

Reforms and Renascence of H-
Diplo

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Report on Panel 23: Returning Diplomatic Historians to H-Diplo: A Roundtable
Tom Zeiler, with input from George Fujii and Diane Labrosse

At the 2007 Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) conference, an impressive group of scholars discussed the future of H-Diplo. The original conception of the roundtable focused on why some SHAFR members have unsubscribed from the listserv. Talk to a roomful of selected diplomatic historians and you will find this opinion: the H-Diplo list is useful but not worth their time because a small number of subscribers monopolize the discussion threads with their rants. Still, it was quickly apparent from the presentations of eight panelists – and robust comments from the audience – that H-Diplo is alive and well, and is one of the top six H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online lists with over 4,000 active members from across the globe (of whom 1525 are SHAFR members), and that scholars would do well to take another look.

After brief remarks by Tom Zeiler of the University of Colorado at Boulder regarding the session's purpose and goals, the rest of the panelists gave their insightful presentations. They included Sally Marks, an independent scholar; William Keylor, Boston University; Chester Pach, Ohio University; Heather Dichter, University of Toronto; Fred Logevall, Cornell University; George Fujii, University of California, Santa Barbara; Christopher Ball, Iowa State University; and Diane Labrosse, Concordia University. The latter three are the administrators of H-Diplo; Christopher Ball is H-Diplo Review Editor and List Moderator, George Fujii is the H-Diplo Web Editor and Reviews Editor, and Diane Labrosse, the Managing Editor of H-Diplo, also acts as Reviews Editor and List Moderator.

The history of H-Diplo's evolution sparked much comment. Overall, panelists and audience members agreed that the decline in discussion threads is a good thing, for the seemingly endless confrontations involved in these postings were the reasons so many scholars turned off H-Diplo in the first place. Perhaps readers were *too* connected. Perceived online bullying or long-windedness turned off many readers. Even so, most were not concerned with the polemical nature of the discussions, especially when comparing H-Diplo to other discussion lists where commentary often is uncivil. Besides, some believed that a healthy discussion of current events was welcome at this time in history. Even so, the managing editor of H-Diplo has exerted great, and fruitful, efforts to reduce off-topic and overtly political discussion threads and leave them to individual bloggers while focusing

* Due to last-minute changes, the list of participants at this panel differs from that listed in the print and online versions of the conference program, as published by SHAFR. The H-Diplo editors thank Peter Knupfer and H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences for financial assistance with travel to SHAFR.

traffic on roundtables, scholarly essays, and the diffusion of information on access to archives, fellowships, conferences, and the like. Editors attempt to enhance interpretations, and downplay moralizing in discussion threads. They wrestle with the issue of fairness, and have insisted that proper discussion adhere to standards found in graduate seminars and scholarly journals.

To be sure, tinkering with the various formats of discussions must and will continue. For example, some panelists suggested that there be advance announcements of roundtables on the list to alert subscribers. Others advocated a digest of reviews, of recent books in the field, and even of postings (Editorial note: the latter already exists – visit <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/list/> for instructions on the digest option for list postings, or visit <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/rss/> to sign up for another other—RSS feeds) to facilitate access to key information. H-Diplo might consider a section on works-in-progress, or short postings of 500-words on various topics. Perhaps the list should survey subscribers for feedback on the types of forums they would like H-Diplo to offer. Furthermore, H-Diplo needs to ensure that those who have unsubscribed from the list are aware of what they are missing in terms of scholarly material. H-Diplo is in the process of being transformed in to the flagship list for all scholars of diplomatic history and international relations.

Indeed, the editors are working hard on that score. The benefits of H-Diplo were evident. Oft-heard comments at the panel regaled H-Diplo's dissemination of information. Scholars removed from the mainstream venues of conferences due to distance were obvious beneficiaries of the lists. Many stressed the access and insights offered by H-Diplo to archival research. Information on archives, particularly those outside of the United States, is oftentimes limited and sketchy. H-Diplo announcements provide critical information to ensure that researchers will be able to avail themselves of the archives upon arrival. In addition, graduate students stressed that they received a myriad of help about research, special programs, and other opportunities on H-Diplo that was not available anywhere else. They could form panels through postings, for instance, or learn about new fellowships and conferences.

Above all, the editors have closely monitored the evolution of H-Diplo to ensure ever-higher scholarly standards. Diane Labrosse, the managing editor, emphasized the hiring of top-notch editors and the expansion of the advisory board to effect more outreach overseas. A scholar in the audience, Yafeng Xia of Long Island University, noted the recent invitation to join the editing team to boost contacts with the China's scholarly community. Also in the works are two new projects. One is the H-Diplo Journal Watch, which will offer the tables of contents for over a hundred journals in the field in one convenient location on a quarterly basis. Another will be the H-Diplo International History Spotlight,

which will present historiographical essays on a wide array of topics, under the editorship of William Gray.

In sum, this upbeat panel concluded that H-Diplo is alive and well, and that scholars who have left the list should give it another try. Since reforms have taken place over the past four years or so, the forum has become even more professional. The quality of the roundtables, for which Thomas Maddux of CSU Northridge deserves great praise, rivals that of the top journals in the field. George Fujii, the highly-skilled Web Editor, has transformed the H-Diplo webpage into a work of art; thanks to his efforts scholars have access to pristine PDF-formatted reviews and commentaries and subscribers can receive H-Diplo information in a number of ways, including RSS (really simple syndication) feeds.

H-Diplo welcomes your input on ways to attract more scholars, students, and others interested in our field. And please urge those frustrated by the forum in the past to take another look. H-Diplo is thriving but it always strives for improvement in ways to serve a large and growing community of people involved in research, writing, and teaching about foreign affairs.

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