

H-Net: Past, Present, and Future

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The Ghost of H-Net Past

When H-Net began in 1994, email was a rarity, the internet was a collection of text-based gopher files that you could access if you knew the right commands, and scholars in small departments or isolated areas never had the chance to talk with someone else in their field. Into these dark times, H-Net editors took on the challenge to teach their colleagues how to use email. Editors promoted discussions of which archives were the most useful for which subjects. H-Announce soon started to replace physical paper flyers to announce conferences. Isolated scholars learned about funding opportunities, could research archives before visiting, and increased their intellectual life by having discussions with fellow scholars. Listserv lists connected people around the world in ways that had never before been possible. It was all very exciting.

But then, Netscape invented a way to put images on the web. People learned how to make their own webpages. Archives started digitizing images and texts and putting finding aids online. Facebook came around and suddenly the problem was not how to find someone to talk to but how to find time for all your new Friends. Twitter made it easy to follow other scholars. Instagram and snapchat made discussions of far-away places more visually interesting. And H-Net lists went on as usual. Discussions dropped off as scholars found other ways to communicate and research.

The Ghost of H-Net Present

In 2008, the H-Net Executive Council learned that the listserv software was not going to be usable much longer. It could not deal with increasing numbers of spam messages. The software was going to be unsupported soon. H-Net faced some major changes and the choice was not whether to change but how to change. It took a few years for Council and the Staff to settle on [Drupal](#) as the new platform. H-Net has always been committed to open-source software and having all of our products free to the user. (Institutions pay for the Job Guide ads but the job searcher has free access.)

Once the decision had been made to use Drupal, there were another few years of deciding what H-Net needed and how to make it work. There were wireframes, discussions, lots of changes, more discussion, input from editors, more changes, and on and on until a few years ago we had a design that could be field-tested. This was announced as the H-Net Commons, and networks - no longer just lists - moved to the new system. We immediately found flaws and bugs and the staff found fixes. The second version of the Commons went live and the number of issues has gone down.

There is still room to improve. We can make the experience for users and editors better and those changes are taking place. Many networks are doing about the same as they were before the move: sending out announcements mostly and maybe having the editors spark a few discussions. New editors could bring new life to old networks.

The Ghost of H-Net Future

For some networks, the move to the Commons has sparked a burst of creativity. They have experimented with the new tools and found amazing ways to use them. Take a look at [H-Diplo's](#) Roundtable reviews, essays of various sorts, and discussions. Several networks have blogs, some have started collecting teaching materials. H-War has its "[Hand Grenade of the Week](#)" blog. Networks with ties to professional associations can be of much more service to their organizations now. We have [H-Podcast](#) and the [book channel](#) coming out. The future looks bright - if . . .

We need more editors to make use of all the Commons has to offer. Imagine H-Net as a place to find primary sources and discussions on those sources. What a boon to students and teachers alike! Imagine H-Net as a place to publish conference papers, to house bibliographies and historiographies, to highlight student projects in digital humanities. The Commons can be a wondrous place - if . . .

H-Net runs on mostly volunteer labor. A few staff people are paid out of Job Guide proceeds but that budget is limited. If we have more money coming in, we could hire more staff at MSU to help with the under-the-hood work that goes on out of sight. If we have more in the budget, we can offer some support to editors so they have time to create this wonderful content. You have given H-Net your time. Now we are asking that you give a little money, too, so H-Net can continue to grow and reach its potential.

Don't be a Scrooge. [Give generously](#). H-Net needs your support.

Thanks and Happy Holidays!

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