

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

Frank F. Conlon

FOR THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS, one conversation among a growing community of Asia specialists has been sustained by H-ASIA, the Asian studies and history network of H-NET, a world-spanning consortium of scholarly lists concerning humanities and social sciences online. The H-NET mission has been built upon a vision: of creating and enhancing international, electronic communication within communities of scholars, teachers, advanced students, and related professionals and of facilitating the electronic transmission of information by those committed to research, teaching, learning, public outreach, and professional service in the humanities and social sciences.<sup>2</sup>

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 cognitive anthropology 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.<sup>3</sup>

While a major characteristic of H-ASIA posts involves gaining and sharing knowledge with distant colleagues, many posts are devoted to calls for papers for conferences, 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 persons at major universities and centres of Asian studies, probably many of these sorts of resources are available close by from colleagues and research collections. However, most Asia specialists are not at major centres, and H-ASIA has provided a means to overcoming the 'tyranny of distance.'

For example, the Calls for Papers give isolated scholars a greater chance at participation in events that were formerly often noted in quarterly newsletters received by post well after the deadlines for submission of proposals. H-ASIA has played a role in formation of conference panels, and has served as a medium for greater inclusion of Asia-related papers and panels at disciplinary conferences. There is also a degree of democratisation in our process. While we limit membership to academics – both faculty and graduate students, researchers, independent scholars, librarians and bibliographers – we generally post only with reference to name and institution. Our members do not invoke the distances of 'status' in their willingness to share information or to offer comments.

An important distinction for H-ASIA is that it is moderated by a team of volunteer editors who evaluate proposed posts, tweak subject lines and, in some instances, encourage participation in discussions.<sup>4</sup> While one might imagine an editorial task being one of preventing 'flames' and inappropriate posts, somehow over the years, members of H-ASIA have evolved their own sense of civility – editorial interventions are few and far between. The H-ASIA team is always prepared to welcome new volunteers for editing, book-review editing or new web-based related activities that will emerge in the future.

The 'threads' of discussions may involve only a few posts or many; some stimulate participation from only one or two members, others stimulate lengthy debates. A sample of discussion subjects may give a sense of content: textbooks on human rights in East Asia, the control and use of alum in Ming China, ethnographies of 'failed' development projects, comfort women in World War II, introduction of tobacco into India, the controversies of the Smithsonian exhibit on Hiroshima, the career of the quotation about 'destroying a village in order to save it' in the Vietnam War, Gavin Menzies' book on Zheng He (Cheng Ho) 1421 and its critics, and ideas and sources on the teaching of the partition of India.

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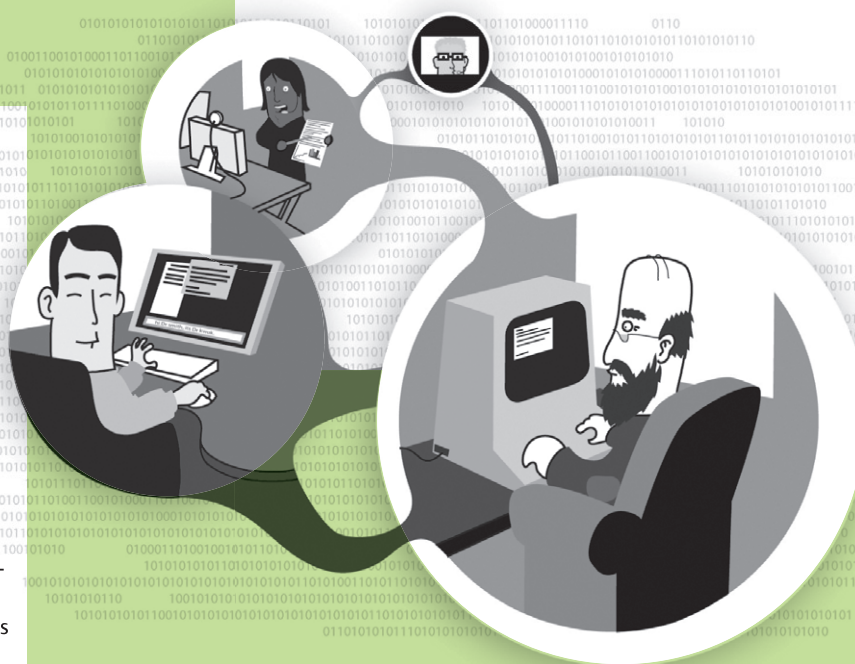
Because H-ASIA's members dwell in virtually every time zone of the globe our conversations are, by nature, asynchronous. Gratification is not instant, yet I believe this contributes to a more measured and thoughtful participation by members. What is clear is that H-ASIA serves to overcome various 'tyrannies of distance' – our numbers are growing particularly in Asia. Beyond physical distances there also are status distances. Without setting 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.

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H-NET Home Page: <http://www.h-net.org/>  
H-ASIA Home page: <http://www.h-net.org/~asia/>

#### Sources/notes

1. Thomas Erickson, 'Persistent Conversation: An Introduction' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 4:4 June 1999. <<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol4/issue4/ericksonintro.html>>
2. H-NET Mission Statement <<http://www.h-net.org/about/mission.php>>
3. Etienne Wenger, (1998), *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998
4. Current editorial staff currently includes, besides Frank Conlon, Kate Brittlebank (University of Tasmania), Ryan Dunch (University of Alberta), Linda Dwyer. (Salisbury State University), Andrew Field (CIEE, Shanghai), Sumit Guha (Rutgers University) and Ming-te Pan (SUNY-Oswego).



## How to join H-ASIA

1. Send a post (with subject line empty) to [listserv@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:listserv@h-net.msu.edu) with the message

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

[e.g. SUB H-ASIA Al Einstein, 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://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=lm&list=H-Asia>

## Getting Published: A companion for the humanities and social sciences

Gerald Jackson and Marie Lenstrup, 2009.  
NIAS Press: Copenhagen.

Book review by Julian Millie

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 NIAS 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', served as a useful checking exercise for my own 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.

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The book is written in a second-person frame, addressing the reader as if she were a 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 theses, 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 can-do academic able to perform high-quality research that is then transferred directly to prose so clear that 'your mother could read it' (the old chestnut!); who will effortlessly enter into a contract with his or her choice of marquee publishers; and who is able to draw infatuated media attention of the academic and normal 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 figment 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'.

# Library collections in transition

## The future of books in libraries

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



THE DIGITAL LIBRARY AS WE KNOW IT TODAY can be traced back to the emergence of electronic journals and the first e-books in the late 1990s. Unlike its print counterpart, however, the online version means that libraries no longer own or control access to the content. Together with the shift in scholarly publishing and reading habits, this shift in control over access and location of content is the biggest challenge to libraries today.

Most of those libraries that are now cancelling print journals in favour of online material and buying e-books instead of print copies have become very concerned about the uncertainty of future access to online collections that could result from publisher mergers, the trading of titles between publishers, and the disappearance of online content due to providers going out of business. This concern highlights libraries' need for secure access and facilities for archiving content regardless of providers. While this concern is addressed in some license negotiations and agreements, the issues remain unresolved.

Owing to the cost of digital publications, libraries that used to spend 50 percent of their acquisitions budgets on printed books and monographs now spend 25 percent or less.

#### Pricing, budgets and costs

At the same time, libraries are deeply concerned that subscription costs for electronic journals and e-books continue to sky rocket. This price rise has forced libraries into print collection cancellations. It has resulted in huge shifts in the allocation of resources in collection budgets towards increased support for e-journal and e-book packages – a shift that can be read out of the acquisitions budget of every library in the

I can't help seeing the first as an attempt at symbolic self-aggrandisement, and the latter as a lazy reading by someone wanting to drag all meaning to a central repository of 'common sense'. But that is the point of a book like this – it is written by editors, and they see things differently to academics. This book is a valuable resource for making scholars aware of the stylistic, cultural and economic requirements of the world of book-publishing. (Also, I am not sure my imaginary super-academic/writer exists, at least I haven't met her yet.)

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Nevertheless, by exploring the gap academics must cross in order to compete in the world of scholarly publishing, *Getting Published* is also a contribution to a debate about the benefit of the impregnable position the book occupies beside other forms of academic output: production of a single-authored book has become a benchmark of progress in academic careers that is unfairly applied to staff whose expertises lie in other areas of academic achievement; declining financial resources have seen

world and that leaves small libraries without the means to meet the demands of their users. Owing to the cost of digital publications, libraries that used to spend 50 percent of their acquisitions budgets on printed books and monographs now spend 25 percent or less. Thus, in order to meet the growing demand for e-publications and databases, NIAS Library, where we used to spend 40 percent of the budget on printed monographs, now spends less than 18 percent on these books.

The digital library is nowadays taken for granted. Students and researchers demand access 24/7 to e-journals and e-books, and the library must respond to this demand. Simultaneously, libraries have been confronted with budget cuts and demands for more effective management; the answer to these demands has been more electronic material and simplified administrative procedures; more electronic media and fewer printed volumes. Moving and handling paper is expensive and time-consuming work!

Challenged by user demands and economic realities, libraries are set to change into 'libratories', a combination of library, repository and electronic access hub – 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Which leaves little space for the traditional printed book in modern library collections.

Academic publishers, who depend on sales to libraries, cannot cover their costs only by publishing printed volumes but must meet the demand for electronic formats to ensure their continued survival. It is actually a very interesting paradox that even with the growth of digital technologies and the ease of utilising these technologies, publishers continue to increase the price of both e-publications and print material, although digitising is more cost-effective for publishers than traditional production (Lewis, 2008). Another paradox is that publishers continue to promote both print and online versions even though this keeps prizes up and is highly undesirable both for libraries and researchers.

#### Changes in scholarly communication

The global pressure on researchers to 'publish or perish' has increased drastically over the last couple of years with publication output becoming the main path to success in research assessments exercises, job applications and faculty grants. Not only young scholars depend on publishing to advance their careers: all faculty members must publish to ensure grants and academic standing.

university presses compete with non-scholarly presses in producing books for broad readerships, and this trend has made publication difficult for scholars whose work engages with the finer detail of materials outside the public's attention; understaffed university presses routinely seek subsidies that sap resources marked for research and place a question mark over the probity of publication process; and what is wrong with journal articles? It is not clear why a monograph should be a higher token of academic esteem than a refereed journal article in a quality journal.

Although these questions are outside the brief of *Getting Published*, the authors deserve ample credit for not positioning the scholarly monograph as the 'be all and end all' of academic achievement. Instead, they lay out the multiple paths open to scholars in their working life. Jackson and Lenstrup make it clear that publication of a scholarly monograph with an international publisher is not the only trajectory open to scholars. Some of the chapters in *Getting Published* discuss e-publishing, writing and publication of articles, and self-publication. This is a valuable feature of the book, and it acknowledges that the reality of scholarly work is far more varied than the traditional monograph as we know it.

The information contained in *Getting Published* will help writers navigate the strenuous currents of academic publication, and is therefore of use to all academics. To writers contemplating production of a first monograph, this book (or one like it) is essential preparation.

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However, printed books and journal articles are no longer intrinsically the right means of distributing knowledge. Open Access models, 'license to publish' and creative commons agreements are becoming more and more accepted forms of publishing. Future scholarly publishing will be much influenced by authors' attitudes at the writing stage, and library collection policies will need to change in order to reflect these new developments.

New forms of scholarly communication and Open Access are slowly becoming integral elements of library collection development activities. Many academic and university libraries have already created and implemented action plans for scholarly communications programmes and Open Access repositories, developed in close collaboration with researchers. The current model of commercial publishing of the academic research output is, after 20 years of excessive journal subscription price increases, no longer financially sustainable. Scholars are taking back ownership of their research output by retaining copyright and making their research freely available through 'license to publish' agreements for everyone on the web. Several national research councils and funding institutions now demand that all scholarly works created with their backing must be published as Open Access publications.

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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.

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