History, People, and Informatics: A Conversation between Sharon Irish and Wendy Plotkin

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Abstract

This extended interview between founding H-Urban editor Wendy Plotkin and H-Urban reviews editor Sharon Irish traces the early history of online scholarly communication via H-Net, H-Urban, and COMM-ORG, informed by Plotkin's background as a planner and community activist in the 1970s and 1980s. After work with community development corporations on the East Coast, Plotkin entered graduate school in urban history at the University of Illinois at Chicago. During this period in the early nineties, Plotkin had a job with the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI), and then collaborated on the development of the forum that became H-Net. In addition to standards and protocols about new communication technologies, face-to-face relationships grew out of online exchanges, often with lively disagreements about the direction of H-Net. Plotkin's own broadening use of digital tools prompts her concluding reflections on historians' continuing need to use the Internet to overcome physical and intellectual fragmentation, and how the Internet has democratized the field of history.

Preamble

For three years now (2007-10), I have been the project coordinator for the Community Informatics Initiative of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). Community informatics (CI) is an emerging field, with continuing debates about definitions and core questions. Informatics is the study of information systems and processes, including computational, social, and individual cognition. CI, with its social emphasis, aims to understand not only how communities access, create, organize, and share information, but also the types and qualities of connections between and among communities. CI scholars and practitioners examine the uses of information and communication technologies in geographically-distinct and underserved areas, and work with local communities to achieve their goals. This focus stresses that reciprocity must characterize relationships that involve the distribution and use of information. Community members spearhead both naming the issues of the community and the process leading to solutions. [1]

As an historian, I puzzle over which concepts contributed to the emergence of community informatics. One convergence of ideas I wanted to investigate occurred in the 1990s. Seventeen years ago, in 1993, Wendy Plotkin was a graduate student in urban history at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). Her graduate assistantship gave her an early entrée to the world of computers and the Internet. She used this experience to become a key participant in the launching of H-Net (Humanities and Social Sciences on Line), an organization devoted to using the Internet for scholarly communication, together with a professor of political history, Richard Jensen, and another graduate student, Kelly Richter, who specialized in Civil War history. The first of the scholarly forums was H-Urban, which Wendy established as a model for the later forums, and which is how I came to know her. [2]

Wendy and I met in person for the first time in Chicago, Illinois, in July 2008, after having developed a virtual relationship since 2002, when I became review editor for H-Urban. I wanted to document her memories and ideas relating to the early years of H-Urban. During two conversations in Chicago — one at a noisy restaurant in Greektown [3]

and a second follow-up meeting in the Italian neighborhood near the campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago — Wendy shared her insights about online scholarly communication. Our conversations then continued in email exchanges between Wendy and me that covered the history of H-Net and H-Urban, her growing interest in geospatial technologies, and her ideas for future projects. This article thus takes the form of an extended interview in three parts. The first focuses on Wendy's background as a planner and community activist in Boston in the 1970s and 1980s. The second examines her decision to become a historian upon her return to Chicago (her hometown) in 1990, and her involvement in the creation of H-Net, H-Urban, and COMM-ORG, in the subsequent decade. The third considers her broadening use of digital tools, reflections on historians' continuing need to use the Internet to overcome physical and intellectual fragmentation, and ideas about how the Internet has democratized the field of history.

— Sharon Irish

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Participating in the Community Revolution of the 1970s

| Sharon Irish | Wendy, your background in urban planning and policy (especially your years of employment in Boston on housing and economic development issues) really influenced your historical scholarship. Would you talk a bit about this period of your life, and the relationships between planning and your work in urban history? | 5 |

| Wendy Plotkin | After graduating from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with an undergraduate degree in history (1971), I headed to Boston. I worked in several jobs at the regional planning agency, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), first in housing and then in transportation.[1] In the mid-eighties, I got a master's degree from Tufts University in urban and environmental policy (1983-87), writing a thesis on the Boston Housing Partnership, a major community development project.[2] | 6 |

| | After getting my master's, I worked for the state of Massachusetts (1985-87) during the administration of Governor Michael Dukakis. Amy Anthony, the director of the Executive Office of Communities and Development (EOCD), found innovative ways to help the community development corporations (CDCs) that were becoming prominent players in the creation of Massachusetts housing and business by that time. Then, as now, it was difficult for CDCs to secure operating funds; most of the available funding was for specific projects, putting the proverbial cart before the horse. The CDCs with which we worked didn't have the money to function and train people in development before becoming involved in complex projects. EOCD provided CEED (Community Economic Enterprise Development) funds that enabled them to do just that, and I worked on "Special Projects." [3] | 7 |

| | From 1987-89, I worked for the city of Boston, helping CDCs get financing for housing and commercial projects. I was the liaison between the banks and the CDCs in securing loans that were packaged with federal and state subsidy and tax credit programs. By that time, I had also became personally involved with the Fenway CDC, which functioned in the neighborhood in which I lived. The Fenway CDC was a nationally known organization that had its roots in fighting arson-for-profit. In the 1980s, it organized against gentrification, developing affordable and ecologically sound housing that included long-term subsidies to maintain a racially and economically diverse neighborhood. I saw up close, not only the economic, but also the social benefits accruing to community members who participated in decisions that affected their lives. They helped to influence the course of development in their neighborhoods, and experienced strong communal ties that grew as a result of their collaboration. | 8 |

Figure 1. Fensgate Housing Cooperative, http://fensgate.com.p6.hostingprod.com/ The Fenway CDC renovated the Fensgate Housing Cooperative in 1986 in partnership with two private real-estate firms familiar with mixed-income housing. The 1904 building, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, originally had five residential apartments, one on each floor. Today, it has 46 apartments whose different prices reflect the goal of the building to house diverse individuals and households. Courtesy of the Mackin Group

| **Irish** | This aspect of your work intersects with community informatics because it values participatory decision-making, using a variety of tools to build strong relationships and coalitions. | 9 |
Plotkin	Yes. And I was particularly impressed by what might be considered an early form of low tech "community informatics," in the work of Urban Planning Aid. Urban Planning Aid was a consulting firm established by MIT and Harvard students in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1966 to "provide technical and informational assistance and promote transfer of skills to low income community and workplace groups in Eastern Massachusetts around issues of housing, industrial health and safety, media access, and backup research." [Urban Planning Aid 1972] I became aware of them through their publication *Less Rent: More Control: A Tenant's Guide to Rent Control in Massachusetts* when I became involved in an action contesting a rent increase in my Beacon Hill building in 1974.[4]	10
Irish	Beacon Hill…pretty impressive!	11
Plotkin	Not really - I lived on the less famous side of Beacon Hill, which had a legacy steeped in sailors, prostitutes, and Jewish immigrants. Its housing stock consisted of old three- and four-story apartment buildings, not the Georgian-style mansions on the other side. Massachusetts' 1972 rent control law required landlords to maintain their properties, and my neighbors and I documented the deficiencies in the building and asked the owners to	12

	deal with these prior to being considered for a rent increase.	
	Over the years, Urban Planning Aid produced a series of similar manuals, such as *Tenants First: A Research and Organizing Guide to FHA Housing and How to Use OSHA* (the landmark Occupational Health and Safety Act of 1973). They also warned of the perils that existed in reliance on community development corporations because of their roles as developers and owners, which would blunt their potential as activists on behalf of tenants. [5]	13
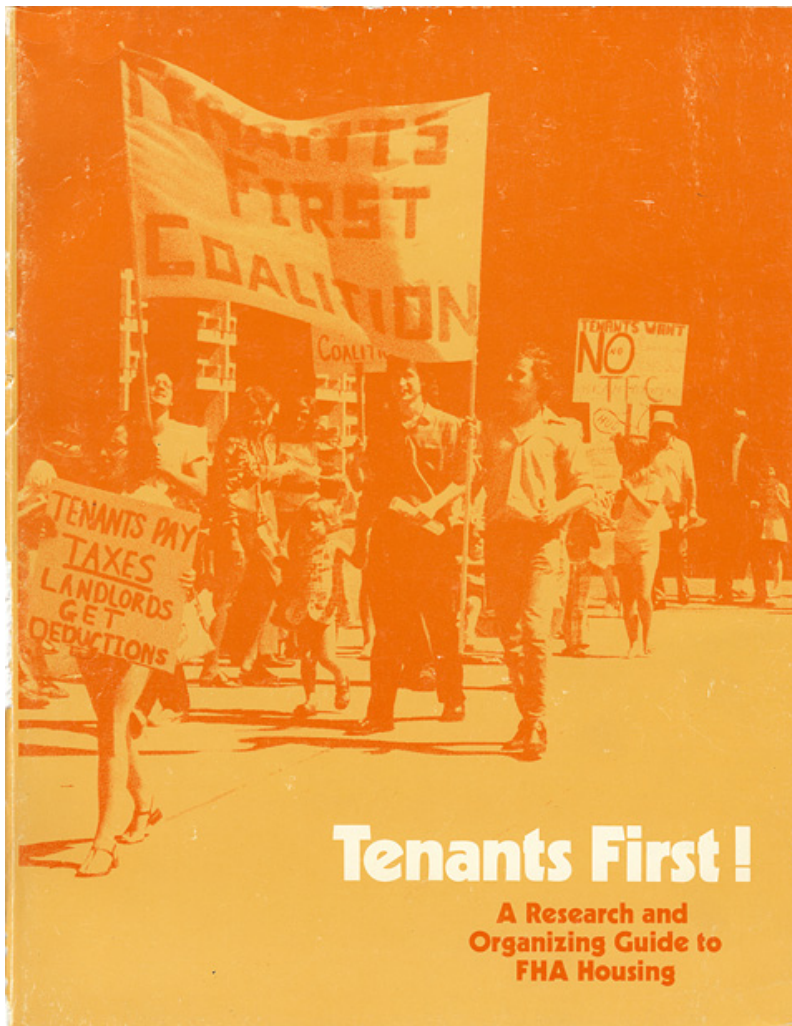
Figure 2. *Tenants First! A Research and Organizing Guide to FHA Housing* aimed to assist tenants of apartment buildings that were arriving at the end of multi-year contracts with the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). These contracts provided protections against rent increases and evictions. [Achtenberg & Stone 1974]

Irish	And yet…you became involved in the Fenway CDC.	14
Plotkin	I think that this is because, at heart, I am a moderate, and I wasn't ready to rule out the benefits to be gained by CDCs, as more radical activists were. While I understood the arguments made by those critical of CDCs, I thought that they represented the possibility of a more socially-conscious, benign type of development, especially if there were external mechanisms — such as the existence of tenant advocacy groups — that would co-exist with them to temper any turn to parochialism and profit orientations. What attracted me to either type of organization — CDC or advocacy group — was their potential for involving	15

"ordinary citizens" in the decisions that affected their daily lives, the goal that Saul Alinsky so well expressed.

Because of my more moderate approach to "community organizing," it is not surprising that I became an academic and an educator, rather than an activist. I was more interested in investigating society's dynamics than in siding unequivocally with one side or the other. Furthermore, as an academic, I created H-Urban and Comm-Org to encourage academics and professionals to share scholarship with each other, rather than to disseminate it to "ordinary citizens." 16

These choices suggest the increasing distance that grew between my past and career as an academic. However, my years in Boston impressed on me the value of collaboration, something that was given short shrift in the academic discipline that I chose, history. As a graduate student at Tufts, as a participant in neighborhood organizations, and as a professional providing resources to community-based organizations, I was engaged in enterprises that involved — and were strengthened by — collaboration. When I returned to Chicago in 1989, it was this appreciation for partnership that would be the most important influence on how I applied the digital revolution to the field of history. 17

History, the Digital Revolution, H-Net, and H-Urban/Comm-Org

Irish 1989 was, thus, a major turning point in your life. After working in Boston for seventeen years, you decided to return to Chicago, your hometown, and re-enter academia for a Ph.D. in urban and American history. Why did you decide to leave planning and become a historian? 18

Plotkin In fact, when I returned to Chicago, I considered entering a Ph.D. program in *either* planning or history. I did not feel that I had adequate training to address the complex issues that planners dealt with, and, if I were to continue as a planner, I wished to have more time to explore the theoretical issues (e.g., the "greater good," competing visions of the "ideal" physical environment) and to strengthen my planning skills. This is where chance played a role. I interviewed with both the history and planning departments at the University of Illinois at Chicago; the historian with whom I met was far more interested in my joining the program than the planner. Furthermore, I had never lost my appreciation for history in Boston, and I always saw history as another route to the goal of understanding how cities operated. 19

Irish You worked with Perry Duis and Richard Fried at the University of Illinois in Chicago, finishing your doctorate in 1999. Your dissertation was on the dynamics of urban neighborhoods in Chicago, with a special focus on racial deed restrictions and restrictive covenants. These are legal documents that limit access to housing on the basis of racial categories and/or religious affiliation, is that right? 20

Plotkin Yes. My interest in racial deed restrictions was stimulated by my community experiences in Boston. CDCs were part of a major movement in the 1960s and 1970s that endorsed the concept of neighborhood-based control, itself an outgrowth of the emphasis on "participatory democracy." As a person who had witnessed (during my childhood) the use of such control to thwart racial integration in Chicago — one of the most segregated cities in the nation — I wanted to explore this "negative" type of community organizing, so as to raise consciousness about the darker side of neighborhood-based control, and alert newer 21

organizations to the dangers of parochialism. I was especially interested in the use of racial deed restrictions by developers and neighborhood groups, because, contrary to public understanding, these were an example of de jure discrimination in the North. My current book, *Deeds of Mistrust: Race, Housing and Restrictive Covenants in Chicago, 1900-1953*, is nearly finished, and I have a website entitled "Racial and Religious Restrictive Covenants in the United States and Canada" on the topic. A follow-up project, entitled *Deeds of Whiteness*, will be a national study of these restrictions.[6]

Figure 3. This 1940 U.S. Supreme Court case involved Carl Hansberry, father of Lorraine Hansberry (author of the 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun*). Carl was sued by neighbors when, in 1937, he purchased a building covered by a racial restrictive covenant in the Washington Park neighborhood of Chicago, not far from the University of Chicago. The case went through the county and state courts, and ended in the Supreme Court, which ruled that the presence of invalid signatures voided the document. Microfilm edition of *Chicago Defender* (City Edition).

| **Irish** | Let's turn now to your involvement with computers in the early 1990s. | 22 |

| **Plotkin** | While I was a graduate student at UIC, I had a job working with the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI). The TEI is an international collaboration (then funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and its European counterparts) to pave the way for digital versions of literary and linguistic texts, including historical ones.[7] | 23 |

Their full-fed Heroes, their pacific May'rs,
280 Their annual trophies, and their monthly wars.
Tho' long my Party built on me their hopes,
For writing pamphlets, and for burning Popes;
(Diff'rent our parties, but with equal grace
The Goddefs fmiles on Whig and Tory race,
285 'Tis the fame rope at fev'ral ends they twift,
To Dulnefs, Ridpath is as dear as Mift.)
Yet lo ! in me what authors have to brag on !
Reduc'd at laft to hifs in my own dragon.
Avert it, Heav'n ! that thou or Cibber e'er
290 Should wag two ferpent tails in Smithfield fair.
Like the vile ftraw that's blown about the ftreets
The needy Poet fticks to all he meets,
Coach'd, carted, trod upon, now loofe, now faft,
In the Dog's tail his progrefs ends at laft.

REMARKS.

VERSE 280. Annual trophies, on the *Lord Mayor's Day*; and monthly wars, in the *Artillery Ground*.

VERSE 281. *Tho' long my Party*.] *Settle*, like moft Party-writers, was very uncertain in his political principles. He was employ'd to hold the pen in the *Charaçter of a Popifh fucceffor*, but afterwards printed his *Narrative* on the contrary fide. He had managed the Ceremony of a famous Pope-burning on *Nov.* 17, 1680 : then became a Trooper of King *James's* army at

Hounflow-heath : After the Revolution he kept a Booth at *Bartlemew-fair*, where in his Droll call'd St. *George for England*, he açted in his old age in a Dragon of green leather of his own invention. He was at laft taken into thé Charterhoufe, and there dyed, aged about 60 years.

V. 285. *To Dulnefs*, Ridpath *is as dear as* Mift.] *George Ridpath*, author for feveral years of the *Flying-Poft*, a Whig-paper ; and *Nathaniel Mift*, publifher of the Weekly Journal, a Tory-paper.

IMITATIONS.

VERSE 283-84. —— *With equal grace Our Goddefs fmiles on Whig and Tory race*.] Virg. Æn. 10.

Tros Rutulufve fuat; nullo difcrimine habeis. —— Rex Jupiter omnibus idem.

P

Figure 4. Portion of print edition of Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad*. Text Encoding Initiative, http://www.tei-c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/fr/html/SA.html.

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<l>(Diff'rent our parties, but with equal grace</l>
<l>The Goddess smiles on Whig and Tory race,</l>
<l>
 <note type="imitation" place="bottom" anchored="false">
  <bibl>Virg. Æn. 10.</bibl>
  <quote>
   <l>Tros Rutulusve fuat; nullo discrimine habebo.</l>
   <l>— Rex Jupiter omnibus idem.</l>
  </quote>
 </note>'Tis the same rope at sev'ral ends they twist,
</l>
<l>To Dulness, Ridpath is as dear as Mist)</l>
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Figure 5. Several lines of Pope's *The Dunciad* with TEI mark-up. Text Encoding Initiative, http://www.tei-c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/fr/html/SA.html.

Working at the TEI triggered my interest in the effects of digitization on the production of

history. In 1991, I decided to do an independent study on the subject, and chose faculty member Richard Jensen to guide me. Richard was already legendary for his intellectual contributions to political history (contributing to the "ethnocultural" and "quantitative history" schools with his landmark *The Winning of the Midwest* [8]). However, it was his activities in training historians in the use of computers for quantitative methods that led me to him. From 1971 to 1982, he served as the founding director of the Newberry Library's Quantitative Institute, which trained over 800 scholars in using quantitative methods in history. Certain similarities existed between Jensen's goals for the institute and H-Net. Both brought together scholars with similar interests in an emerging field of history, and tended to attract participants from smaller universities and colleges who had fewer networking opportunities than those with larger faculties and student bodies [Jensen 1983].

	At the time I approached Richard, I think he was already expanding his interest to include the qualitative uses of computers in history, especially in scholarly communication.[9] Working with him, in 1991-92, I researched and wrote a paper entitled "The Use of Electronic Texts in the Historical Profession," interviewing historians, librarians, publishers, archivists, and documentary editors.[10]	25
	Towards the end of my work on the paper, Richard invited me to meet with him and Kelly Richter, another graduate student in history. The two of them had begun discussing creating an online scholarly history forum, using the "bulletin board" technology that was one of the early popular means of connecting individual computers. However, I recommended that this new forum instead use Listserv, a more advanced technology I had familiarity with through my work at the TEI. Listserv was superior to the "bulletin board" technology in a number of ways: it had the advantage of automatically creating "logs" of all messages, as well as having the capability of storing files. Thus, in creating H-Net, Richard, Kelly, and I decided to use Listserv as the communications software.	26
Irish	What was H-Net like in its infancy?	27
Plotkin	It was exhilarating, one of the most exciting times in my life. The three of us took a memorable road trip to Washington, D.C. and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in October, 1992 (and also celebrated Richard's birthday). We stopped in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania on a crisp, cold, fall day, and Kelly saw the name of an ancestor on one of the gravestones. In Washington, we visited both the American Historical Association (AHA) and the NEH, and shared our ideas with them. Both organizations were encouraging. We went back to UIC and prepared an application for funding by NEH. The first grant was turned down, but the second one, submitted after H-Net had begun operations, succeeded. Thus, H-Net began with funding only from UIC and the volunteer services of people such as Kelly and me, although Jim Mott, a former student of Jensen who was a programmer in statistical analysis (SPSS), soon added his expertise.	28
Irish	What was your role in creating and shaping H-Net?	29
Plotkin	I had proposed to Richard that I create the first H-Net list, on urban history. He agreed, and we discussed a name. I suggested Urban-H, and he said that H-Urban would be better — all of the subsequent lists would begin with H-. I agreed, and began planning H-Urban.	30

In 1993, what came to be called the Internet was already in operation, although in its more primitive stages, and there were a few history forums on it. However, these were a mix of serious and amateur historians, and the quality was mediocre, for the most part (the classical scholars were far ahead).[11] Thus, when we created H-Net and H-Urban, we consciously set out to develop something that would be different — that would be dominated by scholars and practitioners in auxiliary disciplines, and that would have a scholarly tone. Unlike the more free-wheeling online groups on history at the time, H-Net incorporated a strong commitment to core values in academia, including deference to more established scholars and high standards for the content of scholarly communication. Our goal was to wed the best contemporary practices in humanities scholarship to the new possibilities opened up by the Internet. To do this, we created "moderated" lists, in which all messages would have to go through an advanced graduate student, faculty member, or practitioner. Early on, possibly after the lists had started, we also decided that each list should have a "board" of the leading scholars in the field. Thus, drawing on the democratic nature of the early Internet, I began to write to urban historians of some repute, and asked them to serve on H-Urban's board. Most agreed. We created the idea of separate lists for the board, and Edboard-Urban was born.

On February 24, 1993, I sent out the first H-Urban (and H-Net) message; many more followed. The messages were a mix of announcements, queries, and attempts to promote discussion — the latter the least successful, unless we were discussing urban poetry or urban films. In those early days, as a graduate student, I took the time to abstract book reviews in the major journals, and also to develop mini-essays on a variety of urban historical topics. When key urban historians passed away, I'd summarize the major obituaries or write one myself. I began to combine conversations on the same topic, and to store them on the Listserv "fileserv" (or server), alerting our subscribers that they could obtain this summary with an e-mail with a command such as "Get Electric Streetcars." Membership grew from 25 to 50 to over 100. (We are now over 2,000.)

Figure 6. An example of the interface of a Bulletin Board System (BBS), an early group messaging system in the 1980s and 1990s. Vintage Computing and Gaming, http://www.vintagecomputing.com/wp-content/bbsmenu_large.jpg.

| Irish | What about the other early H-Net groups? | 33 |

| Plotkin | H-Urban was not alone for long. H-Women followed soon, as did H-Ethnic, H-Film, H- | 34 |

Family, H-Teach, H-Labor, H-Law, H-Medieval, H-Politics, H-CivWar, H-South, H-SHGAPE, HOLOCAUS and H-Antisemitism, HAPSBURG, H-Albion, H-Asia, H-Africa, H-Business, H-Diplo, H-Film, H-German, H-Grad, H-Ideas, H-Judaic, H-Latam, H-Local, H-Oz, H-PCAACA, H-State, H-West (I am probably forgetting a few). A few of these lists pre-dated H-Net, and eventually became H-Net lists in the first years of the organization, incorporating H-Net's more scholarly approach and features when they did.

Beyond this list of names, I think it is useful to emphasize the extent to which H-Net became a "virtual community," one that, for many of us, was more meaningful than the cohort groups at our places of work. At the time, graduate students and faculty members who were interested in the use of the Internet were in the minority, and H-Net brought us together in a medium that allowed ongoing, easy contact.

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Furthermore, in spite of the assertion that involvement in the Internet led to social isolation, important personal and professional relationships formed among us. At least in my own case, the chance to meet these colleagues face to face enhanced, although it did not replace, these relationships.

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Mailing Lists Offered Through H-NET

Name	Description
H-ALBION	British and Irish history
H-AMSTDY	American studies
H-CIVWAR	U.S. Civil War
H-DIPLO	diplomatic history, foreign affairs
H-ETHNIC	ethnic and immigration history
H-FILM	scholarly studies and uses of media
H-GRAD	graduate students in history
H-JUDAIC	Judaica and Jewish studies
H-LABOR	labor history
H-LATAM	Latin American history
H-LAW	legal and constitutional history
H-POL	U.S. political history
H-RHETOR	history of rhetoric and communications
H-RURAL	rural and agricultural history
H-SOUTH	U.S. South
H-TEACH	teaching college history
H-URBAN	urban history.
H-WOMEN	women's history
HOLOCAUS	Holocaust studies; anti-semitism
IEAHCnet	Colonial America

How to subscribe:
Send a message to: LISTSERV@UICVM.UIC.EDU
The text of the message should say:
SUB [space] name of list [space] your full name [space] your institu-tion.
The length of the message cannot exceed 45 characters, so you may need to abbreviate your name or your institution's.
To reduce the number of messages you receive from each list, you may ask for each day's messages to be compiled in a daily "digest." You may request this service by adding a second line to your subscrip-tion message. That line should say: SET [space] name of list [space] DIGEST.

Figure 7. Sidebar showing early H-Net lists at UIC. Thomas J. DeLoughry, "History, Post-Print", *Chronicle of Higher Education* (12 January 1994), A19.
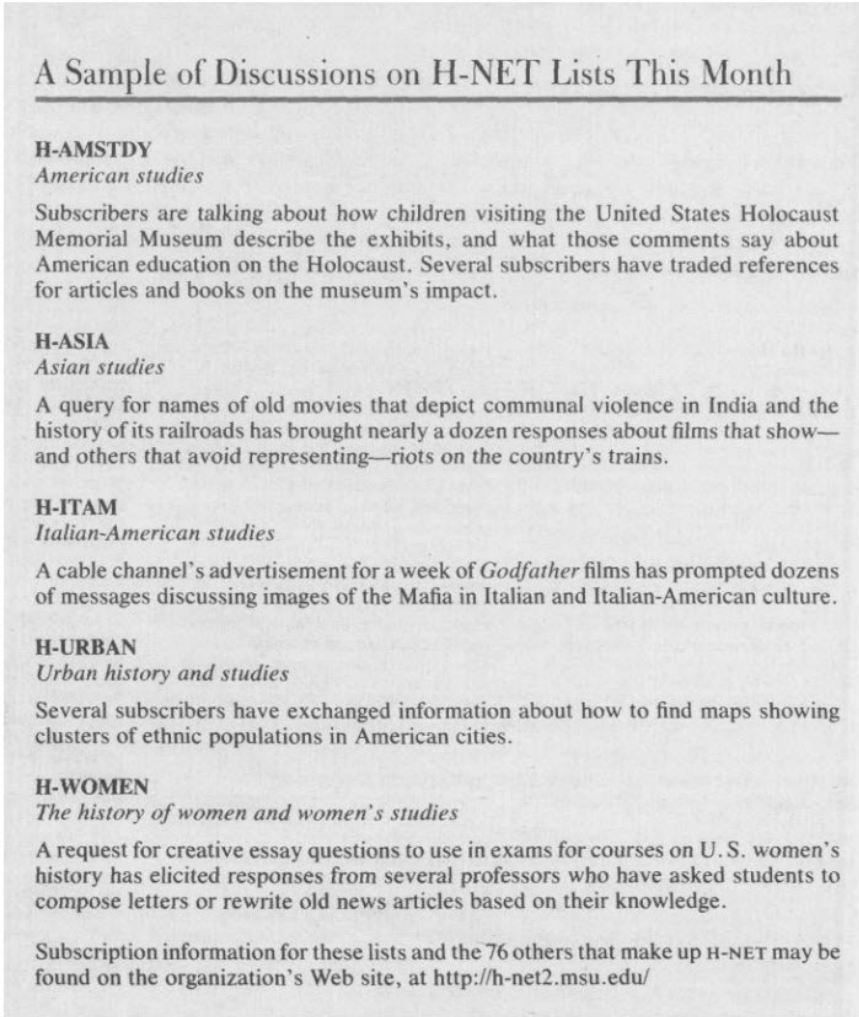
Irish — Did you stay involved in H-Net after you started H-Urban?

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Plotkin	Yes, the other lists initially used H-Urban as a model, and I began to teach the other moderators how to use Listserv. We created H-Staff and H-Editor, and used these in-house lists to discuss how to run these new types of forums. Each list had to create standards for subscription and postings, with the goal of nurturing "virtual communities" of scholars and students in similar fields. There were questions about the extent to which this new tool should be used to democratize scholarly communication; for example, should H-Net conform to traditional scholarly and copyright standards? Some argued that the Internet should be used to do away with many of the hierarchical and proprietary practices within academia; others thought that these should be maintained at the same time that a more informal means of communication was offered.	38
Irish	Where did you stand?	39
Plotkin	I am a traditionalist, and thus I supported the second of the above views. For example, I argued that all postings should include a signature and an institutional affiliation, and, ideally, the academic status of the author. My argument for doing this was not to defend special privileges for those higher up on the ladder, but to provide H-Urban and H-Net readers with the background necessary to appraise the contributions of those who posted, and to promote the networking goals of the lists.	40
Irish	Would you say that you represented the mainstream or the minority in your views?	41
Plotkin	Probably the mainstream, at the time. I had significant differences over copyright with Richard Jensen, which led to tension between us. Richard argued for a more liberal approach in borrowing material for use on the Internet; I disagreed. Meanwhile, those who posted to the lists began to test other boundaries early on — from sending e-mail with no capitalization to offering political tracts on current or historical topics.[12] While this occurred on all lists, lists such as H-Antisemitism and HOLOCAUS had special difficulties, with Holocaust deniers insisting on their rights to post. The editors of these lists stood firm in refusing to entertain discussions of marginal or questionable scholarship, and, in so doing, did H-Net a service in establishing a reputation for scholarliness.	42
Irish	What were some of the highlights of these early years?	43
Plotkin	For me, the most important was when H-Urban became the first list to invite a moderator from outside of the United States (Alan Mayne, then at University of Melbourne, now at University of South Australia). This, and the international membership, added a "multicultural" element to H-Net. Less traveled scholars such as I learned about the reverse of seasons in the northern and southern hemispheres, the different "summer" vacations of scholars in different parts of the world, and the range of academic titles and ranks in different countries.[13] The expansion of the list staffs also created a community of editors within each list, among whom policies and practices were discussed and refined. Soon after Alan joined me, others followed: Martha Bianco (a graduate student and then instructor at Portland State University), Mark Peel (a historian at Monash University, Australia), Maureen Flanagan (a historian at at Michigan State University), and Keith Tankard (then a historian at Rhodes University in South Africa). Our first non-historian was Mickey Lauria, a leading planning scholar, who is among the longest serving editors.	44
	To accommodate decision-making among us, we created the first "editors list" (Edit-Urban)	45

for discussion of policy. Soon, we established the "editors' manual," which was a list of our policies. This grew over time as more decisions were made, and became a resource for training new editors. We debated such things as enforcing proper grammar (after someone sent in a posting in the e.e. cummings mode of all lower case), and agreed that we would require proper grammar and would retain the right to edit postings. We began to check and expand citations of scholarship that were sent in, and, as history resources became more numerous on the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1993 and 1994, we added links to information about scholarship. We also reserved the right to reject "non-scholarly" postings.

Irish	Other highlights?	46

Plotkin	H-Urban posted the first book review on H-Net (long before we had a formal review system), and also introduced the idea of a subscriber's survey.	47

Irish	With all of this time given to H-Urban, did you start to shift your focus away from H-Net as a whole?	48

Plotkin	Yes, for a variety of reasons. I needed to focus on my dissertation and other graduate studies, so as to develop the traditional historical skills and knowledge that would give me credibility within the historical community. Thus, I only had so much time to give to H-Net and H-Urban, and H-Urban increasingly took much of my time. The policy disagreements that I had had with Richard Jensen about H-Net made me more inclined to devote time to H-Urban. Not only that, but I was not primarily interested in the administrative, technical, or even policy aspects of H-Net and H-Urban — I was in it primarily for the scholarly benefits it had to offer.	49
	Finally, H-Net stayed at UIC for only two years, and moved in 1995 to Michigan State University. Thus, graduate students and faculty at Michigan State University began to take more of the leadership and staffing roles.	50

Irish	Why did H-Net move to Michigan State University?	51

Plotkin	Michigan State (MSU) was more willing than UIC to invest in H-Net, and H-Net's rising star, Mark Kornbluh, was a faculty member in the History Department.	52

Irish	How did the change in location affect H-Net?	53

Plotkin	Well, first, Michigan State made a major financial commitment to H-Net, and this investment allowed H-Net to take advantage of the powerful technology of the WWW, and to provide a permanent technical and training staff. This was a scenario that fulfilled the commitment of Mark Kornbluh, and another H-Net activist, Peter Knupfer, to move H-Net beyond just e-mail lists.	54

Irish	Was there anyone who disagreed with this scenario?	55

Plotkin	Yes, in fact — Richard Jensen and Jim Mott — and this turned out to be the crux of the 1997 H-Net election. I should give you a bit of background on this.	56

	In 1994, H-Net had organized itself and elected Richard Jensen as Executive Director for a three year term. At the same time, Mark Kornbluh was elected as the chair of the H-Net Executive Board. In 1997, H-Net had its first contested election for executive and associate directors: Richard Jensen and Jim Mott against Mark Kornbluh and Peter Knupfer.	57
	Each of the slates had a different vision for H-Net. Richard Jensen argued for a reliance on the discussion lists as the core of H-Net, while Mark Kornbluh advocated for the development of WWW pages to augment the discussions. In the end, the H-Net editors elected Mark Kornbluh and Peter Knupfer as Executive and Associate Director, and H-Net developed according to their vision ([Marcus 1996], [Guernsey 1997]).	58
Irish	Which vision did you support?	59
Plotkin	The Kornbluh-Knupfer one. It was my interest in digitization of texts that had led to my involvement in H-Net, and I was fascinated by the possibilities of making primary and secondary documents available on the WWW, as well as teaching and other materials. On H-Urban, we created an annotated list of WWW sites related to urban history. We increased our production of book reviews, and created a Teaching Center, with scores of syllabi.[14]	60
Irish	Did these features add to H-Urban's success?	61
Plotkin	Definitely, largely because we were able to attract dedicated and committed scholars such as Clay McShane, Roger Biles, and you to take on the book review and other features![15]	62
Irish	Did you have a web designer, as well, or did H-Net do the web design?	63
Plotkin	We were extremely fortunate to have Charlotte Agustin, a historian with an M.A. in history, working as a web designer for us. Charlotte was an outstanding designer, who developed and maintained the all of the H-Urban webpages. However, Charlotte's contribution went well beyond that. She has a fine analytical mind, and participated in the intellectual decisions that went into the Teaching and Weblinks pages, eventually, in effect, taking over all aspects of the teaching site, including editing and posting the syllabi, among our most popular products. Charlotte and I shared a belief in the significance of producing syllabi that had a consistent format and complete citation information on the readings, which added to the time needed to process them. However, I believe that it is this effort that made our syllabus collection stand out from others on the web, although Charlotte had to step back from her intense activity with H-Urban to return to income-producing activities.	64
Irish	You worked very hard, as I recall, trying to generate discussion on H-Urban. You contacted leading scholars in the field, asking them to contribute substantial commentary on significant urban history questions so that you could post these online and moderate a discussion. It wasn't a resounding success, was it? Why not?	65
Plotkin	Because those of us who created H-Net had not really taken into account the significant obstacles that stood in the way of online discussion among historians in college and university settings, especially in the United States. Most important was an academic reward system that favored formal, print, peer-reviewed communication (as opposed to ongoing, informal, online communication). Such a system produced so much pressure on	66

	academics to publish and teach that there was little time left for informally broadening their horizons in an international and interdisciplinary forum.	
	I had hoped to encourage a flowing discussion of major arguments and assertions within urban history. However, most historians preferred to use their research and writing time to put these ideas on paper for publications that would garner them credit rather than on a public Internet list. Note that it is not the online environment that was necessarily the most important aspect here, but the emphasis within academia of formal, peer-reviewed communication manifested in books, articles, and reviews.	67

A Sample of Discussions on H-NET Lists This Month

H-AMSTDY
American studies

Subscribers are talking about how children visiting the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum describe the exhibits, and what those comments say about American education on the Holocaust. Several subscribers have traded references for articles and books on the museum's impact.

H-ASIA
Asian studies

A query for names of old movies that depict communal violence in India and the history of its railroads has brought nearly a dozen responses about films that show— and others that avoid representing—riots on the country's trains.

H-ITAM
Italian-American studies

A cable channel's advertisement for a week of *Godfather* films has prompted dozens of messages discussing images of the Mafia in Italian and Italian-American culture.

H-URBAN
Urban history and studies

Several subscribers have exchanged information about how to find maps showing clusters of ethnic populations in American cities.

H-WOMEN
The history of women and women's studies

A request for creative essay questions to use in exams for courses on U.S. women's history has elicited responses from several professors who have asked students to compose letters or rewrite old news articles based on their knowledge.

Subscription information for these lists and the 76 others that make up H-NET may be found on the organization's Web site, at http://h-net2.msu.edu/

Figure 8. A sample of discussions on H-Net Lists this month. Lisa Guernsey, "A Humanities Network Considers What Lies Beyond E-Mail", *Chronicle of Higher Education* 43:20 (24 January 1997), A23-A24.

Irish	Were there any other factors that discouraged discussion?	68
Plotkin	One that relates to urban history, I believe. Urban history has increasingly fragmented into distinct geographical, chronological, and thematic domains. National boundaries still act as barriers to comparative work, and, in the United States, most historians of 18th, 19th, and 20th century cities show little interest in seeking continuities with the earlier cities in the rest of the world. This is partly because they believe that the "modern" city was a significant departure, if not a complete break, from earlier cities, but also because the continents seem so different.	69

	Similar barriers exist between political, social, cultural and other historians of cities, who have not succeeded, I believe, in establishing connections between their findings.	70
	These differences limit the ability of many urban historians to develop and discuss their topics in a comparative framework, the type of focus to which the Internet is especially suited. I have often thought that groups with a more narrow focus — e.g., H-UrbTransport, H-UrbHousing, H-UrbReligion — would be more dynamic than H-Urban, because, at this level, historians begin to share more interests.	71
Irish	Was your decision to create COMM-ORG in 1995 an effort to move in this direction?	72
Plotkin	In part, although I was also interested in testing a different model from H-Urban. I established COMM-ORG — an on-line seminar on the history of community organizing and community-based development — in November 1995, and served as editor through December 1996. Funded by the University of Illinois at Chicago Great Cities program, COMM-ORG was an online forum involving periodic presentations of working papers and discussion on the history and practice of community organizing and/or community-based development. It allowed me to examine the possibility of online scholarly collaboration in the specific area of urban history that was closest to my personal and professional experiences in Boston and the dissertation research that evolved from that.	73
Irish	Why did you use this more formal approach?	74
Plotkin	Because of my frustration at the refusal of scholars to engage in substantive discussions on H-Urban. I thought that, if papers were presented, this might trigger discussion – and, even if it didn't, there would at least be the outcome of an online piece of scholarship.	75
Irish	Was this more successful?	76
Plotkin	Not really. Again, it was difficult to get leaders in the field to contribute papers, for an obvious reason — COMM-ORG did not include peer-review prior to publishing papers. Thus, there was no academic credit for preparing a paper to post on COMM-ORG. We were lucky to get as many good papers as we did, from senior, Internet-adept scholars who no longer had to worry about tenure and promotion; junior scholars who appreciated the opportunity to post work that had been rejected for formal publication; and academics in disciplines where publishing was less important.	77
Irish	What happened to COMM-ORG?	78
Plotkin	Under the current able editorship of Randy Stoecker, who produced one of the best papers during my period overseeing it, COMM-ORG continues to be a vital forum for practitioners and scholars. For the most part, it focuses on current practices and theory of community organizing, rather than its history.[16]	79
Irish	Wendy, we have been looking backwards at events that occurred over ten years ago. Since then, you have matured as a scholar and taught at a major university. How has the passage of time affected your perspective on H-Urban? For instance, what is the impact of newer technologies on H-Net and H-Urban?	80

	In June, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published an article entitled "Change or Die: Scholarly E-Mail Lists, Once Vibrant, Fight for Relevance." It quoted T. Mills Kelly, the associate director of the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, and a former H-Net editor, as saying that the advent of blogging, Twitter, and similar technologies is likely to make "e-mail lists…increasingly irrelevant" [Young 2009]. Do you agree with this assessment?	81
Plotkin	No, not at all. Mills was basing this assessment on his experience with those lists in which he was involved. According to the *Chronicle*, Kelly noted that "one of those lists shut down for lack of use in 2005, and the activity on the others sputters along with little useful information."	82
	However, H-Urban's experience has been virtually the opposite. Our subscriptions are coming in at a faster pace than at any other time except in the initial years, with a total of almost 2000 active subscribers from 48 countries. The United States accounts for a high proportion of these — approximately three-quarters — with Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, France, and the Netherlands next in order. Most of those joining seem to be younger faculty and graduate students, with an increasing number coming from outside of the United States, although H-Urban subscribers include many — although not all — of the leading international urban historians. A cross-section of subscribers within the last year includes an assistant professor of history at St. Olaf's College in Minnesota; a Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of Chicago; and an assistant dean of a Maryland pharmacy college who works on environmental health and historical epidemiology.	83
Irish	To what do you attribute this growth?	84
Plotkin	Largely, to the greater comfort of a new generation with the Internet, and the availability of improved facilities for accessing it. However, two other factors play a role, I believe: H-Urban's reputation for quality, including posting information that is considered to be relevant, and our outreach to new board members from outside of the United States.	85
	However, H-Urban occasionally loses subscribers, which is always disappointing to me — and it seems to be some of the older, more established scholars who choose not to stay. I don't think that this is a result of the medium, but because they have less need for the announcements, calls for papers, book reviews, and syllabi that comprise the major features of H-Urban. It's not that this material is not of a high quality, but that scholars can obtain this material from journals.	86
Irish	Do you still believe that there is a role for online discussion in the scholarly world, or have you accepted the more traditional preference among historians to record their findings primarily in books and articles?	87
Plotkin	I do believe that there is a role for online work, and I have *not* accepted the traditional preference for books and articles at the cost of online discussion. In fact, these years of teaching and research have led me to question the scholarly forms and practices that evolved during the era of print. If one examines these forms and practices closely, one sees that, to a great extent, they arose because of the reliance on print. For example, the high cost of producing and distributing scholarship made it more efficient (in terms of cost and time) to package and deliver lengthy manuscripts and unrelated collections of articles	88

|	and book reviews at periodic intervals.	
Irish	Haven't historians continued to use these forms for intellectual reasons?	89
Plotkin	Yes and no. I think that, within history, the book form has persisted because history has been considered a humanities discipline, and the art and craft of writing is deemed a key part of historical production. Writing ability carries greater weight among historians than among social scientists — a standard with which I agree.	90
	In addition, this attitude has been buttressed by the growing belief in the late 20th century in the *organic* and *subjective* nature of history. By "organic," I mean the sense that most arguments are so complex that they require a book-length document for their exposition — and that a historian must display the skill to grapple with intertwining layers of evidence and analysis over a specified chronological period to be able to reveal the past in all its complexity.	91
	By "subjective," I refer to the effects of the skepticism and linguistic concerns that seeped into all academic disciplines in the 1960s and after. Within history, these factors heightened the sense that authors' *worldviews* and *assumptions* were the engines that organized the strands of evidence and analysis into unique configurations — and that historian's books were, in fact, an intricate mix of fact and interpretation that was as much art as science.	92
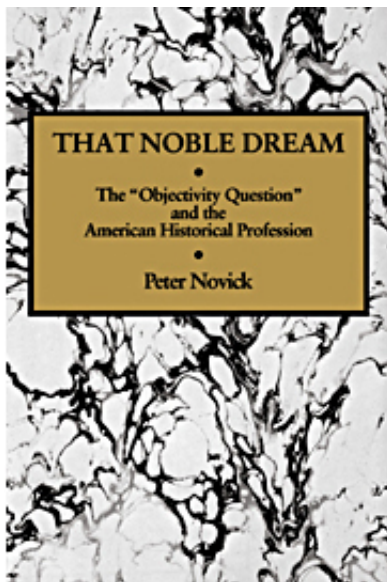
Figure 9. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge University Press, 1988). http://www.cambridge.org/us/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=0521343283. This 1988 history of the American historical profession detailed the decreasing faith among historians in the existence of a single objective truth.

| | However, I believe that this outlook denies the degree to which good historical monographs consist of *debatable facts* and *ideas* that can be separated and evaluated individually and sequentially in online forums as well as in the "manuscript" package. I am not saying that books should be abolished, but that historians should begin to develop intermediate evaluative processes in which the ideas and evidence within them are tested, before they are packaged as articles and monographs. | 93 |

	As for journals, the choice of publishing a group of articles and book reviews in periodic issues is also a reflection of the economies of print. Except for the occasional special issue, these typically combine articles on topics that have few common themes or connections. Online journals have generally continued this packaging of dissimilar materials. With the digital medium, I believe it makes more sense to publish the articles singly, so that it is easier for the scholars to save and organize them.	94
	There is also a need for a classification system that would tag *all* books and articles, regardless of location or chronological period, in a consistent manner. The classification systems currently in place do not cross national boundaries, and were not created by urban scholars. Even in the digital age, it is difficult for a researcher to find all of the relevant work on a topic – and this process takes up a significant amount of time. If urbanists in a variety of disciplines collaborated to create and maintain a classification system that would encompass existing and new work, this would speed up that part of the research process that involves identifying and retrieving relevant work on a given topic across geographical and chronological lines.	95
Irish	Are your beliefs in this area tied to the latest of the projects in which you are interested — the *Historical Encyclopedia of Urbanism*?	96
Plotkin	Yes. The *Encyclopedia* — a collaborative, online, historical encyclopedia of international urban studies and history — would provide a central place for storing up-to-date knowledge on key concepts in urbanism, in a manner that would promote comparative analysis. The idea for this emerged from my experiences in teaching historical methods to undergraduates. I had always encouraged students to use encyclopedias as a means of obtaining a concise summary of the state of knowledge on a topic at the start of their research. However, when I assigned the entry on "the city" in the *Britannica Online*, I (and the students) were shocked at the Western bias in the entry, with almost nothing on the cities of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This led me to investigate the history of encyclopedias, including *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and to evaluate the importance of encyclopedias, which many scholars dismiss as serious sources for scholarly information.	97
	This dismissal is ironic, because, in recent years, encyclopedias on all topics have proliferated, leading to what I have labeled "intellectual sprawl." The idea of an encyclopedia is to publish concise information about a topic so as to provide a source for scholars who do not have the time to keep up with the thousands of books and articles published each year. I consider this not only a sound rationale for their creation, but one that is increasing in importance each day, as the volume of information on any topic multiplies geometrically.	98
	However, the proliferation of encyclopedias defeats their ability to serve their audiences, for it forces the reader to keep track of each new encyclopedia on the topic of her interest. Print encyclopedias are expensive, and most individuals can afford only one or two. And, in these days of the Internet, how likely is it that either faculty or students will make a special trip to the library to consult an encyclopedia?	99
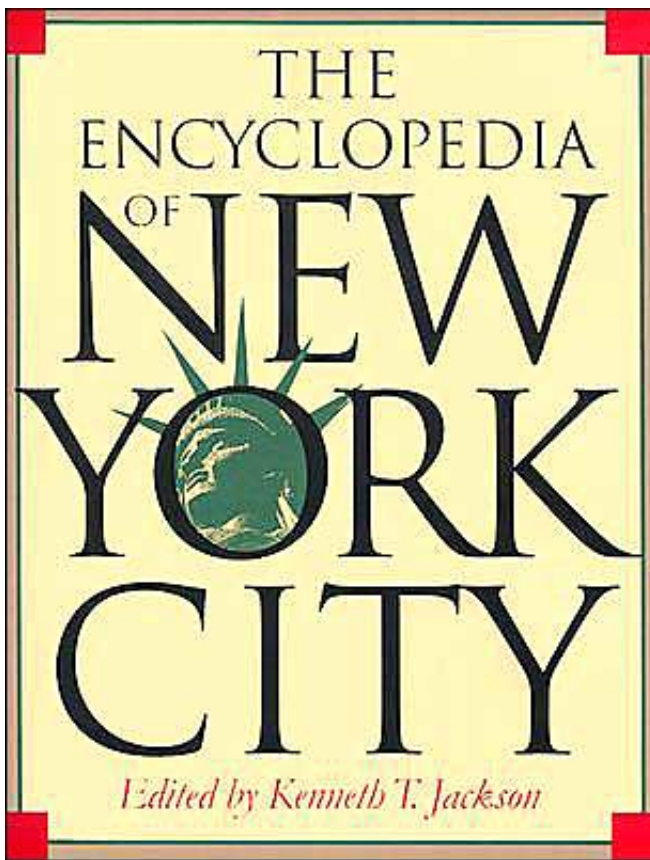
Figure 10. Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (Yale University Press, 1995).

| **Irish** | How does the *Historical Encyclopedia of Urbanism* aim to stop this proliferation? | 100 |

| **Plotkin** | By borrowing some of the lessons learned from Wikipedia. Wikipedia, in spite of its commonly cited flaws, has shown how a single encyclopedia can become a "standard" if it is easily accessible, current, and of an acceptable quality. Accessibility comes from being online and freely available. Currency of information is obtained through the involvement of groups of individuals in updating it on an ongoing basis, rather than relying on a small number of contributors chosen by an editor to update it once every five or six years, if ever. Quality is secured by having the encyclopedia editors provide ongoing oversight of information for terms of two to four years instead of taking on the massive job of updating all knowledge in a field in one or two years. | 101 |

| **Irish** | Say something more about quality, frequently cited as the "Achilles heel" of Wikipedia. As Stephen Colbert satirized in his television show on Wikipedia (available at http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/72347/july-31-2006/the-word---wikiality), the veracity of its contents is always vulnerable to the provision (intentional or unintentional) of false or incomplete information by users.[17] | 102 |

| **Plotkin** | Quality is certainly among the most important issues, and products such as Wikipedia are always suspect on this score. However, I would argue that the traditional model of creating encyclopedias also diminishes quality. The *Encyclopedia* aims to remedy the defects in both the Wikipedia and traditional models. | 103 |

| **Irish** | You certainly don't shy away from ambitious goals! How will this project promote quality | 104 |

	scholarship?	
Plotkin	In the first place, the *Encyclopedia* would be maintained by editors who are established scholars in the field. One of their roles would be to ensure that all information in the encyclopedia is accurate, and that the entry on any given topic is written in a coherent manner.	105
	In the second place, the *Encyclopedia* would not rely on a single scholar to summarize the state-of-the-art knowledge on a given topic, as do traditional encyclopedias. Rather, it invites scholars from across the globe to incrementally suggest additions, subject to approval and editing by the original author of the entry or one of the editors. I believe that this will result in a higher quality of information than encyclopedias that require single individuals or an occasional team to cover a broad expanse of information.	106
Irish	Why?	107
Plotkin	Even the best scholars are not aware of all developments in their area of expertise, especially over time. The number of places to publish is expanding, and it is difficult to keep up with new scholarly information on *any* topic. The lack of incentives for spending time on encyclopedia entries also works against quality, as encyclopedia entries have little weight in the promotional standards that determine scholars' advancement and salary.	108
	In addition, the reliance on print for many encyclopedias works as a deterrent against frequent updates. The costs of issuing a new edition (editorial time, printing, distribution) are so great that new editions are done at relatively long intervals, if done at all. Thus, they quickly become out-of-date.	109
Irish	Does Wikipedia offer a model for updating an encyclopedia?	110
Plotkin	No — because of the need for quality assurance (in terms of content and writing), something that Wikipedia does not yet offer. Citizendium, which dubs itself "a citizen's compendium of everything," is another project intended to add quality standards to an online encyclopedia by attaching names to the articles. The organizers select editors who are responsible for overseeing additions. However, I don't believe that Citizendium will be accepted among scholars in specific disciplines, because its highest level decision-makers are not specialists in *their* disciplines.	111
	Thus, I see the need for the *Encyclopedia* to develop an editorial structure that draws on established scholars in urban history. To do this, the editing of the *Encyclopedia* will have to parallel the editing of scholarly journals, i.e, a continuous process. The senior editors of the *Encyclopedia* would serve as long as editors of scholarly journals, with occasional handovers to new editors, consistent with the experience of scholarly journals. Of course, they will have to be assisted by a comprehensive network of contributing editors who are specialists in specific places, time periods, and topics.	112
Irish	It sounds as if the *Encyclopedia* could really help reshape the field of urban history. What other innovations would this project feature?	113
Plotkin	The most important — and the most daunting — is the design of an organizational	114

structure that will depart from the alphabetical organization favored by most encyclopedias. Alphabetical organization, with all of its merits, defeats the possibility of using the vast amount of knowledge collected in scholarly encyclopedias for comparisons across time, place, and topic.

	Let's take urban transportation, for example. We now have encyclopedias of Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, and New York City (in the U.S.) and Melbourne, in Australia, along with any I've not listed here. In most of these, entries on urban transportation are included in alphabetical order, and, unless there is a subject index, there is no way to identify them. While a subject index is of real value, its creation is somewhat arbitrary -- and the subject indexes of different encyclopedias are likely to be different, again defeating easy comparisons.	115
	The goal for the *Encyclopedia* is to create a structure of broad categories that will be used for each geographical region, so that the historical development within that category can be easily compared to that of other regions. These categories might include transportation, water, food, energy, shelter, security, order, and creative expression, for example. We have involved anthropologists in the design of this structure because they are most familiar with doing broad comparisons over long stretches of time and places.	116
Irish	How is the *Encyclopedia* related to H-Urban?	117
Plotkin	I believe it is a better way to carry out the mission I had when I established H-Urban of promoting international and interdisciplinary work.	118
Irish	H-Urban has been vitally important to me since I first joined in 1997: the stimulating discussion threads, book reviews, and sharing across disciplinary interests have broadened my research questions. A number of H-Urban editors and readers are at small colleges in non-urban settings, or in a non-academic professional setting, and I think the online support they get for their scholarly interests is invaluable.	119
Plotkin	I agree. However, H-Urban, with its loose structure and lack of serious, comparative discussion, does not succeed in taking the next step — integrating scholarly content or ideas, either across space or time. Most historians address fairly narrow topics, because of the time- intensive nature of historical research. Without the availability of concise, easy-to-access, information on the work of other historians, it is difficult to avoid the fragmentation of urban history that has been so much lamented in the last thirty years. Indeed, this fragmentation has increased because of the multiplication of journals relating to urban history and studies, and the increased costs of acquiring journals from other nations.	120
	When the Internet became available to scholars, others and I hoped that it would serve to overcome this fragmentation. How to do this well, however, has eluded H-Urban — and the international urban history community. Discussions on H-Urban have not thrived because the rewards do not exist to encourage historians to participate, nor to examine the scholarship on their topic in other geographic areas. Pressures to publish in formal journals are too great — and most scholars do not have the time to pursue broader scholarship, save for reading several journals and attending conferences. While these traditional means of sharing our research and our findings remain important, they still do not provide a coherent, international and interdisciplinary framework within which to contextualize one's work.	121

	The use of Wikipedia by many of these scholars, in spite of the problems with quality control, has demonstrated to me that scholars are hungry for a single, easily accessible place to record and retrieve a large body of information. The *Encyclopedia* offers the chance to create such a place that would be used to summarize the state of the knowledge in urban history on an ongoing basis, in a form that will facilitate comparisons, overcoming the fragmentation of urban history that has marked the discipline until the present.	122
Irish	What is your timeline on the *Encyclopedia*?	123
Plotkin	I hope to introduce discussion of it on H-Urban in May 2010, and, over the summer, conduct research on similar attempts to provide on-line, extensible — and, if available — structured encyclopedias. Hopefully, in the fall, I'll be able to submit a proposal to the NEH Digital Start-Up Grant program for funding to develop a prototype in consultation with leading scholars of urbanism (e.g., history, art and architectural history, anthropology, architecture, geography, literature, sociology, urban planning, and urban studies). If funded, and if the *Encyclopedia* seems feasible as a concept that is attractive enough to leading scholars to secure their involvement, at the end of the grant period I'll organize a team to apply for further funding to create a foundational version — one that contains enough core knowledge to induce scholars to augment the existing entries and propose new entries that expand the geographical or chronological scope of the work.	124
Irish	Could you offer some parting thoughts on digitization of scholarly materials and the democratization of history?	125
Plotkin	I am glad that you raised this, Sharon, because, up until this point, I have not really demonstrated a *direct* connection between my work and community informatics, in which a key value is the democratization of knowledge. However, I do believe that they are indirectly connected.	126

Let me focus first on the promise of the Internet for democratizing the production of history. As a fairly traditional academic, I believe in the need for historians to acquire a broad knowledge of history, the humanities, and the social sciences, and to combine these with good analytical and writing skills. It takes time and effort, as well as a good intellect, to acquire this foundation, and even then, the historian's skills improve over time.

		127
Irish	Speedy history is indeed about as good as fast food!	
Plotkin	Exactly. However, in spite of this continuing reliance on an intellectual elite, there *is* a need to expand the pool of those who join this select group. That is because it is impossible to create a single, enduring, unchallenged interpretation of history. The difficulty in preserving all evidence of human existence, and the subjectivity inherent in collecting, organizing, and analyzing this evidence, make this a pipe dream. For example, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the majority of academic historians (almost all white males) wrote primarily about elite politics, society, and culture. They deemed this the only "knowledge" worthy of study, and overlooked the lives and activities of non-elites — the middle and working classes; racial, ethnic, and religious minorities; women; and children. It is no coincidence that the democratization of the academy during the 1960s and 1970s, with increasing numbers of non-elites entering the historical profession, led to an active interest in the study of non-elites.	128

Aside from the social change that expanded the pool of those who became historians, the growth of technology has had a role in decreasing the importance of wealth in undertaking what is often very costly historical research. For example, some scholars have argued that the development of microfilm in the 1930s reduced the costs of doing historical research. This made it possible for students and junior scholars to undertake research that would have formerly required costly travel to libraries and archives. In a similar vein, the creation of on-line primary and secondary resources have reduced, although not eliminated, the need for travel and reproduction.

Figure 11. "Developing Microfilm," June 1942. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs, Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection, http://www.loc.gov/rr/microform/images/microfilm.jpg.

Irish	Of course information technologies, whether in the form of microfilm or digital archives, have changed the way that we do historical research. Different people ask new and different questions, as you have pointed out.

Plotkin	Amen! The Internet has also enhanced the quality of good undergraduate education, so that students at a state or community college now have access to some of the same resources that formerly only the elite schools could afford. This availability also allows individuals who were bored by history in their formal education to renew their enthusiasm for the field, and for present day students from K-12 to complement their formal education in a self-directed, interactive manner. This also has the potential for bringing a wider audience, of a range of ages and experience, into the discipline of history.

Irish	What about the effect of the Internet on those who don't want to become historians?

Plotkin	In some ways, this is even more important, because all of us are citizens, even if we are not historians. One of the requirements for being a good citizen is being well informed in history as well as current events. And this has not always been easy in the past. Individuals have a variety of learning styles, but traditional education has tended to rely on a single style, emphasizing lecture, reading, and writing. The Internet offers not only an *easier* and *cheaper* way to disseminate information, but also a greater variety of methods of presenting it.	133
	The use of visuals enhances the understanding of history, as David Staley discusses in his book [Staley 2002]. It is not, as some critics argue, an anti-intellectual concession to the "visual" generation. The integration of text, visuals, and hypertext can offer a less forbidding means of learning history than in the past, making it available to many more individuals. Online discussion forums such as H-Urban and COMM-ORG can answer questions that students previously were discouraged from asking teachers. Overall, the Internet has become part of the solution to making the study of history more appealing to individuals from all walks of life and with various levels of formal education.	134
	All of this is for the good, because, as I said above, knowledge of history is essential to becoming an informed citizen. Whether it is learning about the history of exclusionary zoning and redlining or reading the minutes of the planning board of one's town, the easy availability of this information can make us all more engaged citizens.	135
Irish	Let me take this opportunity to thank you, Wendy, for your engaged scholarship and incomparable dedication to urban history, online and off.	136
Plotkin	And let me thank you, Sharon, for the time and excellence you have contributed to H-Urban and other scholarly enterprises.	137

Notes

[1] In the late 1970s, the administration of President Jimmy Carter provided funding to regional planning agencies under two initiatives — the Areawide Housing Opportunity Program and the Regional Housing Mobility Program — to promote fair and affordable housing in the nation's metropolitan regions. The goal of the program was to promote "deconcentration" of racial minorities from the inner cities to the suburbs. My supervisor was a former community organizer who was opposed to moving African-American residents out of the inner city into the suburbs. While opening up the suburbs to African Americans and other racial minorities was an admirable objective, in the absence of similar initiatives to allow them to stay in improved neighborhoods in the city, it looked a lot like the "Negro removal" of the urban renewal programs of the 1950s, at a time when the energy crisis was encouraging white gentrification. Staff from regional housing agencies around the country convinced HUD to change the interpretation of the statutory language of the Regional Housing Mobility Program so that, instead of encouraging movement from their neighborhoods, the funds could be used to revitalize the neighborhoods. Watching my supervisor's participation in these negotiations with HUD, I learned the importance of advocacy and personal contact in shaping how the government implements (or does not implement) legislation, a lesson on the informal processes that affect governance.

[2] The Boston Housing Partnership was an umbrella program to garner resources and assist ten community development corporations in rehabilitating and managing a total of 1000 units of multifamily housing in their neighborhoods. The former director, Robert Whittlesey, is now the director of a larger organization, the Housing Partnership Network (http://www.housingpartnership.net). The history of the Network is described at http://www.housingpartnership.net/about_us/history/.

[3] The CEED program no longer exists.

[4] *Urban Planning Aid, Less Rent, More Control: A Tenants Guide to Rent Control in Massachusetts* (Cambridge: Urban Planning Aid, 1972).

[5] Emily Achtenberg and Michael Stone, *Tenants First! A Research and Organizing Guide to FHA Housing* (Cambridge: Urban Planning Aid, 1974) and Urban Planning Aid, *How to Use OSHA* (Cambridge: Urban Planning Aid, 1975). The records of Urban Planning Aid, which closed its

doors in 1982, are at the University of Massachusetts at Boston (described at http://www.lib.umb.edu/node/1645). Among those who have assessed their work is Lily M. Hoffman, *The Politics of Knowledge: Activist Movements in Medicine and Planning* (Albany: SUNY, 1986).

[6] For a description of both projects, see Wendy's webpage at http://www.wbhsi.net/~wendyplotkin.

[7] It did this by creating a "mark-up" system that would characterize not only the physical content of texts (e.g. title, body, headings), but also the intellectual content (e.g. date, place, war). On the TEI, see http://www.tei-c.org/index.xml.

[8] Richard Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971). In his review for the *American Historical Review*, Lewis Gould described the work as "superub" and wrote, "Well written and closely reasoned, *The Winning of the Midwest* brilliantly combines the techniques of the social scientist and the historian to produce a convincing narrative of developments in the principal regional background of partisan conflict at the end of the nineteenth century." Lewis I. Gould, "New Perspectives on the Republican Party, 1877-1913," *American Historical Review* 77:4 (Oct., 1972), 1074-1082. Quote on 1076-77. Jensen is routinely included as one of the pioneers of the "ethnocultural" school in the historical literature; see, for example, "The Invention of the Ethnocultural Interpretation," *American Historical Review* 99:2 (April, 1994), 453-477, especially 460-463.

[9] For the evolution in Jensen's thoughts on the qualitative uses of the computer among historians, see Richard Jensen, "Historians and Computers: Word Processing," *OAH* Newsletter (1983), 11:2, 15-16; Richard Jensen, "The Hand Writing on the Screen," *Historical Methods* 20:1 (Winter, 1987), 35-45; and Richard Jensen, "Text Management" (Review), *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 22:4 (Spring, 1992), 711-722.

[10] See [Plotkin 2003]

[11] The Internet emerged from systems developed by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), within the Department of Defense starting in the 1960s. These systems were initially set up to allow scientists to exchange large electronic files, but the convenience of exchanging short messages was discovered immediately. The initial civilian system — ARPANET — sent its first message in 1969, but much work remained to develop the physical and systems infrastructure to embrace an entire nation. See Barry M. Leiner et al., "All About the Internet: History of the Internet," at http://www.isoc.org/internet/history/brief.shtml.

For the most part, humanities scholars did not begin to use these systems until the mid-1980s, a decade before the term *Internet* was adopted for what was, by then, far more seamless and user-friendly than in its early days. Textbook publishers were among the earliest funders of humanities networks, hoping to obtain better information for planning purposes. Among academicians, classicists and literary/linguistic scholars were among the first to use this new tool for group communication, with the creation of *Humanist* and the *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (BMCR, which only distributed book reviews). In 1985, the "Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link" (WELL) brought together "authors, programmers, journalists, activists and other creative people" to communicate online (http://www.well.com/). At the same time,Professor Lynn Nelson at Kansas State University and others started the first history discussion lists, including Mediev-L, History-L, and HAPSBURG. These lists, while containing some valuable content, did not screen messages or limit their subscriptions to scholars, and were liable to more casual use by amateur historians. For early articles about the Internet and history discussion groups, see Richard W. Slatta, "Historians and Telecommunications," *History Microcomputer Review* 2:2 (Fall 1986): 25–34; David R. Campbell, "The New History Net," *History Microcomputer Review* 3:2 (Fall 1987): 25; and Norman R. Coombs, "History by Teleconference," *History Microcomputer Review* 4:1 (Spring 1988): 37–40.

[12] Among the pieces attacking the type of gatekeeping practiced by H-Net, see Jesse Lemisch, "The First Amendment is Under Attack in Cyberspace," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 41:19, January 20, 1995, A56. For a more recent discussion of the topic, see Thomas W. Zeiler, "Is Democracy a Good Thing?" *OAH Council of Chairs* Newsletter 34 (November 2006), at http://www.oah.org/pubs/nl/2006nov/zeiler.html. On the debate over requiring authors of posters to identify themselves, see Lisa Guernsey, "Scholars Debate the Pros and Cons of Anonymity in Internet Discussions," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 43:6, October 4, 1996, A23-24. See Melvin E. Page, "Editing an H-Net Discussion List," *OAH* Newsletter 52 (August 1996), at http://www.h-net.org/about/press/oah/page.html for a thoughtful overview of the stylistic issues associated with H-Net editing.

[13] See [Marcus 1996] at http://www.h-net.org/about/press/oah/intl.html for a good early examination of H-Net's global reach.

[14] An early description of H-Net's website is Mark Lawrence Kornbluh, "The H-Net Website: Designing OnLine Resources for Scholars and Teachers," *OAH Council of Chairs* Newsletter, 52 (August 1996), at http://www.h-net.org/about/press/oah/web.html. On the H-Net Book Review project, see Patricia Lee Denault, "The H-Net Review Project," *OAH Council of Chairs* Newsletter 52 (August 1996), at http://www.h-net.org/about/press/oah/essaybr.html. On H-Net's teaching rsources, see Sara Tucker and Robert Wheeler, "H-Net and the Classroom: H-Teach," *OAH Council of Chairs* Newsletter 52 (August 1996), at http://www.h-net.org/about/press/oah/teach.html.

[15] Clay McShane is a professor at Northeastern University, and a historian of urban technology, with landmark books *Down the Asphalt Path: American Cities and the Automobile* (Columbia, 1994) and *The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Johns Hopkins University, 2007). Roger Biles is a professor at Illinois State University, and the author of numerous books, including *Richard J. Daley: Politics, Race, and the Governing of Chicago* (Northern Illinois University, 1995) and *Crusading Liberal: Paul H. Douglas of Illinois* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2002).

[16] COMM-ORG is now an independent list operated by Randy Stoecker of the University of Wisconsin, at http://comm-org.wisc.edu/. In addition to the history there, see Randy Stoecker, "Online for Organizing: The Story," June 2000, at http://www.plannersnetwork.org/publications/mag_2000_3_mayjun.html.

[17] See "Wikiality," Stephen Colbert's satirical monologue on Wikipedia, at http://www.comedycentral.com/colbertreport/videos.jhtml?videoId=72347. There is a growing scholarly literature on Wikipedia; among the most thoughtful by a historian, see Roy Rosenzweig, "Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past," *Journal of American History* 93:1 (June, 2006), 117-146.

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