

An Editor's Point of View: H-NET and the Nature of Listservers

**Robert W. Cherny,
San Francisco State University
USA**

I'm assuming that most of you are *not* H-Net subscribers. If you are, what I have to say may sound rather old-hat, though perhaps you'll have some responses to the questions I'm going to pose at the end. I plan to tell you briefly about my own experiences in H-Net, and to share some conclusions and questions that I've drawn from those experiences.

I subscribed to my first H-NET discussion list, H-Labor, in late October or early November of 1993. I soon subscribed to several more--for urban history, political history, history teaching, and American studies--more than half of all H-Net lists at the time. I currently subscribe to 17 H-Net content lists and about 10 H-Net lists connected with editing or governance. And I've been a member of the H-NET executive committee since last spring.

I also began to develop lists soon after I first subscribed. First came H-SHGAPE. SHGAPE stands for the Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, and H-SHGAPE deals with the history of the United States from 1865-1920. It went online in April 1994. Later I helped to organize and launch H-West (history of the North American west) and I continue to serve as chair of its advisory board. At about the same time, I began to develop a list for California Studies--an interdisciplinary list devoted to the scholarly study of California. I hoped to include history, politics, economy, social patterns, culture, cultural expression, geography, geology, meteorology, and the teaching of all these. It was called CalStd-L and it was not an H-Net list at first CalStd-L went online in 1995, using the listserv at San Francisco State University. It was an unmoderated and unedited list; in January 1996, CalStd-L joined H-Net and became H-California.

With these lists, some of our initial expectations about the number and disciplinary orientation of subscribers proved to be wrong. When we launched H-SHGAPE in 1994, we expected to subscribe as many as 200-300 US historians; we now have 1,081 subscribers in 20 countries (but with 998 from the United States). We expected that the list would be of interest only to historians; though historians are numerically dominant, our subscribers include specialists in literature, law, politics,

museums, and libraries. We expected H-California to be relatively small, limited largely to Californians, and broadly interdisciplinary. It currently has 534 subscribers in 13 countries (only twenty of the subscribers are from outside the United States, and more than half are in California). Though we wanted H-California to be broadly interdisciplinary, in fact it tends to be dominated by historians. I'll return to issues of discipline and place toward the end of my talk.

In my comments today, I'll focus on editing, based on my experience over the past six-plus years. (Is it possible that it has been only that long? Somehow it seems that e-mail lists and H-Net has been part of my professional life for nearly as long as I can remember.)

First of all, the terminology: in the beginning, we called ourselves moderators, and then, early on, we decided to call ourselves editors. This change in terminology reflects an important evolution in the way that H-Net listowners think about themselves. A moderator is like the chair of a meeting, who calls on people to speak and enforces Roberts's Rules of Order. An editor has a more active role vis-a-vis content. This more active role includes simple copy-editing, but the more important editing duties are to stimulate discussion, sometimes (rarely in my experience) to encourage discussion participants to reconsider or reformulate their comments, and sometimes (again, rarely in my experience) to restrain or even cut off discussion.

A central H-Net principle is that every list must have more than one editor and must have an editorial advisory board. Part of the reason for this is to guarantee that lists do not become the personal property of an individual and reflect only one individual's perspective--we want lists to serve an identifiable scholarly community, not be an idiosyncratic sounding board. Most H-Net lists have two or more online editors, who post messages every day, usually on rotating schedules, and they also have a book review editor and a webmaster. All the lists have websites on the H-Net server, where it is possible to review past discussions. Some lists maintain other material on their websites as well, often syllabi for classes related to the subject of the list, websites related to the subject of the list, and often other material as well.

I've found that when a list is edited, the process seems to create a particular set of expectations among the list subscribers. The lists that I edit and that I read most regularly are closely focused on scholarly matters--book reviews, announcements of conferences, requests for assistance with research problems, and discussions of current issues among scholars with that specialty. For my list on the American

Gilded Age and Progressive Era, I cannot recall an instance in the past several years when a posting was rejected as inappropriate. The vast majority of submissions for H-SHGAPE and H-California no longer require editing--they are well composed, thoughtful, appropriate, scholarly.

However, I've learned from my experience on the H-NET Exec Com that there are a few--two, three--of the more than a hundred H-NET lists where this online culture has not developed in the way it has in the large majority of lists. These are not lists that I read regularly, but as I understand their problems it seems that the key variable in each instance is that the list editors have not acted with sufficient restraint and that, consequently, a different type of online culture has developed among the subscribers to those lists.

I can bring a comparative perspective to these H-Net experiences, because I also subscribe to some unmoderated, unedited lists and in fact I own or have owned several unmoderated, unedited lists--CalStd-L (which I already mentioned), and also a list for a bay area labor history study group, a list for my colleagues in the history department at SFSU, and a list that is not at all academic, for an organization of people who lost their fathers in WWII. I also set up an unmoderated, unedited list for all my seminars. The dynamic on most of these lists is decidedly different from that on an edited H-NET list:

- Most of these unedited lists tend to be more spontaneous--people are likely to post whatever their reaction may be to a previous message, to post material not relevant to the purpose of the list, to send replies to everyone when they mean to reply to just one person, to send complaints to the entire list, to include the previous message and the message before that and the message before in their replies. There's a lot of clutter on unedited lists.
- Most of the unedited lists tend to be more personal--which means, among other things, that people are more likely to compliment or insult other subscribers. Flaming can be a problem. Flaming--angry, insulting, *ad hominem* comments--even caused one list to shut down.
- One unedited list is almost moribund--it's as if all the subscribers have forgotten that it exists except for, perhaps, an announcement once a month or so.
- All this is to say that these unmoderated, unedited lists are less scholarly, and this quality in turn seems to drive away serious scholars, which then moves the list even further away from its initial purpose.

There are only a few controls available to the owner of an unmoderated list. One is a strong welcoming message that every new subscriber receives, containing

information about appropriate list behavior. Other controls include personal warnings of violations and ultimately deleting an offender from the subscription list.

Some of my experiences with CalStd-L and H-California illustrate these differences. CalStd-L was unmoderated. It attracted not only serious scholars but also a range of political activists. Posting notices of events likely to be of interest to scholars in California studies was defined as appropriate, and proselytizing or agitating or attacking other list members was defined as inappropriate. The only remedy for violations, as I noted, was first to warn the person and then, on a repeated offense, to unsubscribe the person. I had to do this once in the few months that CalStd-L existed as an unedited, unmoderated list, and it caused me to seek to affiliated the list with H-Net.

H-Cal is an edited version of the very same list. There are many fewer submissions by political activists. If there is an issue that is clearly political but has implications for scholars, the three online editors confer via e-mail and usually post at least an informational message. If the discussion becomes too one-sided or too partisan or veers off into *ad hominem* attacks, we intervene in various ways--by requesting that person reconsider his/her message, or by posting a message to the entire list requesting information about the other side, or by directing list members to websites that discuss the issues and then closing the discussion on our list, or by just closing discussion--either by posting an announcement to that effect or by informing individuals who submit comments that the thread has been closed.

The importance of editing, then, in my experience is that it is process of editing that makes a list a useful medium for scholarly exchange and that keeps it focused on that purpose. Without editing, a list can acquire the nature of a chat room. A well-edited list can be very important in developing scholarship.

From my experience with H-Net, I also see a number of tasks that face us. Let me mention them now and invite your suggestions during the discussion period:

- H-Net's subscribers and editors are concentrated in North America, and we have a significant number of participants in Australia, New Zealand, and Western Europe, but we are committed to becoming a truly international organization. However, lists like H-Labor, which has defined its purpose as labor history, tend, in fact, to deal almost exclusively with *US* labor history. In addition, H-Net has invested a great deal of effort in developing lists for other parts of the world, especially Africa, and has done reasonably well in involving African scholars in those lists.

We have a German list, run by German scholars in German. We have lists on the history of Italy and France with considerable participation by scholars in those countries and postings in either English or the language of the country involved. We want to do more of this for Asia and Latin America. What is the most effective way to accomplish this increased internationalization of H-Net? How do we overcome language barriers?

- H-Net began as an organization of historians, but we are committed to becoming broadly interdisciplinary, serving the social sciences and humanities. What is the most effective way to do this?
- H-Net is now heavily dependent on Michigan State University for facilities, staff, and financing. If we are to expand significantly, we need to find additional sources of funds. What is the most effective way to do this?
- H-Net began as a relatively small group of online editors, who gathered regularly at meetings of the major American history societies. As we become more international and interdisciplinary, we shall lose the regular face-to-face contact that we once had and that gave us a sense of shared community. How can we retain that closeness and sense of community as we grow worldwide?

I look forward to your comments and suggestions.