

## *H-Maritime* and the Asynchronous Learning Community: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Thinktank

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### Abstract:

As globalization shrinks the world, scholars and researchers are faced with wonderful new opportunities-- and seemingly endless challenges. Can the internet be trusted to provide information that is factual, relevant, and verifiable? Can students be directed to appropriate resources on the web? How can the wonderful potential of the net be used to complement the tried-and-true tolls of historians and other social scientists and humanists: how can the web facilitate teaching and learning, scholarly activity and disparate research agenda? A solution to these--and other-- issues may lie in listservs, which bring together specialists, buffs, amateurs and professionals in a civil, germane environment. For some time, Michigan State University has maintained *H-Net*, an umbrella organization that houses nearly two hundred listservs-- everything from *H- James Joyce* to *H-War*. Recently, Cal Maritime professor Tim Lynch launched *H-Maritime*; in its first fifteen months in operation, it claims over 250 subscribers in 26 nations. This paper will address the potential, prospects, and perils of managing a listserv, and hopes to provide some perspective on how this tool can be used to further refine and develop disparate research agendas.

Keyword: History, Pedagogy, Listserv.

### Body of text:

The speed of technological change in computing and electronic communication over the past few years has been nothing short of breathtaking. The development of the internet has been both a blessing and a curse for academics. While increased access to research materials has represented a tremendous savings in both time and money, the sheer volume of available material is often daunting. Worse, students have come to rely overmuch on the Internet, and far too often on websites of dubious credibility. Given these changes, and the unsettling rate at which they have occurred, it is not surprising to find a lack of perspective. Heralds of change trumpet the transcendental value of the new technologies to liberate critical thinking, reform education, and transform universities, while jeremiads warn that education is being trivialized, intellectual property commodified, and the academy of scholars destroyed. Despite the competing (and hyperbolic) views of "connected scholarship", the fact remains that the world of cyberspace scholarship has grown from a novelty to a fundamental part of the professional lives of thousands of historians worldwide (*Perspectives*, 1991, p. 1).

For the better part of the fifteen years, scholars have grappled with ways to develop the enormous educational potential of the Internet and the World Wide Web, while avoiding many of the pitfalls associated with this new paradigm. Academic discussion of the impact of the internet reflects a popular discourse which alternatively values Internet companies at astronomical sums, while lamenting that the only businesses making money off the Internet is pornography. Rhetoric aside, for most academics the development of the Internet is valuable only to the extent that it assists them to do what they have always done—teach, research, and publish. The challenge has been to insist that gimmicks not substitute for serious teaching and scholarly research.

Among the most successful, dynamic and effective strategies has been the creation of *H-Net*, a series of over 175 edited lists and websites maintained by Michigan State University. An

international consortium of scholars and teachers, H-Net creates and coordinates Internet networks with research in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. By so doing, H-Net has professionalized the world of international electronic scholarship by organizing into a format that parallels accepted academic practices and models. By publishing peer reviewed essays, assessing multimedia materials, and providing discussion for colleagues and the interested public, H-Net has been a pioneer in the use of new communication technologies to facilitate the free exchange of academic ideas and scholarly resources. H-Net, then, is best described as an international consortium of scholars who establish and coordinate electronic networks to advance humanities and social science teaching and research. It was self-consciously fashioned to provide a positive, supportive, egalitarian environment for the friendly exchange of ideas, scholarly resources, and teaching tools. Beyond that, H-Net lists are inducing an elaborate flow of private messages among people who probably would not have matched their common interests otherwise.

Subscribers (membership is free of charge) and editors communicate through electronic mail messages sent to the group. As one of the largest organizations in the humanities, H-Net lists, which represent a collaborative network of teachers and scholars, comprise the single most used communications medium in higher education today. Queries and messages are screened by the list editors to promote a diverse readership dedicated to friendly, productive, and scholarly communications. The lists are connected to their own websites that store discussion threads, important documents, and links to related sites on the web. The editors—who are nominated, selected and trained in a process that can take several weeks— control the flow of messages, commission reviews, and reject items (advertisements, “flames” and ad hominem attacks) that are considered unsuitable for a scholarly discussion group. The editors contribute their time out of the sense that they are shaping a new communications system in their fields, for their discipline, and within academe in general. Their efforts have paid off: today, on a round-the-clock basis, over 19,000 scholars based in 59 countries take part in discussions that resemble academic symposia. Many of these participants live thousands of miles apart and would otherwise have little-to-no chance to compare professional concerns and insights.

While H-Net has grown and matured in the past fifteen years, the basic goals have remained unchanged: to enable scholars to easily communicate current research and teaching interests; to discuss new approaches, methods and tools of analysis; to share information on electronic databases; and to test new ideas and share comments on the literature in their fields. Moreover, H-Net aims to connect scholars and others who are committed to engaging materials in a new way that will facilitate scholarly activity, promote effective teaching, and utilize new technology to enhance intellectual relationships in service to the profession. On all of these fronts, H-Net has succeeded wildly. In fact, H-Net now provides more opportunities to discuss the teaching of history than all other venues, traditional or technical—combined. From the beginning, editors and participants on H-Net's networks have been interested in issues of pedagogy and ways to improve teaching. The vast majority of the H-Net networks devote at least part of their attention to teaching as well as research, and teaching will remain a high priority for H-Net as we continue to look for ways to use communication technology critically, not as a substitute for teaching, but as a way to assist teachers. Likewise, H-Net provides a cost-efficient way of bringing new research and teaching ideas to faculty across the country. In a word, H-Net has sharply increased the quantity, quality and diversity of communications among historians. How do senior professors or new teaching assistants learn to teach? Where do they hear about new techniques, or find evaluations of various procedures? Where can they go to share their own experiences and ask questions? The answer is H-Net. "H-Net lists enable scholars to communicate current research and teaching interests, to discuss new approaches, methods, and tools of analysis, to share information on electronic databases, and to test new ideas and share comments on the literature in their fields," says Mark Lawrence Kornbluh, executive director of H-Net.

The impact of H-Net has been felt throughout the discipline, but has been especially appreciated by those who otherwise would be remote from the centers of scholarly activity. While professors at the major graduate universities are already well-connected, the H-Net lists provide a scholarly lifeline to independent scholars, librarians and archivists, public historians, graduate students, and teachers at smaller or less well-funded colleges, community colleges and universities, offering intellectual stimulation and a chance to maintain a dialogue with leading scholars in their fields of interest. This has had a notable impact on teaching, research and community involvement. As one listmember attests: "The list makes me feel connected to a larger community of scholars, which is important for me as I sit forlornly in the middle of the tall Illinois cornfields at my small college," she says. "Connections get made online--people put panels together, find authors for book chapters and book reviews, locate friends and lodgings, and find speakers for their classes." Additionally, the lists have served to level distinctions between those sundry classes that had so long defined academe: the boundaries of status, profession, discipline, and nationality that demarcate academic life and which have served as the traditional academic hierarchies and boundaries have far less permanency in cyberspace. As a result, bridges can be built. "Scholars' written words, not their rank or their institutional affiliation, are what matters," says Steven H. Mintz, associate dean and professor history at the University of Houston. "H-Net has created a vital place in the profession for scholars across the entire country: at two-year and four-year schools, secondary schools, research centers and historical museums, archives, and libraries. Independent scholars, graduate students, junior faculty members, and endowed chairs--all are equal in the online arena. International voices and the voices of multiple disciplines are an integral part of the dialog, forestalling the kinds of provincialism that tend to creep into academic discussions."

A great deal of planning and behind the scenes operations guarantees that each list works smoothly, and offers more than just daily messages. H-Net early on developed a fairly uniform structure for creating a new list. Prospective editors worked with the officers to define the scope and mission of the list. The Executive Committee approved the editors and editorial boards. Backstage, the editors worked with the editorial board and sponsoring organizations to publicize the list, elicit submissions, and expand in this direction or that. These private sessions among the list editors have made the list increasingly autonomous and independent. Each of the editors has a clearly defined role: some are building strong WWW sets, others work on book reviewers, and others concentrate on daily message services. All the lists have editorial boards, which discuss policy, make future plans, and hear appeals from disgruntled subscribers. On numerous internal H-Net lists the editors and staffers discuss the technical problems of editing, and more general issues like censorship, copyright, expansion plans, and the future of the information revolution. Most of boards are relatively inactive, but a few do set policy.

Once the list is approved, editors trained, and editorial board confirmed, membership is solicited from scholars, teachers, professors, researchers, graduate students, librarians, archivists, and interested members of the general public. A large fraction are librarians who see themselves as information providers for their entire campus. Many others are high school teachers, curators of museums, directors of local historical societies, archivists, and professionals in various state and federal agencies. Just as the Internet can be used to bridge disciplinary and national boundaries, it is now clear that it is also serving to reconnect scholars and a broader educated public. H-Net lists currently count large numbers of librarians, archivists, teachers, journalists, lawyers, and others. All of them are interested in historical approaches to their material, and they are eager for contact with scholars from different perspectives. The H-Net lists make possible frequent interdisciplinary contact inside academe, and between academics and well-informed non-academics, of the sort that is often wished for but rarely achieved. Most subscribers never post anything, but they feel do feel themselves active participants, much like the scholars who attend sessions at conferences and never ask questions out loud, but instead build upon what they hear. One professor explained the process:

“Although I've never posted anything to the list, I do not consider myself a lurker: I'm actively reading, thinking about, and using the information and perspectives of others, and when I have something to contribute to a thread, I will. I use H-Net constantly to identify resources, prepare bibliographies, and for course preparation.”

All discussion threads are logged and these logs remain open and available to the public. The on-line logs are an especially rich resource, one that has an important advantage: they are an online resource and reference tool for anyone interested in the fields H-Net cover. H-Net is using the program Hypermail to capture the logs as they are generated and then at the browser's request automatically sort them by thread, subject, author, and date. As the Internet continues to develop, and online resources become increasingly useful, it is essential that access to these resources remains widespread. As a democratic organization, H-Net is deeply committed to fair use for educational purposes and open access to the resources of the Internet. All of H-Net's resources are freely available and will remain so. Beyond this, however, as the largest online organization of scholars in the world, we are committed to playing an active role to ensure accessibility. Books that have been discussed, issues that were debated, references mentioned, are accessible to teachers, students, researchers, journalists, and writers who do not have the time or inclination to subscribe.

For those who are subscribers, H-Net lists provide a myriad of functions. In mundane tasks like finding and matching scholars to topics for a conference, the system works exceedingly well. Many turn to H-Net as they might to a bulletin board, call a colleague, or but a classified ad: and with higher expectations of a prompt and knowledgeable reply. A major advantage is that many people can read the answer too, and perhaps make a contribution. While the annual specialty conference is a necessary event--H-Net will certainly not replace it--but H-Net will fill the time between conferences. The net breaks down the barriers of time, space, and money that keep most of us from getting to more conferences. In the words of one H-Net participant, the list is “like a perpetual annual meeting of the Western Historical Association.” Moreover, H-Net lists have provided a venue for very detailed discussions on current issues that affect the profession—recent threads have discussed the spate of plagiarism that is plaguing the profession, issues of academic freedom and censorship, and related issues.

Additionally, the lists pass on information of vital information: calls for papers, job openings, and fellowship opportunities. In this last role, the lists allow for networking in the old fashioned sense, the development of a web of personal and professional relationships among scholars. H-Net has revolutionized the way these networks and relationships are formed, which is exactly what its creators envisioned.

Indeed, much of the appeal of H-Net's interactive networks is about creating connections. Some of these were intended from the start, others have been serendipitous. H-Net has always encouraged interdisciplinary networks, but the extent to which all of our networks—even those seemingly defined by disciplinary boundaries—have a broad interdisciplinary membership has been a surprise that H-Net editors now look to exploit. H-Net has created an intellectual space where academics communicate with each other and with a wide range of individuals--archivists, lawyers, teachers, librarians, househusbands, and businesswomen who are interested in the humanities. This allows scholars to participate in 'virtual tutorials', in which they can seek to refine historical understanding through conversations with other students of history in many different parts of the world. The community of discourse on H-Net is wider than any other in the academic humanities, and our academic participants see that as a real strength.

One of the most popular functions of H-Net (in addition to the weekly job lists that are promulgated to each of the lists) are H-Reviews. H-Net networks pioneered online book reviewing and H-Net Reviews in the Humanities and Social Sciences (<http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~reviews>), has now grown to include a wide range of media from exhibits to

software. The dramatic technological advantages of Internet publication include: prompt publication and no printing or postage costs--and thus no artificial length limitations. In fact, reviews average twice or three times as long as paper journals (1200 to 2000 words), meaning that the reviewers get the space they need. Since they are ten times longer than CHOICE reviews, librarians rely on H-Net reviews when deciding what new books to purchase. Add to this the eagerness of publishers to become involved in the Information Highway, and H-Net has the formula for a highly innovative book review program. While these reviews are assigned and edited according to the same standards used by major scholarly journals, (each list has a review editor, backed by editorial boards, who selects the titles and the reviewers) because the reviews are published and distributed via the WWW and electronic discussion lists, the time between publication of a specific work and publication of the review is much shorter and the reviews often longer and more in-depth. It is possible that H-Net reviews will sometimes be especially influential--they will usually be the first major review a book receives. Unlike print reviews, the H-Net reviews are also interactive and easily searchable by reviewer, author, title, subject, publisher, and ISBN number. At the end of each review is a place for comments about teaching the work being reviewed, or the review itself. This feature makes possible a dynamic exchange about the reviewed books and software with particular attention to their classroom use. In addition to reviewing specialized monographs within the field, several lists commission reviews of movies, museum exhibits, and software. One of the larger lists, H-German is experimenting with article reviews--a boon to the graduate student and scholar alike—and other lists are considering the same.

To look behind the scene, let us examine H-Maritime. The idea for such a list was first discussed in the summer of 2002 by Professors Tim Lynch (California Maritime Academy, CSU) and Richard Greenwald (then of the United States Merchant Marine Academy, now of Drew University). After fits-and-starts of activity, the pair finally gained permission from the H-Net council in the summer of 2005 to launch a list that would be devoted to 'all matters maritime.' After assembling an advisory board (Greenwald having stepped down from his post as co-editor to assume one of the seats), and adding a second editor (Tom Goetz, a Ramsey fellow in Naval Aviation at the Smithsonian Institution), the list was launched in December of that year. Almost immediately it took off: to date, the list has handled hundreds of posts, answered dozens of queries and brought together more than 250 subscribers in more than two dozen nations. Soon, a third editor (Laura Chmielewski of SUNY Purchase) was added, and the first reviews began to appear. To date, more than a dozen monographs have been peer-reviewed and a similar number are currently awaiting assignment. Keeping with the diverse membership associated with H-Net in general, H-Maritime members include graduate students, tenured professors and all ranks in between. Librarians, archivists, and "armchair" (or "boilersuit") historians flesh out the numbers. Maritime historian and underwater archaeologists dominate, but specialists in maritime literature, marine policy and other fields are well-represented. In addition to calls for papers, announcements of interests, and other services, the list provides a forum where issues of pedagogy and scholarship can be pursued (one thread was devoted to a scathing indictment of the methodology used by Gavin Menzies in his recent work examining Chinese mariners in pre-Columbian America, 1421: The Year China Discovered America).

While there are challenges that need to be addressed (a web-editor is desperately needed, and the list tends to announcements as opposed to discussions), there is every reason to believe that the first eighteen months of operation have been successful. Plans to link with the North American Society of Oceanic Historians and the North Atlantic Fisheries History Association (Lynch provided a lecture on H-Maritime at the annual conference of the former, and a plan to require members of the latter to register for H-Maritime are underway) bode well for the future growth of H-Maritime, which projects to add another two hundred members this year. Also, since its inception, scarcely any members have "signed off" or rescinded their membership; fewer than ten have done so. Indeed, the prognosis is exceedingly positive: the role that this list plays for maritime affairs is a microcosm of the success enjoyed by H-Net over the past decade and a half.

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