-Polment, H-Mideast-Medieval, or H-Education, all of which were grounded in a learned society) gave the network its driving force while in symbiotic relationship, the network, helped the society to publicize its scholarship, recruit officers, and attract new members.

Networks that lack all of the above have found it more difficult to retain and develop their audiences. Some lists have failed due to changes in the profession itself: H-W-Civ, for instance, could not maintain a strong readership or level of content in the face of the decline of Euro-centered surveys and the rise of World History and cultural studies. Others, such as H-MMedia, were innovators in infancy but have in some respects been bypassed by the widespread adoption of new media in the classroom and boardroom. Some, such as H-Psychohistory and H-NEXA, failed because their editors, as judged by H-Net's editorial affairs committee and its Council, violated professional norms and flouted H-Net's bylaws.

While H-Net's discrete subject area networks are at the core of the organization, several of our largest initiatives are H-Net wide and involve common resources, even as they are operationalized by the various networks and network editors. Two of these, H-Net Reviews in the Humanities and Social Sciences, and the H-Net Job Guide, deserve a close look.

The vision behind H-Net Reviews was to take a central means of scholarly communication, i.e. peer review of publications, into the digital world.

Freed from economics and time schedules of print publication, H-Net

Reviews_ could offer to rapidly speed up the review process and to eliminate artificial limits on length. Our model was _Reviews in American History_ rather than the 500-word review typical in the journals of record. Given H-Net's diverse networks, we also aimed to get books reviewed from diverse perspectives, often requesting multiple copies of individual books for review. Most important, we aimed to open up the review process and turn it into an arena of discourse, where reviews could be discussed by a professional audience, many of whom also read the book. Our hope was that authors would be willing to break with the norm of the print word and engage their critics in discussion about their works.

As with everything on our networks, the role of editors was crucial to _H-Net Reviews_. Each network was to have one or more book review editors. A central _H-Net Reviews_ office handled much of the administrative work and arranged for professional copy-editing of the final reviews, but it was the review editors that assigned books, asked for rewrites, and accepted final reviews. Editors were to choose reviewers based on professional norms---professional competency and lack of bias. However, H-Net did want to democratize the process and make it possible for a wider range of individuals, including those early in their careers, to review works relevant to their own fields.

In many ways, _H-Net Reviews_ has been remarkably successful. The sheer number of books reviewed, the diversity of publishers and reviewers worldwide far exceeds our expectations. The distribution of _H-Net Reviews_ is also mind-boggling. Each review goes out by email to anywhere from 10,000 to 50,000 readers and is instantly available over off the web. Time and again, review editors indicate that they get more comments on the reviews they wrote for H-Net than on any other publication they have ever written.

We have sped up the review process, (although often not as fast as we would have hoped) and we have provided a forum for longer more discursive reviews.

As with our network discussions, _H-Net Reviews_ has varied greatly by network and editor. Some editors have done remarkable jobs in covering new books in their fields. They have commissioned first-rate reviews, every bit the equal or superior to any print publications in their fields. Other H-Net review editors, like review editors on smaller journals have found the task tough going. Reviewing has languished for those networks, while those reviews published have been sporadic and uneven in quality.

Equally important to the role of the review editor, has been the culture of different networks. Some, like H-SHEAR, a small very specialized network supported by a scholarly society, and H-Africa, a large multi-disciplinary community, have established cultures that promote discussion of new works in tandem with the publication of reviews. As this has grown in practice, authors have shed their reticence and have been willing to engage in online discussion of their works. In contrast, other networks have been unable to break through long established patterns of behavior. On these networks, electronic publication varies little from print publication (except for the volume of distribution), reviews are scarcely discussed and authors almost never reply.

This unevenness caused a great deal of consternation for H-Net editors. We are cognizant of the fact that the stakes are very high in the peer review of books. Given H-Net's enormous distribution network, we take this responsibility seriously. The informality of H-Net and differing expectations about digital publishing can exacerbated the problem. Nonetheless, the economics of online publication gives us an advantage over print journals in that we can assign multiple reviews and cultivate responses to ensure that an author's work gets a fair treatment.

H-Net Reviews has not revolutionized book reviewing by any means, but we have broadened the review process, opened up a new venue for peer review, and provided an opportunity for scholarly discourse. That different communities take advantage of this opportunity unevenly reflects both the nature of those communities and their editors.

On the surface, the H-Net Job Guide is more a professional tool than an intellectual one. The driving motivation was to provide the widest possible distribution of information about professional openings. There is no doubt that the Job Guide does this. The number of positions advertised on H-Net far exceeds that in Perspectives or the Chronicle. The volume of usage speaks to the utility of the guide. It is important to recognize, however, that the motivation behind the Job Guide goes beyond simply providing a professional service.

>From the start, H-Net has been committed to democratizing opportunity. H-Net networks encourage graduate student participation. In the flat ascii world of H-Net listservs, ideas can be evaluated on their own worth. The signature files at the end of posts that indicate academic position and status, do not carry the same weight that titles carry in departments, print publications, and conferences.

To what extent has the spread of information about academic positions, and the opportunity to network and become known regardless of locale and position, helped to open up the stodgiest and most hierarchical of the humanities disciplines over the last decade? We do not know. But it is certainly a question worth asking.

Ten years ago, H-Net announced its existence. "We are here--come one and all." Our assumptions were that there was a demand for edited, structured discussion; for communication across national and disciplinary lines; and, for communication between graduate students and faculty as well as amongst the profession and a wider educated population. We also took it for granted that there was a desire to share resources and knowledge as well as for free and open online publications. There is no doubt that we were right. The sheer numbers are overwhelming and there is every reason to believe that H-Net will continue to grow and encompass many more communities within the social sciences and humanities.

Indeed, from the standpoint of 2003, H-Net institutionalized. We are not revolutionaries banging open the doors of the academe, but rather one of the main means by which the academe communicates and publishes. (H-Net and the AHA, not only co-exist, but assist each other in innumerable ways.) And just like the mainline scholarly societies, H-Net is taken for granted. We are part of the socialization of the profession. Graduate students learn about H-Net and join H-Net networks routinely as they join the profession. Academic departments post their job openings to H-Net as they do to the Perspectives and the Chronicle of Higher Education. Scholars write reviews for H-Net networks as they do for the AHR and other mainline journals. Discussions on H-Net's networks spill over into conferences and departments.

H-Net has tried hard to professionalize itself. It operates under a new Constitution, remarkably similar in structure to the AHA, with elected officers, a Council, and a formal decision making process. Carefully thought out bylaws govern network communications. The process of starting new networks is far more rigorous than ever before. Networks that have violated professional norms and others that have not reached a large audience have been closed and editors have been decertified. H-Net lists, as a result, are much less the expression of the personality of individual editors and are increasingly the product of collaborative communities.

If H-Net has been institutionalized and professionalized, it is time to ask, in a rigorous fashion, whether and how H-Net has changed the

professions. To what extent have H-Net and the technologies on which it is based, fostered a culture of immediacy that is antithetical to scholarly analysis? Is, as early critics complained, H-Net mostly composed of time-wasting "chat." How, or perhaps more accurately, in what ways, has H-Net contributed to a "decline in standards." Given H-Net's increasingly institutionalized position within scholarly communities as a means of communication, one rarely hears the full indictment today, but to what extent has H-Net been an expression and tool of the post-modernist devolution of serious scholarly inquiry.

Turning the question on its head, from the opposite perspective, we need to ask in what ways H-Net has contributed to an opening up of the profession. Has the flattening of hierarchy within H-Net had an impact beyond cyberspace? Has extending the discourse beyond limited professional journals and ivory covered walls helped to reconnect historians with k-12 teachers, librarians, archivists, journalists, and a broader educated public? Has H-Net been a positive force towards internationalizing the profession, particularly for less developed parts of the world? Has H-Net's commitment to take the scholarship of teaching seriously helped to offset the postwar imbalance within the profession?

We need to ask these questions in a rigorous and sustained manner. To this end, we intend to undertake a detailed internal and external review of H-Net in the coming year. We will ask you here with us today to help pose the questions and the larger profession to participate in the study. In the end, H-Net is the product of the labor of hundreds of our colleagues who serve as editors. Such an analysis not only can help us understand the impact that H-Net has, but can also direct energies and efforts in H-Net's future development.



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