

More Than A Listserv

Celebrating H-Canada's 20-Year Anniversary

By Michelle Filice, PhD



On 10 February 1995, H-Canada went live for the first time. Established as part of the H-Net program at Michigan State University (MSU), H-Canada sought to stimulate dialogue among and between scholars, students and history enthusiasts. H-Canada's first editors, Dave De Brou and Anthony Gulig, were enthusiastic about this new online endeavor. They were also somewhat surprised by the immediate support that they received from Canadians. Only five days after H-Canada's launch, De Brou asked subscribers for patience as he and Gulig took a few days to process 180 subscription requests. "180 wow," wrote De Brou as he signed off his first post.¹

Editors De Brou and Gulig treated H-Canada as more than just a listserv. Reading through their early discussion posts, it is evident that they fostered a real sense of community among subscribers.² De Brou and Gulig were personable; they let subscribers know when they were away from the office, helped them to correct internet problems, and thanked supporters on H-Canada's first birthday.³ Most of De Brou's posts were also bilingual, enabling him to reach both anglophones and francophones. Not surprisingly, their efforts earned H-Canada a steady following. On 30 July 1995, only five months after its launch, H-Canada had nearly 300 subscribers, many of whom actively participated in discussions. By the time De Brou and Gulig left H-Canada on 31 July 1997, there were 800 subscribers.

From the late 1990s on, H-Canada's network continued to expand. Jean Martin and Alan Gordon became the new editors in 1997. Despite its popularity, some scholars were still apprehensive about the fast-growing use of the web by students. Historians were also concerned with the purpose or value of studying history. From October to November 1997, the following topics fostered much discussion: "What is Canadian?"; "Why Study History?" and "Value of History."⁴

Lively discussion continued into the 2000s. New editors, Forrest Pass and Matthew Hayday, moderated one of the most popular

¹ Posted by Dave DeBrou, "Patience svp," (15 February 1995).

² Logged discussion posts from February 1995 to May 2014 are available online: <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=lm&list=H-Canada>

³ Posted by Dave De Brou, "De Brou hits the road" (Aug 12, 1996); Posted by Anthony Gulig, "Changing of the Guard" (Aug 27 1996); Posted by Dave De Brou, "Resetting your H-Canada mail" (18 Dec 1995); Posted by Dave De Brou, "INFO: congratulations/felicitations to/au H-Canada" (Feb 7, 1996).

⁴ Posted by Alan Gordon, "What is Canadian" (2 October 1997); Posted by Alan Gordon "Why Study History" (6 November 1997); Posted by Alan Gordon "The Value of History" (25-30 November 1997).

discussion threads in all of H-Canada history: "Why Canadian History is so Boring."⁵ The conversation originally began as a debate between historians Allan Greer and Jack Granatstein, but it soon included H-Canada subscribers. The post garnered a number of responses, some of which came from scholars in Germany, Brazil and the UK.⁶ Responses came from professors as well as high school teachers, book publishers and the general public. The concern about how Canadians were teaching and learning about history remained a topic of debate throughout the decade.

A decade after its launch, H-Canada was a firmly established online community of scholars and researchers. Through to 2014, editors Ioana Teodorescu, Harold Bérubé and Marc-André Robert continued to moderate discussion posts and distribute information via the listserv. Around Christmas 2014, H-Net announced that it was changing its format, and that by extension, H-Canada would also change. The traditional listserv format would be replaced by a more interactive structure called H-Net Commons. Some of the new features included blogging, the ability to upload videos, and a page for links. Discussion posts were converted into a daily digest format in order to avoid cluttering subscribers' inboxes. The Commons was intended to make communication between subscribers easier and more efficient.

Despite initial problems, H-Canada is largely back to normal. Currently, there are 1736 subscribers, with approximately 3-5 new ones added each week. In order to assist subscribers with recent changes to H-Canada, Filice distributed the Commons Quick Start Guide, which explains how to set up a Commons account and how to contribute to discussions in the new system.⁷ This summer, Filice hopes to fill in some of the empty content pages on the H-Canada site and to recruit at least one new editor.

2015 marks the twentieth anniversary of H-Canada. Over the past two decades, H-Canada has transformed from a simple listserv to an engaged online community. What has not changed is the lively debate and discussion between and among subscribers. H-Canada is an important network to support and maintain because it gives historians, teachers, researchers and students a place to talk openly about their ideas and research, and to ask questions. It will be interesting to see how H-Canada evolves in the years to come as part of the H-Net Commons.

⁵ Posted by Forrest Pass, "Why Canadian History is so Boring" (29 August 2005).

⁶ Posted by Forrest Pass, "Reply: Why Canadian History is so Boring" (31 August 2005), (1Sep 2005).

⁷ To access the Commons Quick Start Guide, please visit: <https://networks.h-net.org/node/905/pages/52876/commons-quick-start-guide>