

H-NET: Scholarly Moderation and the Online Community

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Although it is now common in academic institutions to encourage new learning technologies, the truth is that the electronic revolution primarily has not taken place in the academic milieu, but in the world of commerce. In fact, many colleagues in academe have been frightened and dismayed by the rapid changes in the world of learning due to the internet and enhanced status of the personal computer. Professional organizations, universities, and academics who share intellectual interests have taken some leadership in setting standards within this whirlpool of change. Perhaps, one of the strongest organizations to emerge has been H-NET, which stands for Humanities and Social Sciences Online. This paper will present a brief introduction to H-NET, discussing its history and objectives, organizational structure, special projects, and future directions.

H-NET History: The Development of Online Scholarly Moderation

H-NET is an international consortium of scholars and teachers. According to the current mission statement:

H-NET creates and coordinates Internet networks with the common objective of advancing teaching and research in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. H-Net has been committed to pioneering the use of new communication technology to facilitate the free exchange of academic ideas and scholarly resources.

Conceived in 1992, at the University of Illinois in Urbana, an informal history of the H-NET mentions:

H-Net began with discussions in October 1992 among Prof. Richard Jensen, Wendy Plotkin, and Kelly Richter, to seek funding for a new organization to bring history onto the internet. Plotkin launched H-Urban, the first H-Net list, in February 1993 while working with Jensen on an independent study. H-Women followed soon afterwards. Many other lists were born as H-Net members in June and July of 1993. In the spring of 1994, most of H-Net's operations and lists began to

move to Michigan State University where Prof. Mark Kornbluh secured institutional support for H-Net. In the Spring of 1997, the H-Net staff chose Prof. Kornbluh as its second executive director, in the first contested election for that office.

The idea behind H-NET was to develop scholarly moderated electronic networks. Given the plethora of electronic bulletin boards that emerged in the new internet milieu, the key idea that initially informed H-NET was to develop specialized discussion groups whereby the postings would be processed by editors who would moderate the discussion. Each discussion list would have a mission statement, an editorial board, and the editors, whose tasks might range from editing messages to book reviews or managing a Web site for the list.

H-Net has had a series of on-going projects funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the United States Information Agency. As H-NET migrated to Michigan State University, the organization valued from the creation of MATRIX which is a new computing center devoted to the application of new technologies in humanities and social science teaching and research. Under the leadership of Mark Kornbluh, the Executive Director, and Peter Knupfer, the Associate Director, and an energetic staff at MATRIX, H-NET has expanded to include:

- **Discussion Networks.** The growth of over 100 Discussion Networks. The goals of H-Net lists are 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. Lists usually have an organizing focus that may include: a region, an historical era, a discipline category, an historical event, or other themes. H-Net lists reach over 100,000 subscribers in more than 90 countries. Subscriptions are screened by the list's editors to promote a diverse readership dedicated to collegial, productive, scholarly communications. Each list publishes between 15 and 60 messages a week. Subscription applications are solicited from scholars, teachers, professors, researchers, graduate students, journalists, librarians and archivists.
- **Job Guide.** The H-NET Job Guide is posted weekly. This job guide provides free advertising for academic related positions in the history and humanities, social sciences, and rhetoric and communications. The H-NET Job Guide is not only available online, but most discussion networks publish the Job Guide index to

their subscribers.

- **H-NET Reviews.** The H-NET Reviews is the largest publisher of online scholarly reviews, and was the pioneer in this area. The internet as a medium not only allows quicker publication of the review, and no limitations on book review lengths, but it allows discussion between reviewers, authors, and readers.
- **Teaching.** H-NET Teaching is a gateway that brings together the educational possibilities of new learning technologies, with a focus on discussion networks that are dedicated to teaching, as well as a growing repository of teaching materials and helpful linkages to online pedagogy sites.
- **Announcements.** The H-NET Announcements is an area that is quickly developing into a central clearinghouse for finding out about academic events. The announcement categories include conferences, educational programs, calls for papers, publications, funding opportunities, and new Web sites. In addition, the staff at MATRIX have been developing a new database that will compose a Directory of Scholars, which will significantly aid scholarly communication nationally and internationally.

Connectivity and Content Project

As has been mentioned, H-NET has promoted academic professionalism on the internet by providing services that range from the interchange of ideas to the job guide. As a scholarly organization, H-NET has expanded its activities to include major initiatives in pedagogy and research. Two such examples are the African Internet Connectivity Project and the National Gallery of the Spoken Word.

One of the emerging difficulties in the new world of the internet has been the disparity between the richer and poorer countries. H-NET has made one of the most significant contributions in education and development of the internet among our African colleagues. In collaboration with the African Studies Center at MSU, and the USIA, H-NET has held three annual African Connectivity Workshops, which have providing training and support for African colleagues. And several trips by MSU scholars have been made to African countries to help implement the actual connectivity that they need so much.

Another major project is the National Gallery of the Spoken Word, which is a 3.6 million dollar project, funded by the National Science Foundation. The goal of this project is to create a significant, fully searchable, online database of spoken word collections that span the 20th century. The NGSW will not just be a repository, but it will actively seek to develop exhibits and educational curricula that fully incorporate sound files. These are just two examples of major leadership by H-NET that incorporate the principle that the objectives must determine the technology, that there should be an active idea to serve as the foundation of the technical endeavor.

The Future of H-NET

As H-NET grows in providing academics with discussion lists and other professional services, there has been a heavy utilization of the H-NET infrastructure. The H-NET Web site, for example, has over 100,000 visitors a week, with most visitors spending more than 10 minutes on the site. The H-NET organization has had to consider the capacity for maintaining high standards and areas of professional growth. Thus, the H-NET Executive Committee during a retreat in August, 1999, passed over a dozen motions in a major effort at Internal Review. During the year 2000, H-NET will be considering a new mission statement, by-laws, sponsorship proposals, and other major restructuring initiatives.

Given the voluntary nature of the service provided by the editors and committee members of H-NET, it has demonstrated that academics can take active and responsible leadership in this area of new learning technologies. The principles of scholarly communication, rich content development, and the creation of new resources has created a truly cohesive online community in the humanities and social sciences.

Appendix: H-NET and the Online Community

Web site sections include:

1. H-NET homepage
2. Matrix homepage
3. H-NET Discussion Networks
 - a. Example: H-Africa
 - b. Example: H-SAWH
 - c. Example: H-Histbibl
 - d. Example: H-Soz-u-Kult
4. H-NET Job Guide
5. H-NET Teaching
6. Announcements
7. African Connectivity Project
8. National Gallery of the Spoken Word Project

All of these pages are accessible from:

<http://www.h-net.msu.edu/>