

## [On academic publishing and H-Net's role in the digital era](#)

Blog Post published by Ryan Dunch on Tuesday, August 29, 2017

*Note: This is the first offering in what we hope will be an ongoing series of blog posts from the elected officers of H-Net.*

Writing in 2004, Jonathan Spence wondered whether he might be the last AHA President to have experienced a once-ubiquitous artifact, the [schoolroom inkwell](#). With his characteristic subtlety of evocation and economy of style, Spence invoked this memory to reflect on the changes in scholarly practice he had witnessed over his career.

Those of us trained in the 1980s and 1990s have lived through a transformation at least as momentous as the disappearance of inkwells: the emergence of digital scholarship, with all that entails. Some will recall the excitement when it first became possible to receive journal tables of contents by email, or the much-hyped decline (and partial resurgence) of the monograph. More recently we've seen challenges to established models of classroom teaching, and dramatic changes to the process of historical research. Perhaps like me you've also struggled with the implications of citation indexes and journal impact factors for humanities scholars.

Taken together these changes amount to an ongoing transformation in the political economy of scholarship, one that has generated many benefits and not a few challenges (in passing let me note that H-Net's [H-HistBibl](#) is a low-traffic and high-value resource for tracking this transformation).

One aspect has been the consolidation of academic journal publishing under a few large players, driven by the economies of scale they can offer in the digital environment. We're all familiar with the immense benefit of digital access to a century or more of journal articles, but it has also created new cost and pricing challenges for publishers and libraries, as well as for independent scholars who may not have access to those subscription services.

In the sciences that consolidation has produced what some have labelled [an "oligopoly" of a few large publishers](#), and occasional efforts to push back against their pricing structures and marketing practices (for example, the [resignation of the editorial board](#) of the Elsevier journal *Lingua* in 2015). A separate development has been the [emergence of "predatory publishers,"](#) and the recent disappearance of the Beall's list of them on which many scholars relied to identify them. Most recently, the controversy over [Cambridge University Press' decision to censor](#) one of its journals at the request of the Chinese government—reversed after an international outcry—has exposed the [tension inherent](#) between the big publishers' commercial interests and their role as custodians of academic content.

Dating back to 1993 and the early days of academic listservs, [H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online](#) has been an unfolding experiment in bringing scholars together to advance scholarship in the digital era. Based on volunteer service and committed to keeping its entire content open-access, searchable, and advertising-free, H-Net has transitioned away from email technology to a web-based platform, with new capabilities for hosting digital content that our networks are still only starting to explore. The [Strategic Plan](#) developed for 2015-2020 commits H-Net to "continue to develop our

digital capabilities and to provide leadership in the humanities and social sciences in capitalizing on those capabilities.”

H-Net’s success in doing this of course depends on the interest and efforts of our hundreds of volunteer editors and many thousands of subscribers, ably supported by the dedicated few who work in our home office. Looking back to inkwells and listservs is important, but so of course is looking forward with an informed critical imagination to the possibilities and perils offered by the age of digital scholarship (see [Join H-Net](#) for ways in which you can participate!).

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