Conversational scholarship in cyberspace: the evolution and activities of H-Net, the online network for the humanities

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In an unnervingly short space of time, computer-based communication technologies have effected dramatic changes in scholarly communication in the arts and social sciences. A decade or so ago, computers were little more than bulky calculators, used mostly for mathematical answers to questions asked by physical scientists. Their value for the humanities and social sciences lay in helping researchers to make sense of large sets of demographic data. I remember, as a history undergraduate in the mid-1970s, being assured that over the next decade, advances in computing would see the emergence of a new scientific approach to studying the past, which its champions called 'cliometrics'. I remember, too, my dismay on reading the work of two 'cliometricians', Fogel and Engerman (1974) who, on the basis of computing such things as the average daily caloric intake of plantation slaves, baldly concluded that African-Americans lived better under slavery than during the period of reconstruction (see Gutman 1975).

Yet the subsequent evolution of computing technology was not to privilege positivist scholarship within the humanities and social sciences. Rather, in response to broader market forces, the technology of micro-computing evolved in ways that offered teachers and researchers a tool which, in the main, they could use to work with greater efficiency and economy. Hence the principal attraction of the micro-computer was its use as a typewriter, with what seemed amazing facilities for revision and correction. As a postgraduate tutoring in a busy metropolitan university in the early 1980s, I remember the joy of being able to sketch PhD chapters on the first desktop machine purchased for the department office (it was actually bigger than the desk). Using it meant waiting until after office hours, and often working until the early hours of the morning; but it was worth the inconvenience to see one's thoughts much as they might be read.

Today increasing numbers of workers in the tertiary sector have easy access to compact, powerful and 'user-friendly' machines that, in theory, allow them to do virtually everything from designing the cover of their next publication — written and typeset on the same machine — to transmitting the completed publication to a colleague on the other side of the globe via the Internet. The desktop computer has become a tool for communicating rather than computation. In the last couple of years humanists and social scientists have begun to explore the educational application of new network based communication technologies, notably the much discussed World Wide Web. The Web and its associated software offer anyone with a moderately powered computer and Internet connection access to text, sound and visual materials located on another computer, be it in the next room or on the other side of the planet. Agencies such as the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT) have been quick to sponsor experimental programs using the Web to enhance teaching and self-directed learning, especially in distance education.

For me, the computing/information revolution has meant close involvement in the initiatives and management of H-Net, the online Humanities Network. What follows is a sketch of the evolution and current activities of H-Net, outlining how those of us involved in H-Net see the information revolution changing patterns of scholarly communication and teaching. It reviews some of the problems we have encountered, and concludes by noting some difficulties likely to affect those of us who seek to extend the use of multimedia technology in our teaching and research.

H-Net is a dynamic coalition of moderately computer-literate scholars created some three years by a small group of established historians and postgraduate students working in North American universities. These scholars saw the potential of new software to provide daily edited messages, made up of news and comment on subjects of general interest within their field of scholarship, to colleagues who had, or could acquire, Internet connections and email accounts. Internet discussion and news lists were nothing new, but what H-Net set about creating were 'lists' reserved for academic historians, school teachers, postgraduate students, librarians and archivists. Most importantly, each list was to be edited by a team of scholars and to have an editorial board. By 1994 it had become clear that there was much to be gained by having lists co-sponsored by relevant professional societies. For example, in the case of H-South, a list devoted to the history of the southern United States, close links were forged with the Organisation of Southern Historians. H-Net's Australian and New Zealand History list enjoys a close relationship with the Australian Historical Association.[1]

H-Net currently sponsors 73 electronic discussion lists, a significant number of which are devoted to fields in the humanities and social sciences other than history. Indeed, growth of H-Net lists for Asian studies, Politics and Rhetoric during 1994 was so great that it was decided that the 'H' in H-Net would stand for 'Humanities' instead of 'History'.

The organisation's lists currently reach over 35,000 subscribers in 68 countries. Australians form the third largest national group of subscribers, after the United States and Aotearoa/New Zealand. Each list publishes some 15-60 messages a week. The flow of messages are controlled by the editor, who is responsible for ensuring that communications are of professional value or interest to the members of the list. If a subscriber who sends a message to the list rejects the editor's decision not to transmit it, the editor is obliged to refer the matter for adjudication by her or his editorial board. All messages are permanently archived by H-Net on its gopher / World-Wide-Web site, and can easily be searched.

At the outset, the lists were envisaged as being open-ended conferences. Scholars would be able to do in virtual space what they could only do in the limited discussion time afforded by conferences and seminars. They could communicate current research and teaching interests, test new ideas and share comments on innovations in their field of scholarly inquiry. As it has turned out, the lists have met these expectations much less frequently than the editorial staff of H-Net had hoped. In general, the bulk of subscribers have been content to be passive recipients of information. This has meant that lists with large numbers of subscribers have seen more sustained and worthwhile discussions, but even here conversations have soon run out of steam. Attempts to stimulate discussion by posting work in progress papers for discussion on the list have proved only moderately successful on larger lists.

Why did the lists not work as we originally envisaged? This question was recently examined at some length by Peter Knupfer, a political historian at Kansas State University, and an long-standing H-Net executive member (Knupfer 1996). As his analysis makes clear, the culture of scholarly communication H-Net editors have fostered over the past three years differs from that of more established scholarly communities in key respects. Most significantly, it is a culture that invites scholars to share information to a much greater extent than is the norm in established scholarly circles.

I am the first to admit that tenure, a good record of publication in established scholarly journals, and the support of senior colleagues, have been instrumental in allowing me to make use of new communications to professional advantage. Clearly, what has inhibited the use of lists for the free exchange of scholarly ideas and resources, especially by younger scholars, has been the fear that their work may be plagiarised or their copyright infringed. Understandably, they would rather present their findings and insights through traditional media, where they can be assured of securing peer recognition, copyright protection and professional advancement. An added constraint has been the weight that younger staff understandably give senior colleagues who view active participation in lists as ephemeral, something other than the real business of scholarship.

H-Net has always conceded that scholars participating in the egalitarian environment of its lists risk having ideas plagiarised, and that currently it is impossible to police copyright in the anarchic world of cyberspace. Moreover, H-Net editors have always defended the intellectual worth of lists, but have never assumed they are other than a means of enhancing established scholarly aims and practices. The organisation has long had a policy of warning postgraduate students and contract staff who actively involve themselves in a list, often to the extent of seeking to join the editorial board, that they should not do so at the expense of hindering their doctoral studies or conventional scholarly publication. H-Net does believe, however, that the worth of the service its editors provide should be recognised and credited towards professional advancement.

On the thorny issues of plagiarism and copyright, H-Net list culture has seemed an extension of what I and many colleagues in remote areas have always done, with the advantage of no longer having to lug around bags full of photocopies of work in progress. Over the past three years I have sent drafts of research articles, teaching syllabi and grant proposals to various H-Net lists, and in return gained invaluable criticism, come to know the

work of scholars pursuing like research in different parts of the world, and received many more invitations to publish work and attend conferences than can possibly be accepted. All this has been possible while working in an excellent but chronically under-funded department in far northern Australia. For what has been offered, much more has been given in return.

Further, there are strong indications that the issues of plagiarism and copyright will become better policed as network search software becomes more sophisticated. Historians are probably the least inclined of humanists to assert what the future will bring, but it seems likely that in the very near future copyright protection agencies will have intelligent software cruising the Net and periodically reporting on where the work of its clients has been reproduced. The increased use of the Internet for pre-publication and book publicity will also heighten the detection of 'off-line' intellectual theft.

Over the course of the last twelve months, H-Net has embarked on several ventures which seem destined to see the organisation emerge as an influential player in international scholarly publication, and humanities multimedia teaching. The most important initiative to date has been the H-Net Book Review Program, started in late 1995 under the direction of Professor Mark Kornbluh of Michigan State University, with generous funding from that institution and the US National Endowment for the Humanities. The Book Review Program does not replicate a traditional scholarly activity in cyberspace. Instead, it uses new technologies creatively, to invigorate tradition.

Each H-Net list now has a book review editor, with a brief to commission reviews of new and established works of scholarship of interest to members of their list. Reviews are sought from scholars with recognised expertise, with reviews commissioned from authorities who are not members of the list if necessary. Once the review has been submitted to the list editor, it is forwarded to specially employed H-Net staff for copy editing. It is then distributed via the list that commissioned the review, and also by H-Review, a list set up solely for distribution of all H-Net reviews (no discussion).[2] Finally, a copy of each book review is placed on the H-Net World-Wide-Web site at Michigan State University.[3]

The H-Net Book Review Program has several advantages. One is the speed with which reviews can be published. In the American academic community, reviews regularly appear in leading journals a year or two after a book is published. H-Net can currently obtain and distribute a highly professional review within several months. Given that there are no paper or printing costs associated with the publication of reviews via the Net, reviews can be as long, and as detailed, as the reviewer thinks appropriate. For works of interdisciplinary or international interest, H-Net is in the position of being able to commission simultaneous reviewers from across the spectrum of its lists. This, as Mark Kornbluh has stressed, will create what are in effect electronic conference sessions on important works of scholarship — and sessions which have the advantage of being archived and easily retrievable from H-Net at MSU or one of its proposed mirror sites.

However, perhaps the most interesting dimension to the H-Net Book Review Program is its capacity to stimulate dialogue about new scholarship by offering writers the opportunity to respond to reviews and discuss their work via the appropriate H-Net. To date this has occurred on at least one H-Net with interesting results.

Will H-Net extend further into the realm of electronic publication, to the point of publishing refereed journal articles and monographs? At this time, it is hard to say what the future holds for H-Net. Indeed, much of the conversation amongst list editors at the recent H-Net96 Conference focused on how fast the organisation has grown, and how best to manage continued rapid expansion in list membership and associated projects. The Book Review Program and other initiatives in multimedia teaching mentioned below will greatly engage the editors over the next couple of years. It will mean devising cyberspace administrative structures and making them work. It seems likely that H-Net will increasingly commit itself to electronic publication but, as with the Book Review Program, it will do so in ways that do not seek to replicate book culture in cyberspace.

The shift into publishing will come gradually as a consequence of the second important development within H-Net during 1995. This is the organisation's initiation of projects involving multimedia technology, electronic communication and computers in teaching. In collaboration with Michigan State University, H-Net has a large grant to establish a number of centres across the United States to develop teaching materials and multimedia curricula for history survey courses, to devise and disseminate software and databases, and to provide training sessions for staff and students. In Australia, H-Net's Australian list editorial board was awarded a major 1996 CAUT Grant, to investigate the potential of WWW and communication technologies for creating a virtual learning environment, accessible via AARNet and local computing networks to teachers and students of history in five Australian universities. The project will blend virtual with traditional modes of teaching and learning, but with a view to critically evaluating whether interactive learning programs, online tutorials and consultation facilities do indeed improve students' powers of critical historical thinking.

In the case of H-Net, it seems likely that publication will not mean the replication of scholarly monographs or

journal articles in electronic format, but the generation of research publications that blend traditional historiographical narrative forms with the media now being used experimentally in the creation of virtual teaching environments. For example, the editors of H-Net's Australian and Aotearoa/New Zealand history list will launch an 'electronic journal' this February. It will have a fairly traditional name. It will be a fully refereed publication. Besides being the permanent online archive for H-Net book reviews of relevance to the history of Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, it will accept, assess and publish scholarly articles. However, its principal goal will be to offer a peer reviewed outlet for scholarly work that uses electronic and multimedia technologies. In this sense, it will not compete with established paper-based journals. Indeed, through its links with the H-Net Book Review Program and H-Net lists, it will serve to bring scholarship in conventional media to a growing international audience.

I have offered a fairly enthusiastic picture of H-Net, its current activities, and the likely evolution of its exploration of new communications technology in university teaching and research. However, our editorial deliberations over the course of the past year have at times been far from optimistic. One serious problem affecting all three countries in which H-Net's largest numbers of subscribers reside is a chronic lack of funds for equipment and staff/student training. In the Australian context, most humanities and many social science disciplines are funded through formulae that treat them as essentially 'chalk and talk' subjects. Teaching staff may have computers on the desk, but few have access to even the most basic equipment that would allow them to apply new technologies to teaching. Students generally have limited access to electronic teaching resources, and those that have good access do so because they have bought their own equipment. The cost of hardware and software has certainly become cheaper over the course of the last decade, but it is still a significant outlay which many students cannot afford — especially those whom we are most committed to see participating in higher education. Equally worrying are the often dubious expectations in government and university management about what can be achieved with new communications technologies. For all the managerialist stress on the need to improve quality, the worth of technology is often understood in simple economic rationalist terms. It seems that the virtual classroom of the twenty-first century will be built at the expense of careers for real teachers. There are real dangers in this, since we do not know whether the teaching and learning outcomes that humanists and social scientists desire can be achieved by using new technologies such as the Web.

I introduced this piece with a personal recollection, and would like to conclude on a similar note. The child of working class migrants to Australia, I entered university as a provisional matriculant in the mid-1970s and found the computer a tool I could use to learn to write with the clarity and conciseness my teachers demanded. Since then, I've regarded the information revolution as offering tools that might help historians and their students to do justice to the elusiveness and complexity of the past. Traditionally, desired learning outcomes in undergraduate history teaching have been achieved as students undertook progressively more sophisticated tasks of historical reconstruction, improving their conceptual capacity through one-to-one and small group instruction. However, funding and policy restraints have left little scope for further enhancing outcomes through greater use of traditional small group teaching. Demand for greater flexibility in degree structures has compounded the problem. Moreover, the rationalisation of library resources now presents new challenges for a discipline in which knowledge traditionally has been acquired through relatively free-structured consultation of a wide range of on-campus bibliographic materials.

Those of us now engaged in projects associated with H-Net are keen to see how we might best use new communication technologies to continue to explore history in its true complexity, so that students appreciate the provisional status of historical knowledge, and understand the centrality of their role as reasoning subjects in the selection, interpretation and use of historical evidence. But if new communications do not prove to be very good tools to achieve these ends, or we find ourselves obliged to use them in ways which frustrate these objectives, then I suspect a number of us will have few qualms about resorting to that most basic of technological manoeuvres: pulling the plug.

References

Fogel, R.W. and Engerman, S.L. 1974, *Time on the cross: the economics of American negro slavery*, Boston, Little, Brown and Co.

Gutman, H.G. 1975, Slavery and the numbers game: a critique of Time on the Cross, Urbana, University of Illinois Press.

Knupfer, Peter 1996, 'From discourse to discipline: list editing and the promotion of scholarship on LISTSERV lists', American Historical Association Conference, Atlanta, 7 January 1996.

Footnotes

1. To subscribe, send the command: subscribe h-nz-oz Jo Blow Skase University, in the first line of an email message to: listserv@ msu.edu

2. To subscribe to H-Review, send the message: subscribe h-review Jo Blow Skase university, on the first line of an email to: listserv@msu.edu

3. http://www.h-net.msu.edu

4. At the time of going to press, an URL has yet to be assigned to the new journal www site. From mid-February the address may be obtained by contacting h-nz-oz@msu or paul.turnbull@jcu.edu.au