"The Conversation"

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While working on my PhD I went through a period where I gave a lot of talks at conferences. I’ve really cut back on that, partially to focus on dissertation writing and partially because conferences are just not affordable. While at the height of my unofficial speaking tour, one of my committee members attended one of my talks. She seemed pleased with it and told me she really liked my presentation style—something she and I agreed not enough academic conference presenters seem to work on. But she also told me, “You need to write this is up into an article and get it published. Because it’s only when it’s published that it matters. Publications are where the conversation happens.”

That was just the first time I’d heard it stated so clearly but I think all of us in academia know this: conference talks are good for some things, like networking, but the only conversation that matters—“the conversation”—is in peer reviewed publications. The conversation we all know is in the citations, in the references we make to others’ work, and in the effort to contribute something new to already existing pile of knowledge. Contributing to “the conversation” is all about knowing (and showing you know) what’s already been said, finding something that hasn’t been said, and making a connection between what has been said and what you have to offer that is new.

This only happens in peer reviewed publications, of course. Following up on my question from an earlier post, “What is H-net’s place in the world of academia today?” I wonder anew, “What can H-Net’s role be in ‘the conversation’?” As the conversation has always meant nothing but peer reviewed pubs on paper, H-Net could never be a part of it. But some bits of thinking on this subject have popped up on H-Net lately, and not all of it is entirely pleased with that arrangement.

H-PCAACA editor Dan Fandino posted about an article that advocates academics shaping public policy and debate. There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with that on the face of it. The problem, the article reminds us, is that policy makers and the general public don’t read academic journals: they aren’t part of “the conversation.” If all the hard work poured into academic research is going to have all the benefits that I’m sure researchers believe it can have, and that the (often public) funders of the research hoped for when they agreed to pay for it, those academics need to find new outlets for spreading the word.

At H-HistBibl, editor Dominique Daniel drew our attention to a recent article by Jo Guldi who co-authored the open access The History Manifesto. In her new article, “The Challenges of Beginning a Scholarly Debate in the 21st Century,” Guldi describes some very real challenges for academics publishing online stemming from something of a culture clash between academia and the internet.

The articles H-Net President Randolph Hollingsworth recently posted in her blog about digital literacy are also insightful. Researchers in one article found digital literacy essential for navigating today’s world, yet also found digital literacy hard to define and evaluate. Though the article is not about academia, it raises interesting question about how digital literacy could line up with “the conversation” where something like evaluation is the name of the game.
If you are an H-Net editor, you’ve recently seen a couple interesting documents crop up on Editor Resources, one of which was the AHA’s “Draft Guidelines for the Professional Evaluation of Digital Scholarship in History” posted by Peter Knupfer in his blog “CTRL-ALT-DELETE.” In it, the professional association of historians defines scholarship as “a documented and disciplined conversation about matters of enduring consequence. Hiring, tenure, and promotion involve peer-based judgments evaluating the significance of a scholar’s contribution to one or more of those conversations.” (It may come as no surprise the committee member who advised me about “the conversation” was a historian.) At the same time, in the document the organization encourages departments to support historians who publish in a range of online forms and “turn to digital media primarily for its potential to support a communicative transformation, providing new ways to connect the professional work of expert historical scholarship with the ways in which wider publics memorialize, represent, and engage history.” The document expands: “Some scholars may seek to incubate genuinely new approaches to historical reasoning. Those strategies might include new digital short-form genres such as blogs, social media or multimedia storytelling, participating in strong activist forms of open-access distribution of scholarly work, or creating digital platforms and tools as alternative modalities of scholarly production. Wherever possible, historians should be ready to explore and consider new modes and forms of intellectual work within the discipline and to expand their understanding of what constitutes the discipline accordingly.” This seems to entail expanding one’s definition of “the conversation” as well.

All of this rumbles around in my head as I, other H-Net officers, and several H-Net Council members, draft H-Net’s Strategic Plan. There is clearly interest out there in writing in other forms, and we know academics are not blind to the internet. Others are thinking about academics reaching wider audiences, or academics developing a more diverse range of communications tools besides academic prose. It’s only sensible for this to factor in to our plans for the future of H-Net. A few academics blog, many have found valuable connections in social media, and plenty do loads of research online. But is any of that “the conversation”? AHA’s forward looking document is perhaps a little late to the party (and is maybe still lingering on the front porch rather than dashing in) but at least it seems to have found the address, and it comes from a large and influential organization. Do you know of any other academic professional associations that have come this far?

For us at H-Net, I think the question is two-fold. First, can we use H-Net to add to the conversation? This is the easier question...at first. Basically, can we do what peer review journals do, but just do it here? H-Review already does. Expanding beyond reviews is a matter of finding peer reviewers and editors willing to take the time to sift through submissions. Then indeed H-Net networks can publish original substantial research on par with any journal. I’d argue H-Net networks and academic journals that serve the same fields share the same readers and would share the same authors. The sticky bit comes in garnering the less tangible respect. Are the all important hiring committees and tenure review boards willing to consider an open access publication? That is by no means certain: peer review may actually be less important than exclusivity.

Second, can we change “the conversation”? I don’t just mean add to it, but change its terms, change where and how “the conversation” happens. Can we separate “worth considering as a valuable contribution to the field and to humanity” from “peer reviewed publication”? Not everything published on H-Net has to be peer reviewed, but that doesn’t mean it cannot be good. Can a blog or an essay published online be well researched and insightful enough to be consider part of “the
conversation”? Can a podcast? A video? A website? Producers of these pieces can cite, can reference other work, can research new findings, can analyze solidly, can add something new. Is it possible that as more and more academics take up blogging, vlogging, or website production, we might actually enhance “the conversation” and change the way it is carried out?

The second question seems to me to offer the more worthwhile goal. The first question simply means more peer review in more places, which doesn’t really address anything. But if we can change what it means to participate in “the conversation” we can take academic research beyond the Ivory Tower into places people can and want to read. In doing this, we could expand the impact academics have—not the citation rate, mind you, but the impact on things like public policy and dinner table conversation. By expanding “the conversation” in effect moving into a much larger conversation, we might also expand the circle of folks who are able to participate in it and make academia, research, and the professoriate a more diverse place. And if grad students were taught that their research still matters when they venture outside of peer reviewed pubs into other forms of publication and presentation, grad students might also learn some communication skills they can actually use in careers outside of academia where more and more PhD’s are winding up, and where nobody wants to read lengthy historiographies or French cultural theory.

A discussion ensued from the original post on H-PCAACA. It includes a link posted by Monica Berger to the CUNY Graduate Center's JustPublics@365 initiative which provides digital media training for academics, a recognition that there’s actually a different set of skills required for communicating in digital media and academia prose may not cut it. I’ve said it elsewhere and I’ll say it here: sometimes I think what holds academics back from embracing online communication more heartily is not a lack of will, it’s that academics just don’t know how. Maybe one way H-net could help change “the conversation” would be to provide not only the platform for online publishing, but training for researchers in digital communication, perhaps in conjunction with a university-based Digital Studies center.

At the very least, something seems to be going on with “the conversation,” or at least it seems so to me. I’d be interested to know if other members of the H-net organization think so, and if it pleases you or not. After all “the digital” is here to stay--that seems pretty clear by now. But at the same time, peer-reviewed journals have been criticized for being too expensive, inaccessible, and lately for not even being read by academics--it seems clear something is off with that whole system--and yet there has been little change in how those traditional journals publish and distribute. So the digital world is here, but traditional academic publishing isn't going anywhere fast. Clearly something has to give. What do you think H-Net could do to help, or hinder, the situation?

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