



INTERNET RESEARCH ANNUAL
VOLUME I: SELECTED PAPERS FROM
THE ASSOCIATION OF INTERNET
RESEARCHERS CONFERENCE

2000–2002

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Steve Jones

IMAGINING AN ASSOCIATION

 Early November 1998, Des Moines, Iowa. Thomas Swiss and Andrew Herman invite about a dozen people, including me, to speak at a conference titled “Magic, Metaphor, and Power: The World Wide Web and Contemporary Cultural Theory” at Drake University (Herman & Swiss, 2000). The talk that I had agreed to give was about online journalism, specifically about the experience of reading journalism on the Web (Jones, 2000). But as I looked at those assembled, presenters and participants, it was clear that there was more, much more, about which I wished to speak. Why, for example, did I know so many of those who gathered from research they had done that had nothing to do with the Internet? Indeed, it was a surprise to see some of them there, as I had no idea they were seriously interested in the Internet’s social impacts. I knew most of the attendees from popular culture, popular music, sociology, anthropology, and art conferences and publications. Why had we all coalesced around a conference about the Web?

One obvious reason was that (thankfully) Swiss and Herman brought us together, but I did wonder why virtually none of us had taken the opportunities at the various other conferences at which we saw one another to present research about the Internet and the Web. In conversations at meals and between presentations, it became clear that no one felt there was great interest in our respective disciplinary associations for such research. It became even clearer that the energy generated at Drake those couple of days would not and should not dissipate.

I had already been thinking about the possibility of organizing an Internet interest group within one of the communication associations, but the interdisciplinarity of the conference at Drake quickly convinced me that building on traditional disciplinary foundations was not sufficient. A new organization, one that would be interdisciplinary and international, seemed appropriate, and needed.

Stefan Wray, then a doctoral student at New York University, was one of the first people with whom I spoke about the idea. He summed up the general sentiment about forming an organization in an e-mail written and sent at the end of the conference: “Right now there seems to be little reason to spend time making

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an argument for the need or necessity of an international academic association devoted to scholarly work and research on the Web and the Internet. At this point the reasons for such an endeavor are self-evident” (Wray, 1998).

Having had some experience with the International Association for the Study of Popular Music in its formative years, I knew that much planning was needed. Terri Senft, a colleague of Stefan’s and a fellow doctoral student at New York University, and Stefan suggested a follow-up conference in New York. Greg Elmer, then a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts, volunteered to help, but given that Stefan, Terri, and Greg had dissertations to write and degrees to earn I took on most of the tasks involved in starting up a scholarly association (ranging from creating an e-mail list to applying for tax-exempt status from the U.S. Internal Revenue Service), although I was reluctant to jump into conference organizing until some details were sorted out.

One detail had to do with the association’s name. The conference at Drake University was focused on the Web, but rather than focus on a specific aspect of Internet technology or use we found ourselves discussing names with “Internet research” in them. Ultimately we opted for the simplest, most direct name we could come up with—the Association of Internet Researchers.¹ The association’s mission statement today is essentially the same as the one we came up with in 1998, reflecting a spirit of inclusiveness, curiosity, interdisciplinarity, and openness.

The National Communication Association’s annual convention in 1998 was in New York City, so we used that opportunity to have a planning meeting. We also arranged for an open meeting and hastily (perhaps even haphazardly) put out a call to those interested in forming an association. About a dozen people turned out for the open meeting.

Many mundane administrative tasks were then undertaken, but two stand out. One was creation of an e-mail list registration of the domain name aoir.org (air.org, air.com, air.net, etc., having all been reserved by others at that time). The new e-mail list, air-l, began in November 1998 with eight subscribers. Two weeks after that, it had 16 subscribers; a year later in 1999 there were 160, and by November 2000 there were 630 subscribers (at the time of this writing, April 2003, there are over 1,300 subscribers).

Why such a rapid increase in subscribers? To some extent it was because of the spread of knowledge about the association. But the truest answer to that question lies in the second key task that was undertaken, namely the association’s first conference. Nancy Baym was one of those who attended the open meeting in New York. Her enthusiasm for the association never waned, and she was quick to offer up the possibility that the association’s first conference be held at her institution, the University of Kansas. After that initial conference in September 2000 air-l subscriptions jumped, and what had been for all intents and purposes a “virtual” association quickly became very real for all involved in it.²

To date AoIR conferences have been, in my experience, part scholarly meeting and part a reunion of old friends. Strikingly, even new friends seem like old friends,

perhaps because of the online interactions on air-I. The spirit of collegiality and interdisciplinarity has been nothing short of amazing. Although it can be difficult for people from various disciplines to communicate given the tendency to lapse into the familiar language of one's own discipline (if not into jargon), it has been a characteristic of AoIR conferences that attendees go to great lengths to understand and be understood. The extra effort required to go beyond the boundaries of one's "home" discipline is richly rewarded by the intellectual and personal connections that are made among the people and ideas present.

There are a few points that follow from this quick and incomplete history and description of AoIR. One is that creating an association is a lot of fun, but maintaining it is a lot of work (and a lot of fun). There are many people I should thank who should get credit for AoIR's success in addition to ones I have already mentioned but I would quickly use up most of the pages allotted to this book in so doing. AoIR has had first-rate executive officers who volunteered to help guide it through its formative years, top-notch conference coordinators and program chairs, and terrific members.

Another point is that associations need multiple means of getting together, of associating. Although air-I is an excellent medium of communication and source of information, meeting face to face is important. Were it not for the annual AoIR conference, it is highly unlikely the association would be as vibrant or as collegial as it has become. That is why I am particularly pleased that AoIR has a research annual as another means of sharing and remembering some part of its conferences, and I am grateful to Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., for their enthusiasm for this project, and very grateful to Mia Consalvo for leading the effort as the annual's executive editor.

Reviewing the e-mails from 1998 that I had saved, I am particularly struck by one of the earliest I sent to Stefan, Greg, and Terri in which I asked, in the context of believing in the association's future growth, "What do we want to be like?" (Jones, 1998). Most scholarly organizations do relatively predictable things, as I noted in that e-mail:

- Publish newsletters/journals/Web sites
- Hold conferences
- Provide job-hunting services
- Provide accreditation services
- Give awards for research, service

The Association of Internet Researchers does some of those things, and will do others (on that list or not on it) in the future. What caused me to bring the question up in 1998 causes me to ask it over and over again: What do we want to be like? There is no necessary reason to recreate all of the trappings of other scholarly associations, just as there is no necessary reason to do away with them all. Creating

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a scholarly association is not something that happens every day, and it ought to give us an opportunity to reassess and rethink what we would like a scholarly association to be. Furthermore, there is no reason to end such reassessment and rethinking. Although AoIR is now several years old and has a very promising future ahead of it, change may be as constant as it is in the field of research AoIR encompasses. I hope we can embrace it, and consider AoIR in somewhat the way we might consider the Internet, as a medium of communication and exchange, rather than as a fixed, inflexible object.



Creating “Internet Research 1.0: The State of the Interdiscipline” in Lawrence, Kansas, September 14–17, 2000

Nancy Baym (Conference Chair) and Jeremy Hunsinger (Program Chair)

JEREMY AND NANCY: In 1999, there was a conversation in a hotel lobby in New York City that became a mailing list. On this list was presented the idea for a conference, and the enthusiasm hit several members like a bolt, and this is what happened. Over time some things, people, and tools came together, and the thought was, “We can do this,” and then we did and it was definitely a “We” effort.

NANCY: Some might say that Lawrence, Kansas (wonderful a town though it is), is the middle of nowhere. It seemed wildly ambitious to imagine that we could pull off an international conference sponsored by an association no one had ever heard of here. Indeed, our ambitions were modest. Although we presented it as the international event we dreamed it could be, among ourselves during the planning we hoped that our first conference might draw 100 people, and assumed they would probably all be American. Those assumptions were wrong, but this was what we thought.

I had just joined the faculty at Kansas in the fall of 1999. I spent my first year knocking on doors introducing myself, describing the event, and asking for sponsorship. The University of Kansas was amazingly supportive. Nearly everyone on campus that I spoke with got excited about the event. From upper administration to graduate students, everyone did what they could to make it happen.

JEREMY: I had just taken my administrative faculty appointment in the fall of 1998 as Director of VTOline, having just finished my M.A. I had been working on a variety of Internet education projects. I had a variety of resources at my disposal and had just launched the Center for Digital Discourse and Culture at Virginia Tech with some colleagues. One of the things that I had done with an assistant was to develop a peer reviewing system; that system would become what AoIR has used in each of its conferences. That was my tool, and as the list

had it, the developer of the tool was the one that had to deal with it. My role as program chair was ascertained. I volunteered and thus I was chosen. No one really knew me at that time, but I guess they know me now.

NANCY: Jeremy was as speedy, steadfast, and productive a planning partner as anyone could ever hope for, something he's continued through all our conferences since. We exchanged thousands of e-mails. Between the two of us and our conference planning list (air-meet), the whole conference was created, promoted, and managed online. If anyone ever wants to examine distributed collaborative work conducted via the Internet, we could dig those e-mails out for you.

Meanwhile, I was having a baby. If I can offer some advice to other women planning conferences it would be this: DON'T give birth three weeks before the big event, even if having a cute newborn on hand does give a conference a sort of cozy touch.

In the end, over 250 people from 20 countries and all across the United States converged in Lawrence and I think we all had a fantastic time. There were people I had heard of and admired for years, people I've only gotten to know since, and people I still haven't met. As one colleague said, "There are more people here that I cite than any conference I've ever been to!" I was, and remain, genuinely grateful to everyone who made the journey. I put the effort into creating this conference because I wanted to go to it. I didn't expect the turnout, the internationalism, or the disciplinary breadth. Those were thrilling surprises. But the best surprise of all was the tremendous sense of community. I felt like I'd found all the best friends I'd never met, as did many of the people there with whom I spoke. In the time and conferences since, there have been books, journal issues, collaborative projects, and information exchanges stimulated by AoIR. These are the academic rewards. But for me, the fact that we created a warm home full of friends for so many who felt marginalized in their disciplines has been the conference's greatest reward.

JEREMY: The conference is one of the highlights of my career. As program chair I learned quite a few names very quickly, and at the conference I met the people behind the names. Some of those were not quite what I expected, but that kept it interesting. Of course the strange thing is that this was not the only conference that I was working on in a significant capacity: two weeks after Internet Research 1.0, I was managing, with Tim Luke and Len Hatfield, the Learning 2000 conference. My advice is never to work on two conferences at once. The only reason that I could do both conferences was because of the program committee's efforts. Along with Nancy and her local committee, they made this conference possible. One of the important aspects of 1.0 was its open and collegial nature, and in that is founded the sense of community that makes these conferences so special to so many people. I share Nancy's joy in its success, and look forward to many more.



Building “IR 2.0: InterConnections” in Minneapolis, Minnesota, October 10–14, 2001

John Logie (Conference Chair) and Leslie Regan Shade (Program Chair)

Building the Association of Internet Researchers’ second conference seemed, at the outset, a reasonable task. After all, Nancy Baym and her colleagues had invented most of the “wheels” for the first conference. It fell to us to adapt (rather than reinvent) those wheels to the particularities of the site on the campus of the University of Minnesota, and we had considerable support. The program committee achieved a remarkable degree of interdisciplinarity, in keeping with the conference theme: “INTERconnections.” On the local side, a crew of talented graduate students and techies from Apple were committed to delivering wireless access throughout the main conference site. About a month before the conference, we were just beginning to get a clear picture of how it just might work.

And then planes crashed into the World Trade Center.

And within a few days, the Association and the conference organizers made a determination to press on because it somehow felt important to press on. The conference was transformed by its time, no question, but many members felt a special commitment to pursuing the opportunities for discussion, exchange, and community that we find in AoIR. One correspondent wrote hopefully of “the potential for small islands of normalcy” at the Conference. With extra measures of tolerance and goodwill all around, IR 2.0 often achieved those small islands, even as we came to understand the Internet’s developing role in a sadly transformed global circumstance. IR 2.0 should be remembered as a point in time where this organization’s members were forced to weigh their willingness to assume an added measure of risk in order to meet with their colleagues and pursue their work. In overwhelming numbers, we chose to meet in Minneapolis, and the Association is stronger because we made that commitment to our work, and to one another.



Crafting “IR 3.0: Net/Work/Theory” in Maastricht, the Netherlands: Theoretical, Methodological and Empirical Approaches to Internet Research, October 13–16, 2002

Monica Murero (Conference Chair) and Klaus Bruhn Jensen (Program Chair)

The IR 3.0 theme was Net/Work/Theory. Contributors were called to reflect on “how to theorize what we know about the Internet and on how to apply what we know theoretically in practice,” combining the best traditions of the American and

European schools of thought. This theme was particularly appropriate for such a conference to be held for the first time in Europe, whose intellectual environments have traditionally been a source of social and cultural theory.

The decision to hold the AoIR conference in Europe, in The Netherlands, was a sign of tremendous growth and international expansion of AoIR. The appropriateness of this decision was confirmed by the great success in terms of attendance, the quality of the scientific program, and the significance of international collaborations. Internet researchers, some for the first time, came to AoIR from 50 countries, including from Africa and Asia.

The proceedings of IR 3.0 marked two events in the history of Internet Research: (1) The AoIR Ethical Guide, and (2) The founding of the International Network of Excellence in Internet Research for e-health studies (NoERH).

1. The first AoIR Document on Internet Research Ethics was approved in Maastricht (see also Charles Ess's chapter in this volume).
2. The International Network of Excellence in Internet Research for e-health studies (NoERH) was founded by Monica Murero (University of Maastricht) and Susannah Fox (Pew Internet) during the proceedings of IR 3.0. A mailing list was created to continue the fervid intellectual debate started at the conference, and several international collaborations have been activated since then (to subscribe to the list: air-e-health@aoir.org).

The conference provided opportunities to network, learn from other researchers, hear from leading players in Internet development, and enjoy the "art of fine living" of Maastricht, in the south of the Netherlands. Building on the previous well-attended AoIR conferences, IR 3.0 in Europe brought together prominent scholars such as William Dutton, Director of the Oxford Internet Institute, Robin Mansell, professor at the London School of Economics, Cees Hamelink, professor at the University of Amsterdam, and many others. The event attracted researchers and practitioners from many disciplines, fields, and countries for a program of presentations, panel discussions, and informal exchanges.

The "informal character" of AoIR conferences and scholars was maintained in Europe, continuing a tradition of friendly and informal exchange. IR 3.0 was hosted in the beautiful city of Maastricht in the Netherlands, and many of the participants have enjoyed the city "by bicycle." As the city in which one of the key treaties of the European Union was signed (Euro currency), Maastricht also symbolizes a changing Europe in a changing international setting.

The IR 3.0 conference was organized entirely online, which required a lot of dedication, fast feedback, mediation, and a problem-solving attitude. More than 50 people from all over the world contributed to the AoIR planning and paper revision processes, and to them we'd like to address our deepest thanks. The air-list and the conference Web site (<<http://www.aoir.org/2002>>) have certainly played a fundamental role in the diffusion of information. Outstanding people,

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like Steve Jones, helped a lot during the whole process, and as contributors live in different parts of the world the Internet was certainly a great convenience for all of us!



Notes

1. Initially the name the Association took on, as suggested by Stefan Wray, was association(of).internet.researchers—a(o).i.r.—reflecting the exuberance of the period and fascination with computer code, but through use it became the common Association of Internet Researchers and was abbreviated AoIR.
2. For no one more so, I suspect, than for Nancy Baym!

References

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