5-1-2009

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Back in the Twentieth Century: The Development of The Journal of the Association for History and Computing 1997-2009

Posted on May 1, 2009 by Editor

Editorial by Jeffrey Barlow,

Director, Berglund Center for Internet Studies,
Founding Editor, The Journal of the Association for History and Computing

Forward: At the Berglund Center we have long sponsored a number of scholarly electronic journals. These were a natural outgrowth of our increasing interest in the impact of the Internet. Some of these journals have had significant impact in academic circles. Foremost among these was The Journal of the Association for History and Computing (JAHC), the first scholarly electronic journal in the field of historical studies to be well received in academia. At the same time, as the impact of the Internet has deepened and widened, the JAHC faces much changed circumstances.

Below we discuss the JAHC as an example of the impact of the Internet upon scholarly print and electronic journals. This editorial will also appear subsequently in the JAHC itself. Because it was developed for a scholarly audience, it has a tone which is overly formal and pedantic, a very limited style from which writing for Interface, blessedly, usually frees me. But perhaps the editorial does have the advantage of showing our broader audience not only the impact of the Internet upon academic journals, but also the problems that professional academics face in addressing scholarly audiences within their fields. All of these problems persist despite the many marvelous changes which digital communications have brought to us.

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.01. Introduction: Origins...

As The Journal of the Association for History and Computing begins its twelfth year of production, it is an appropriate time to consider both its past, and its possible futures. The Journal has been significant and influential but faces many challenges if it is to remain important and to expand its influence.

My own relationship with the Association began at the Cincinnati conference in 1997 [1]. At that time, I was an established Asianist in the Modern China field with several books in publication, two Fulbright grants, and a lively research career with frequent travel to Taiwan, China, Vietnam, and Japan. Asian Studies was a hot field because of national security concerns as much as any other factor. I also had established a strong record of securing grants, both personal and institutional, as well.

After accepting the Matsushita Chair in Asian and International Studies at Pacific University, I received a grant from the Matsushita Corporation to develop electronic materials for Asian Studies. I needed to know more about the relationship between content and electronic delivery and the conference, organized by the International Association for History and Computing, seemed a good place to begin.

The conference was a liminal experience. To my surprise, I had far more in common with the presenters and the organizers of the conference than I did with most Asianists. The conference was a confusing experience in some regards, not only because of my lack of background but because the conference organizers, led by Dennis Trinkle, were not themselves quite sure where they were going. But many others had also found the conference exciting, and we met to discuss creating an American branch of the International Association [2].

I was charged with developing an electronic journal for such an organization. During the following year, I read widely, and began to master the Internet as a research tool, all the while posting student work on the Internet for the Matsushita Center for Electronic Learning. This combination of hands-on activity bolstered by theoretical research came to be the essence of history and computing.

My goal was to help create an electronic journal that would be a legitimate scholarly step in the development of our common field, historical studies. From my research, I began to see that it was probable that we were at the beginning of a new stage in the long process of scholarly communications [3]. The medium for scholarly communication had gone through many forms, literally from and clay tablets and stone monuments through codices, parchments, and finally onto paper. Both the materials used and the forms of the content had evolved. The key stages it seemed to me were:

- *From the 1470s through the 1660s: The book was the main form of scholarly communications.*
- From the 1660s through to the present: The journal became the main form. This was not a smooth progression, but accelerated rapidly in the 19th century.
- From 1992-1997, a migration to computers began; whether this was a new stage or an ancillary development of the previous stage remained, in 1997, to be seen [4].

The outcome of that year’s work was a paper presented at the 1998 conference which was a proposal that we create a journal for the nascent AAHC, that it be, of course, electronic, but that it also try to emulate as much as possible the look and functions of traditional peer-reviewed scholarly journals. This was what I had seen referred to as the “stealth model,” meaning that while the new mode of delivery was to be electronic, the journal itself was meant to appear soothingly transitional rather than as a potentially disruptive technology.

Following another several months work at the Matsushita Center, the first issue of the JAHC appeared in August 2008, and the conference paper was presented as the “Editorial Statement” referenced here. While I am quite proud of my status as “Founding Editor” at the JAHC, every editor knows that he or she is at best a conduit for the work of others, usually many others. The common plural for a group of editors is a “stable” of editors. Perhaps the more appropriate term in English might be “kennel,” because reliable editors work like dogs as much as like horses.

The JAHC was rooted in an almost crusading mentality among the founders. I was the greybeard in the group; there were a few others also in mid-career, but most were just setting out. After another ten years working at the Matsushita Center and at the Berglund Center for Internet Studies which succeeded it, I have come to see that this generational progression is rooted perhaps in the development of the WWW and computing itself.

When we began, knowledge of simple HTML was king, and any computer that could link to the Internet was satisfactory. Then came a bewildering cascade of new applications, computers, an entire science and an industry which steadily produced ever more savvy generations of practitioners and their students. And all this in ten years.

These developments were not, of course, driven or developed by academics, most of whom were deeply skeptical of each stage. This put us at the JAHC in a complex position, advocating for changes which were, we believed, going to be deeply upsetting to many of our colleagues.

One of our major tasks at the JAHC in this first decade was simply to understand and stay abreast of such changes, to find writers and editors who could winnow out the important ones from the incidental ones, and explain them to audiences who were often highly skeptical, and always relatively unlearned.

Our chosen niche, following in the tracks of the International Association, was the link between computing and historical studies. At the outset this seemed a simple enough conception, perhaps if anything, too limited. The astonishing pace of change, however, opened many new avenues to us, not only in studying the changes then occurring, but also in teaching and methodology, in research and data gathering, in delivery, and even in the fundamental forms for final presentations of findings.
.02. Successes

We were successful by any reasonable standards. We have published over the past eleven years more than 142 different authors, some of them who were or soon became major figures in our field. Our columnists produced continually useful material issue after issue [5]. We opened this work up to an international audience by producing scholarly abstracts in more than ten foreign languages, encouraging those who read English as a second language to explore our content, and enabling index builders in those languages to catalogue it. Our editors and authors came from more than twenty countries and we discovered groups of like-minded scholars all over the world.

We found that many of our natural allies were not actually in the field of historical studies, but in the Library Sciences. This group realized well ahead of the historians that the critical element in the transition to digital forms of information was going to be indexing and cataloging them.

Our international editors were so dedicated to the sort of work that we were undertaking that they soon spun off sister journals in first French, then in Italian [6]. Scholars, authors and editors from abroad began showing up at our annual conferences, including a panel of Russian scholars—at the time a relative novelty—all of who shared our own abiding commitment.

The field of historical studies itself began to recognize the significance of our work. We became an Affiliate within the American Historical Association less than two years after the JAHC first appeared, in record time, faster even, somewhat to our embarrassment, than had Black Studies or Feminist Studies [7].

We were only the second electronic journal to be indexed by American History and Life and by Historical Abstracts [8]. We may also have been the first scholarly journal to have been hijacked by the Iranian Ministry of Science, which did us the dubious honor of scraping our site in 2004, downloading all of our content to that date behind a misleading URL, a problem which continues to bedevil us [9].

Materials that we first published electronically and themes that we explored also found their way into hard-copy publications, including a book series at M.E. Sharpe edited by some of our founding members [10]. For five years, almost every panel dealing with scholarship or teaching in an electronic environment which I attended at national conferences in History, Computing, Education, or Asian Studies, were peopled by scholars we had first published.

We were also an inspiration to other American scholarly groups contemplating plunging into the World Wide Web. A representative of the American Political Science Association acknowledged our influence in their decision to do so, and I have often consulted with Asian Studies groups as well.

.03. Roots of Success

There were, of course, a number of reasons why we succeeded, so quickly and so spectacularly as both an organization and as a journal. Partly, it was the times. We were just behind the first rapid expansion of the World Wide Web and the development of critical browser and search technologies. Many of us were teaching students who were even more familiar with these than we were, and they
often compelled us to learn about them, or fall behind. In turn, as related fields developed so rapidly, our second generation of students secured excellent professional positions, and a highly productive feedback loop began to build.

The reaction was also, as we had anticipated, often fearful or hostile. Colleagues thought that we were pandering to popular culture; they first dismissed the rapid expansion of Internet-enabled knowledge as temporary, then as simply debased, then as a corrupting influence that threatened to destroy books, if not civilization itself [11].

But granted the necessary expansion of the Web, our successes were ultimately rooted in something more prosaic and familiar: the founding values of our fields: regard for objectivity, an insistence upon double-blind peer review practices, upon citations and bibliography, in short upon critical scholarship itself. These traditional practices also came to be in some regards detrimental as discussed below.

Other reasons for success were the wonderful new tools we could bring to bear. While traditional journals, because of the expense, were forced to limit graphics, color, even notes themselves, we had no such limitations. Soon, we were giving annual awards to fabulous new database sites, to archives of photographs and film clips, to interactive teaching materials, to projects based on all the wondrous panoplies of WWW-enabled scholarly visions [12].

This era created a number of really important figures in the web-based industries, visionaries who saw the possible and created or secured the funding to enable it. As academics our tasks were more mundane and our backing more limited, but among our founders were many of us who took remarkable risks in changing the direction of our scholarship and teaching mid-way in our careers and even in the late stages of critical evaluation processes. We heard of many casualties in our ranks.

Dennis Trinkle, David Staley, and Deborah Lines Andersen produced a number of important studies evaluating the slow spread of and the many obstacles to digitally enabled scholarship and teaching [13]. The AAHC also developed, importantly, documents to help guide the development of appropriate standards for evaluating digital teaching and scholarship [14].

Many established scholars refused to acknowledge that digital change was indeed coming and were stubbornly resisting, rather than assisting us in properly adjusting to it. We were often amused when one of these established scholars finally ventured into electronic scholarship to thunderous applause in The Chronicle of Higher Education. But we knew that many truly creative younger scholars were being harried back behind the safe boundaries of established academic practices. More sadly, some were unwilling or unable to compromise and drifted out of academia altogether.

But fortunately for us, there were also enlightened supporters at our institutions who, in the argot of the time, “got it.” These Deans, Directors, Presidents and Provosts were all painfully aware of how very competitive the academic and international environments were becoming, and wished to succeed in adapting. They funded our arcane projects, nominated us to new positions where we could push even harder, and, not infrequently, defended us against the serious charge that we were
having fun in our work.

The continuing success of the JAHC has been based in large part upon one such generous philanthropist, Dr. James Berglund, who founded the Berglund Center for Internet Studies at Pacific University Oregon and facilitated the bringing together of computer labs and skilled student labor necessary for our continuing development. Other writers and editors are equally dependent upon such visionaries at other institutions, of course.

.04. Failures

Our successes have been worth celebrating, of course, if only because they offer many lessons for future successes. But learning from our failures may be even more critical and we have had many.

As Founding Editor, I have found it galling that we have not been able to move to a quarterly production schedule. I ran this chart of our postings:

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<th>Year</th>
<th>1998</th>
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In each year after 1998 that we met, the board expressed a hope that we could move to a regularly quarterly production schedule. But we encountered two critical limitations. First, most of our founding generation of writers and editors succeeded in their careers and were promoted very rapidly [15]. Some of us have managed to fold the JAHC into those new positions to at least a marginal extent as have I, but others simply could no longer pay proper attention to it. The reader may have noticed that there is no cell for 2009 on the chart. At present, to my understanding of the production schedule, there are unlikely to be more than two issues in this calendar year.

The second cause of our failure was paradoxically, our success, and that of the World Wide Web itself. Other journals and other professional associations saw what we were doing, and moved to offer similar opportunities within their own folds. Where once we were almost the only peer-reviewed critical scholarly venue willing to publish digital scholarship and teaching in historical studies, soon everybody was. It became more difficult, even as the fields expanded, to secure increasing levels of content.

Unfortunately, as I predicted in 1998 in our first issue, when the established brands finally came to the table, they were going to elbow upstarts such as us aside, however much they deserved to suffer for their lack of courage. The succeeding Editor, Deborah Lines Andersen, wisely chose to maintain the quality of our content rather than to seek increasing quantities.

There is another failure that I find hard to pin down. I felt from the first that the World Wide Web was in some sense a component part of what we loosely call post-modernism. Post-modernist analysis has brought a great deal to scholarship, but it has also undermined the notions that there are fundamental truths and values. Perhaps this is necessary, and indeed, an accurate description of reality.
But the quality of scholarship has long been measured, and forever should be measured I think, against not just “truthiness” but truth. For centuries, historical scholarship flourished in an environment where truth was assessed by multi-level gatekeepers, highly qualified experts. Work was rarely published without being passed upon by ranks of such experts, from the advisors who shaped scholarly practices and manuscripts to the readers and editors who accepted or rejected them at scholarly presses and journals, to the libraries which carefully winnowed them in allocating valuable shelf space. The whole was interlocked by the practices of twentieth century scholarship, descended from many roots. When we researched and wrote, we bowed before Herodotus and Thucydides, before Sima Qian and Ban Zhao, as well as historians from every major cultural tradition and national locale.

Now every one of us is a possible publisher. At the JAHC we set ourselves to influence digital publication. We did develop good and useful practices for online citations, quality standards, objectivity and critical thinking [16]. We tried to modify traditional practices and to discover appropriate new best practices.

But we have been helpless before the same historical events that propelled us for a time at least to the scholarly edge of the wave set moving by the expansion of the World Wide Web. The end result has been that while students have far more materials available via the WWW than in their local and high school libraries, they are no better at evaluating such materials than was the case fifty years ago—perhaps less able. And fifty years ago the gatekeepers listed above protected them; now students face an impossible surge of materials, and usually select the most highly ranked ones, or the ones with the most pleasing colors, or with the most graphics. Wikipedia, an encyclopedia written by anybody and nobody, is now largely the arbiter of historical truth and relative importance.

.05. Future Prospects?

What do I believe to be the future of the JAHC? For me, a validity check for historical research is its utility in predicting the future. I am fully aware that this places me in an old, outmoded, and completely discredited school of historical thought. Wiser historians long ago abandoned the conceit that their knowledge of the highly selected segment of the past that they accumulated had any hint of lessons for the future.

Nonetheless, those of us at the JAHC had, correctly I think, the apprehension that we were present at the creation of a new field, a new mode of delivering content, a true episteme. And we felt that, however dimly, we were seeing the future. In preparing this piece, I looked over the works of the many authors and editors we have published and I think that in general we have been on target. While the pace of change has been breathtaking and many new applications unforeseeable, nonetheless much of what we foresaw has unfolded.

I do not hesitate, therefore, to predict the next stage for the JAHC. We are going, I think, to face several obvious problems.

First, our original theme, the intersection between history and computing, has proven to be both too narrow and too broad. Too broad in the sense that everybody is doing it, and we have lost our niche
to many formidable competitors. And in this era, what we do seems to be less clearly defined, unless very narrowly defined, in which case we lack adequate materials to publish.

We cannot however, simply unlink from our core interest; to do so is to lose our identity entirely. I that that rather we should embrace that link. The numbers of books and articles on the history of computing, computing practices, etc., are growing steadily and we must publish more of this list. This will not be easy, it will require an aggressive editorial staff which will seek out and encourage submissions that on their face may not be terribly interesting.

What, for example, was the first serious impact of email on the doing of history? What was the process whereby computers entered into dissertation research and practices? The first generation is still alive, and as historians we should see the importance of collecting their memories, and we now can do it in video as well. Each of these topics, we believe, like all historical research, also offers important lessons or at least understandings.

There is an entire field of corporate histories in the information technologies which are usually being written in-house. These may lack the impact of Ida Tarbell’s works of course, but may be equally important in the ongoing Darwinian process of consolidation in the industry. Then there is the huge field of gaming development, taken seriously largely only by gamers themselves. But sociologists and those in new fields such as “Gaming Studies” are also working away. Where are the historians?

Rather than continue on with perhaps decreasingly persuasive examples, I will leave it to future editors to do what their predecessors at the JAHC have done, identify the creative thinkers and writers among the not-yet-notables and solicit their work.

A second problem is diminishing interest among younger scholars simply because our field, once revolutionary, has blended into the background of their daily lives. We are not tied together, for example, by our common experience of oppression, as are scholars of ethnic and gender studies.

Our interest is a more remote and tepid one, and in our classes we need to treat the impact of computers upon history as an element in every contemporary historical field and problem, as it is, I believe. We must, in our teaching, develop an interest in younger scholars in better understanding the immediate past to which we are, after all, eyewitnesses.

For me, for example, the development of the computing industry has become as important a factor in the triangular relationship between Taiwan, China, and the United States as was the Korean War, or the nuclear balance in the Taiwan Straits, and is a great deal less understood. Yet I do not teach this issue.

In his 2003 presidential address to the AAHC, Ryan Johnson listed a summer workshop we presented in 2000 at the International Center for Computer Enhanced Learning at Wake Forest. This brought in several tens of teachers from the surrounding area, and was, I believe, the last such workshop we offered. We should both as individuals and as institutions do many more.

This is not to say that we should become a subfield of the Histories of Science, Technology, or
Business. But the impact of digital technology has been pervasive and we must see it for the formative event that it truly is, and in the JAHC encourage the production and publication of works which will illuminate that impact. To do so is to stay true to our original mission, to study the relationship between history and computing.

The JAHC also faces a perilous future because all academic journals do. At the JAHC, we have depended upon self-sacrifice and the kindness of others for our production expenses. But for most journals, the chase for funding is constant and too often drives decision-making. On the WWW, it is difficult for journals to maintain an identity—let us say it—a “brand”—because articles are usually found via a search, not in the studied perusal of a new issue arriving upon one’s desk. Yet most established journals are financial black holes supported by the large scholarly associations which produce them [17].

Our future is also challenging, because research itself is being marginalized, and the teaching of history is frequently reduced to an academically supportive activity. Deans now demand that we teach ever-larger classes, and presidents stuff our classrooms to the bursting point in an effort to lower costs. The Liberal Arts themselves wither under the impact of the decline of the American economic empire.

All of these issues are, as well, opportunities for us. Computing, or at least digital technology, is now a direct influence upon history, not only its subject but also a force that shapes it. Who better to study this process than the members of the AAHC, and where better to publish our findings than in the JAHC?

These points that I have tried to make here doubtless seem overly dramatic. But when I tried to understand the development of scholarly communication in the pre-digital era, I saw that each of those generations too, saw themselves as living in challenging times, and it was those who responded to those challenges who carried historical studies forward.

**Endnotes:**

[1] Please note that although I suggested that this piece will cover the JAHC from its inception to the present, in fact I was much less active after 2006 and Deborah Andersen’s piece in this issue should be considered authoritative for the following period.

[2] I am not naming these many individuals, both out of a fear of overlooking many of them and their contributions to the development of the AAHC, but also because I am trying to avoid the usual elegiac self-referential tones such pieces as this easily adopt. To better understand their contributions, see the JAAHC itself at: http://mcel.pacificu.edu/jahc/


[5] Again, I prefer not to list individuals here, knowing that I will inevitably leave some worthy scholar out of the list.


[7] See the site within the AHA at: http://www.historians.org/affiliates/am_assn_his_computing.htm

[8] For more material on these successes see Ryan Johnson, “The Long Strange Trip It’s Been” at “http://journals2.iranscience.net:800/mcel.pacificu.edu/mcel.pacificu.edu/jahc/JAHCVI2/ARTICLES/president.HTML

[9] Note the URL immediately above. Such pirate sites often outrank our legitimate sites on Google searches, presumably because the Iranians either manipulate rankings or often assign our articles in their own educational institutions. The American equivalent, I suppose, was the attempt of a leading American corporation to lock up our content in exchange for a generous annual payment. We desperately needed—and still need—such funds. Supposedly they simply wanted preferential access to our foreign language abstracts and our several dual-language articles, but the ninety page contract they sent us seemed much too opaque and open ended and when we tried sending them a simplified version which carefully reserved our rights, they broke off negotiations.

[10] See the list at: http://www.theaahc.org/publications.html


[12] These also sometimes challenged our classical standards. I remember with some chagrin my own editorial fiat that a very imaginative and playful scholar could not include a banner of Grateful Dead style dancing bear icons at the top of his article.


[15] Those who did not succeed were those who found themselves in unsupportive environments. These often withdrew to safer areas of scholarly activity and their energies were lost to us. Others, through no fault of their own, could not establish the critical academic toehold that might lead to tenure and were reduced to debilitating and distracting underemployment or ancillary positions.


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