A conversation in Asian studies

The H-ASIA story

Scholars are a talkative lot; we thrive on conversation. Our lives are made up of conversation. To paraphrase Thomas Erickson, in conversation we create, develop, validate and share knowledge, and in the give and take—questions and answers, misunderstandings, corrections and elaborations—we find means to unpack, share and explicate complex subjects.¹

Frank F. Conlon

How to join H-ASIA

1. Send a post (with subject line ‘emplo soup’) to listerv@het.net.edu with the message

SUB H-ASIA Your first name Your surname, your institution

[e.g. SUB H-ASIA C. Eileen, Univ. of Southern North Dakota].
(Note that the comma appears only between your surname and your institution)

2. This post will generate an automated acknowledgment containing a request for subscriber information which must be completed and returned to our subscription editor. (The return address appears on the request form.) When that form has been completed and returned the subscription editor will add your name to the H-ASIA list.

Searchable logs of over 35,000 H-ASIA posts may be consulted at http://het.net.edu/cgi-bin/lu/brown/ps?tx=lu&lid=H-ASIA

Getting Published: A compendium for the humanities and social sciences


Most academics will aspire at one time or another to writing a scholarly monograph. It is not surprising, then, that a body of how-to literature has appeared to assist them. Getting Published is the work of two enterprising publishing insiders with much experience in the field of academic publishing: Jackson is editor-in-chief of the wonderful NAIS Press, while Lenstrup runs a consultancy business for academic publishers. This attractively written book takes us through the process of production of a scholarly monograph, commencing from the planning process and concluding with delivery.

The book will be of great use to first-time writers and especially scholars who wish to convert their thesis into a book. For these scholars, the chapters on book-planning and thesis conversion in Getting Published are, I think, essential reading. But experienced

academics will also benefit. Chapter Two, entitled ‘Planning your book’, serves as a useful checking exercise for my current writing project, reacquainting me with a number of realities of academic publishing. Apart from that, readers will appreciate the up to date discussions on issues of relevance to academic writing more broadly. These include a description of the pros and cons of e-publishing, and an account of the effects of on-line access on the economies of journal publishing. I had a number of revelatory moments: the discussion of the differing economies of hardback and paperback publishing gave me a greater understanding of some contemporary practices of the academic publishing industry.

I was completely unprepared for an editor’s simple instruction that I should ‘write a text that is readable for a general reader’. This was a figure with whom I had to consciously familiarise myself, and I still have only a vague idea of who he is.

The book is written in a second-person frame, addressing the reader as if she were an inexperienced writer undergoing the publishing process. This feature gives the text an accessible, relaxed feel. This is a good choice by Jackson and Lenstrup, as the subject matter is one that is likely to cause some anxiety to academics, who are being called upon to be expert in increasingly varied registers of writing: different challenges are posed by these, books, grant applications and general media pieces. These distinctions create pressure on academics, especially on academics recently emerging from the doctoral process. These people have thorough training in methodology, scholarly method and research skills. Writing is merely something they have had to do in order to materialise this. It is the same for reading. Even though their research experience will in most cases have given them a vast competency in reading difficult texts, they are never required to think critically about reading. I was completely unprepared for an editor’s simple instruction that I should ‘write a text that is readable for a general reader’. This was a figure with whom I had to consciously familiarise myself, and I still have only a vague idea of who he is. Getting Published surveys such problems, providing an important discussion largely avoided in academic training.

Getting Published caused me the occasional flash of anxiety. It stimulated glimpses of a repugnant figment of my own imagination: the cavend-academic able to perform high quality research that is then rendered so unclear that ‘your mother could read it’ (the old chestnut!), who will effortlessly enter into a contract with his or her choice of marquee publisher; and who is able to attract the media attention of the academic and national worlds to their publications. This person appeared in my mind’s eye when I read the authors’ injunction for us to not be shy about promoting our work; ‘Grab every opportunity to broadcast the merits of your book to the academic community and the world at large’. The figure also popped up when I read the authors’ implication that, in the interests of clarity, the sentence ‘High-quality learning environments are a necessary precondition for the facilitation and enhancement of the ongoing learning process’ was inferior to ‘Children need good schools if they are to learn properly’.

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¹ H-ASIA was launched in 1994 with 12 members in 2 countries (US and Japan); today its membership numbers over 4700 members in 68 countries from Argentina to Vietnam. Most members post items only occasionally, but we know from other comments that many ‘listen in’ and, as one member put it, ‘feel as if I have a lot of valuable colleagues on whom I may call, and from whom I learn a lot’. In other words, H-ASIA fits the general definition of a community of practice—a term born in anthropologist and adopted by the field of knowledge management to depict a cluster of practitioners who, by sharing learning, expand their community and enrich their own knowledge.²

While a major characteristic of H-ASIA posts involves gaining and sharing knowledge with distant colleagues, many posts are devoted to the growth of committees, symposia and edited volumes, notices of member publications, notes on new teaching and research resources, book reviews and—a much used feature—job notices. For current and former universities and centres of Asian study, probably many of these sorts of resources are available close by from colleagues and research collections. However, most Asian specialists are not at major centres, and H-ASIA has provided a means to overcoming the tyranny of distance.

Because H-ASIA’s members dwell in virtually every time zone of the globe, our common project—Gratification is not instant, yet I believe this contributes to a more measured and thoughtful participation by members. What is clear is that H-ASIA serves to overcome various ‘tyrannies of distance’—our numbers are growing particularly in Asia. Beyond physical distances there also are status distances. Without getting it as a goal, the H-ASIA team has contributed to a democratisation of knowledge and scholarly communication, where participants’ rank and status are irrelevant. Some years ago in response to a survey, one member said of H-ASIA, ‘it helps me feel connected to a broader intellectual community in my field. I can keep abreast of publications, conferences and jobs, and what issues are most contentious among scholars.’ In continuing to meet such expectations, H-ASIA has flourished thus far for 15 years—its editors and community will hope to continue evolving as a useful and humane link among scholars around the world.

Frank F. Conlon
University of Washington, USA
conlon@u.washington.edu

H-ASIA Home page: http://www.h-net.org/~asia/
In the last decade, the information environment has undergone a digital revolution and the rate of digital publication has increased exponentially. This has resulted in dramatic changes in academic and public libraries’ collections and services. Among librarians we talk about ‘the serial crisis’ or that a spectre is haunting the publishing industry; it is the ghosts of all the publishers that have disappeared in the last few years because they neglected the electronic media – big publishing houses, which have been absorbed by other more forward-looking publishers. However, while many traditional presses have closed down or have been losing money for years, new publishers are emerging with different business models that encompass electronic developments like e-books, Open Archives, Open Access digital repositories, and Creative Commons.

Anja Møller Rasmussen
NIAS Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Library, Denmark
anja.moller.rasmussen@nias.ku.dk

Sources

This means that today a great amount of research materials and data is available online, and free of charge to the reader. Instead of purchasing or licensing content, some libraries are now devoting their collections budgets to supporting Open Access publishing initiatives, thus acknowledging that the production of knowledge is not free and that the costs must somehow be met. During the last couple of years, new Open Access business models have been developed and hopefully publishers are starting to realise the importance of extending Open Access publishing models to researchers who wish to make their research results freely available to the academic community.

Anja Møller Rasmussen
NIAS Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Library, Denmark
anja.moller.rasmussen@nias.ku.dk