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How to Lead an Academic Social Network

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Abstract

Dubbed “the world’s first and oldest academic social network” by a grant reviewer at the National Science Foundation, HASTAC (Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory or “Haystack”) built its first interactive website in 2002. Now, 22 years later, HASTAC has some 18,000 network members, over 400 institutional members, and a thriving graduate-student-led HASTAC Scholars program that selects 100 new student members each year. Co-Director Cathy N. Davidson co-founded HASTAC with David Theo Goldberg and numerous other scholars in the humanities and social sciences working in tandem with computer scientists and programmers. Before Wikipedia, Facebook, or Twitter (now X), HASTAC created an open-access, public network with the purpose of making full use of evolving affordances of technology while also critiquing and seeking to improve issues of access, ethics, gender and racial bias, and social and environmental impact. This essay details what it takes to lead and sustain a dues-free, participatory social network with community standards and collaborative decision-making, and where any network member is invited to blog, post, start dialogues, and lead research initiatives, across institutional and other boundaries.

Keywords: HASTAC; Social Media; digital humanities; academic communities

Try to remember (or imagine) everyday life in the distant 1900s. Think circa 1993. As the story goes, one April day that year, two computer scientists at the University of Illinois’s National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA), Professors Dan Reed and Larry Smarr, came before television cameras and held up a sheet of paper containing a list of all the world’s websites, about 30 or so.¹ They then announced that NCSA would be releasing the Mosaic 1.0 browser to the general public. Now anyone with an internet connection would have access to all that knowledge on the World Wide Web free of charge. Equally amazing, by using this browser, anyone would be able to communicate and collaborate with anyone else on the Web almost instantaneously. They could publish online, expressing their thoughts anonymously or pseudonymously if they wished, without going through an editor or a publisher, or requiring an institutional affiliation or credentials of any kind.

¹ Callaham 2023.

To many, it seemed like magic. What came to be known as “Web 1.0” changed the very concept of who could communicate publicly, and how. By the end of 1993, there were more than 10,000 websites. By 2000, there were 17,087,182. To put those numbers into perspective, there are currently over 1.5 *billion* websites worldwide.²

As I write this idiosyncratic, unapologetically personal account of the online social network that I co-founded at the beginning of the twenty-first century and have directed or co-directed ever since, I offer this “ancient” context because it’s hard to comprehend what it *meant*, way back then, to create an academic social network where none previously existed. HASTAC.org (Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory, called “Haystack”) began at the very dawn of online social media, at the beginning of a new era that web designer Darcy DiNucci dubbed “Web 2.0.” Coined in 1999, the term described the next iteration of the World Wide Web where the goal would be to facilitate, host, and promote interactive, participatory “user-generated content.”³ In 2004, open source media advocates Tim O’Reilly and Dale Dougherty kicked off what would become one of the Internet’s most evangelical annual events, the “Web 2.0 Summit,” convened each year in (of course) San Francisco.⁴

So we were on the scene early when, in 1999–2000, my brilliant friend and colleague David Theo Goldberg (longtime Director of the University of California Humanities Research Institute, or UCHRI, now Director Emeritus) and I (then Vice Provost for Interdisciplinary Studies and Co-Founder of the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute at Duke University) began talking with others about the need for a “Humanities 2.0” that fully utilized the new interactive, user-generated affordances of technology—their promise and their perils. Because we both were in positions where we could organize events, feed into existing networks and create new ones, and write grants for inter-institutional activities as part of our overarching job descriptions at the time, we were able to bring together colleagues chiefly in the humanities and interpretive social sciences who shared our conviction that “Knowledge Should Be Shared.”⁵

“Sharing” is the key word here and marks an affinity with the scholarly field known, at the time, as “humanities computing.” That field has a long and venerable history, often traced back to the late 1940s and 1950s, notably with the collaboration between programmers at IBM and the Italian Jesuit priest Roberto Busa on the *Index Thomisticus* (a computerized concordance to Thomas Aquinas). Around the same time, at the University of California at Berkeley, English professor Josephine Miles joined with engineering colleagues to create a concordance to John Dryden, mostly using punch cards.⁶ The purpose of these highly specialized indexes, prepared by scholars in the field, was to make knowledge more widely available. Others in the multidimensional field that we now call “digital humanities” chart their genealogies differently for example, through the computer graphics traditions of the

² “Total Number of Websites” n.d.

³ DiNucci 1999. Archived from the original on October 11, 2011.

⁴ O’Reilly 1999. Archived from the original on April 24, 2013.

⁵ “Knowledge Should Be Shared” was the first, official motto of the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute that was part of the larger John Hope Franklin Center for Interdisciplinary and International Studies, co-founded by Vice Provost Cathy N. Davidson and Dean Karla F. C. Holloway at Duke University in 1999.

⁶ Berry and Fagerjord 2018; Drucker 2013; Schreibman, Siemens, and Unsworth 2004. For extensive discussions about the key issues of humanities computing and digital humanities, see the magisterial University of Minnesota series *Debates in the Digital Humanities* edited by Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein, including *Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities* (2020) and *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (2023).

1960s and 1970s, or through stylometry, topic modeling, corpus linguistics, electronic gaming, or early cybernetics.⁷ Still other humanists were dedicated to creating transformative archives such as the Women Writers Project (that went online at Brown University in 1999) or, later, the Slave Societies Digital Archive (at Vanderbilt University).⁸

To drastically oversimplify a complex history, HASTAC took a different course than much of the computational humanities extant at the turn into the twenty-first century. We envisioned an interactive academic social network where the focus was less on a specific knowledge product and more on a new process of knowledge-making, one both crowd-sourced and egalitarian. We created a public, online, multi-institutional social network where researchers and students, specialists and amateurs, could register and then blog, write comments, initiate discussion topics, and offer projects for others to join. Further, we imagined a new kind of public humanities where, together, we would do what humanists do well: analyze, theorize, and critique the social and political implications of social media itself.

1. Lesson #1: Learn from your detractors—but do not let them deter you

Not everyone loved or even understood what we were up to. Remember, the concept of a “social network” was still unfamiliar. Facebook did not yet exist, nor did its now-extinct predecessors Myspace and Friendster. There was no Twitter (now X), Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok. Wikipedia was just being launched. Khan Academy and the first MOOCs (Massive Online Open Education) did not start until 2008. When we began talking about a free, open-access network that allowed anyone to publish and share their ideas and research without benefit of peer review, some found the very concept offensive. Indeed, some prominent academics believed that, by encouraging crowdsourcing, we were depreciating the worth of their scholarly expertise and undermining the importance of higher education. I personally was on the receiving end of epithets (I’m quoting exactly) including “crazy,” “trendy,” and “flash in the pan” (I heard that last one several times). The president of one of our major professional organizations publicly called HASTAC’s founders “charlatans” for proposing such an outlandish idea.

At a 2001 convening of humanities center directors hosted by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, some participants proposed that we directors ban together and collectively “take a stand” against the Internet. They balked at our idea of a Humanities 2.0. Others, however, were excited by our proposal. David and I were able to convene a follow-up meeting, joined by numerous scholars across the country. Collectively, we began to formulate what a truly public “open source humanities” might look like.⁹

Humanities scholars from many disciplines and institutions came together for a series of meetings at UCHRI and Duke, as well as at the University of Washington (hosted by Kathleen Woodward), University of Southern California (Tara McPherson and Anne Balsamo), Stanford (Tim Lenoir and Jeffrey Schnapp), the San Diego Supercomputer Center at the University of California, San Diego (Alan Blatecky and Richard Marciano), and, a bit later, at the

⁷ Cf. McPherson 2016. See also McPherson 2018, and her monumental work with digital scholarship at the University of Southern California, the Vectors journal and Scalar (a multimedia authoring platform)..

⁸ “History” n.d.

⁹ Davidson and Goldberg 2004. In 2006, UCHRI hosted an intensive summer program dedicated to the Internet and all things tech as part of its annual Seminar in Experimental Thinking (SECT). See also, Davidson, Goldberg, and Jones 2010. We published a draft of this book on HASTAC.org where anyone could comment, then traveled to a number of universities where we held open forums about the book. We later cited and included the names (or pseudonyms) of all contributors on the website and in the printed book.

University of Illinois (convened by Kevin Franklin, Lisa Nakamura, and Allison Clark when all three were at that institution). Early on, Tim Murray (Cornell), Danny Herwitz (University of Michigan), Diana Taylor (NYU), Martha Nell Smith (University of Maryland), Tom McCalla (National University), the late Julie Thompson Klein (Wayne State University), and many others (with apologies to all I've inadvertently omitted) offered different forms of personal and institutional support. We also established active early partnerships and research collaborations with the Minority Serving Institutions High-Performance Computing Working Group, Creative Commons, the California Digital Library, the Coalition for Networked Information, the National Initiative for a Networked Cultural Heritage, *Vectors* (at USC), The New Ancient World, the Sikh 3-D Virtual Museum, and many other nonprofit and industry organizations.¹⁰ (See “Addendum,” below, for a full list.)

While serving as the Executive Director at UCHRI, Dr. Kevin Franklin led the development of HASTAC's pioneering website. Hosted at Stanford, the first iteration of HASTAC.org was a display site with an interactive blogging platform available to all HASTAC members. When we discussed adding a wiki to enhance the collaborative, research-sharing capacities of the site, Kevin took a number of us to meet an internet entrepreneur and web developer working out of a tiny cement block office in Silicon Valley. That person was Jimmy Wales. Later that year, Wales and Larry Sanger launched an entirely new kind of encyclopedia, one without prescriptive topics and that would be written, emended, and maintained by volunteers. That was Wikipedia.

Jumping ahead some years, I should note that, while several universities resolved to “ban” the use of Wikipedia in the classroom, a number of us at HASTAC encouraged our students to work to make Wikipedia better—as a form of public humanities and a form of active learning or radical, student-centered pedagogy.¹¹ I was particularly outspoken on this issue then and continue to be now. A participatory knowledge-site is only as expansive as its participants who need to both contribute and critique infrastructures (and ideologies) that impede equitable contribution. Along with other HASTAC members, I worked with Wikimedia Foundation (the nonprofit foundation that hosts Wikipedia) to organize “hackathons” where students would do original research and then create, correct, or add to existing Wikipedia entries, especially to help ensure greater inclusivity by correcting sexist or racist bias and adding more essays on women, people of color, postcolonial perspectives, and, indeed, on the humanities more generally.

In short, despite some early opposition, we persisted (Figure 1).

2. Lesson #2: Find your friends and allies wherever and whenever you can—and cherish and recognize their priceless contribution

Although we faced some initial opposition, HASTAC also enjoyed a good deal of enthusiastic support and has survived remarkably well. Early on, for example, a number of distinguished computer scientists embraced our idea and championed it. David brought HASTAC to the attention a colleague at the University of California Berkeley, the legendary computer scientist and robotics engineer Ruzena Bajscy. Ruzena was founder of the system's multi-campus Center for Information Technology Research in the Interest of Society (CITRIS). Previously, she had worked at the National Science Foundation, presiding over the Cyber-infrastructure Division of the Computer and Information Science and Engineering

¹⁰ See “HASTAC: The Human Dimensions of Emerging Science and Tech” 2003.

¹¹ Davidson 2007. See also “Cathy Davidson of Duke on the Value of Wikipedia” 2007. See also Davidson 2022.

HASTAC
Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory

HOME NEWS RESOURCES SIGN UP PROJECTS ABOUT US

A consortium of humanists, artists, scientists, social scientists, and engineers from universities across the country, **HASTAC** ("Haystack") is committed to new forms of collaboration across institutions, disciplines, and communities to promote creative uses of technology.

Our aim is to promote expansive, innovative uses of technology in formal education and lifelong learning.

InFormation Year 2006-2007

We are devoting 2006-2007 to public programming that promotes the human and humane dimensions of technology. Each of the nine HASTAC sites will develop new courses and seminars for students and faculty as well as colloquia, seminars, and workshops open to the general public.

To learn more about the 2006-2007 InFormation Year, please download this pdf brochure.

Participating Sites

UPCOMING EVENTS

July and August 2006 Summer Institutes in Southern California

The University of California Humanities Research Institute (UCHRI), in partnership with the San Diego Supercomputer Center (SDSC) and **HASTAC** members, will host two institutes: The July 24-28, 2006 **Cyberinfrastructure Summer Institute for Humanists, Artists, and Social Scientists** will be held at SDSC in La Jolla. This five-day hands-on institute will introduce humanists, artists, and social scientists to commonly used and emergent information technology tools. Teams of faculty as well as postdoctoral fellows and graduate students are especially encouraged to apply.

The August 14-25, 2006 Seminar in Experimental Critical Theory (SECT) will be hosted by the UCHRI at the University of California, Irvine. Seminal digital innovators and innovative humanists will be paired to discuss the implications of new technologies for the humanities and the human condition.

Program and fee information as well as online registration will be available December 1, 2005 on www.hastac.org, www.sdsc.edu, and www.uchri.org websites.

Figure 1. Screenshot of an early, fully in-tact HASTAC.org homepage (dated Dec. 20, 2005) captured on the "Wayback Machine" of the Internet Archive, retrieved Sept 13, 2024. Unfortunately, we have never been able to recover the earliest HASTAC.org sites hosted at Stanford.

Directorate. At the time, NSF was sponsoring an "advanced collaboratory" initiative, a term coined by computer scientist William Wulf that means as a "center without walls in which the nation's researchers can perform their research without regard to physical location, interacting with colleagues, accessing instrumentation, sharing data and computational resources, [and] accessing information in digital libraries."¹² Ruzena introduced us to her former colleagues who offered us grant support for a major convening at NSF headquarters.

A diverse cohort of some thirty or forty humanities, social science, and media studies scholars (many of whom continue to serve on HASTAC's various advisory boards), came together at NSF. Dan Reed and Larry Smarr were able to join part of our conference and John Seely Brown, the eminent former head of Xerox's PARC (Palo Alto Research Center) key-noted one of the sessions. We left that meeting brimming with ideas and with the most

¹² Wulf 1989.

inclusive (if “science-y”) interdisciplinary name we could come up with: Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory, a proper “SLA” (as scientists would joke), a “Six Letter Acronym,” with a catchy insider (that is non-obvious) nickname: “Haystack.”¹³ Our first logo included a stylized pile of hay and our first newsletter was called, predictably enough, “The Needle.”¹⁴

In writing this essay, I took the opportunity to be in touch with Ruzena again. Now in her nineties and as brilliant as ever, she reminded me of two factors crucial to anyone seeking to pioneer innovative, transdisciplinary projects. First, she noted that some scientists had been as wary of the cross-disciplinary collaborations (for example, with dancers) that she championed at CITRIS as humanists had been when we started HASTAC. That’s another lesson: cross-pollination is not always easy. Yet, she also reminded me, when she took David and me to meet with Bruce Cole, then Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, to propose an entirely new NEH division dedicated to digital humanities, this noted art historian was eager to listen. Needless to say, the Office of Digital Humanities, founded under Cole in 2008, has gone on to have an indelible impact on the entire field.¹⁵

3. Lesson #3: Stay relevant and never forget the stakes

Despite those HASTAC early detractors and, no doubt, with the aid of early supporters, HASTAC.org is alive and well. In 2012, an anonymous external reviewer on a different grant from the National Science Foundation confidently dubbed HASTAC “the world’s first and oldest academic social network.”¹⁶ Since then, we have quoted that phrase many times. No one has yet come up with an older, still extant online academic social network. So we are going with it!

Now, HASTAC has some 18,000 individual network members and 400 institutional members. The most vibrant and ambitious arm of the network is the HASTAC Scholars program, an entirely student-run international program comprised of about 80% graduate students and 20% undergrads. This year the program is run by Tatiana Bertolucci and Tysean Bucknor, doctoral students and Fellows of the Futures Initiative based and supported at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. As co-directors, they select some 100 new HASTAC Scholars to serve two-year terms. The Scholars engage in a variety of collaborative, cross-institutional, cross-disciplinary projects together. For example, they decide on a scholarly book of current topical interest, read and discuss it together, write reviews of each chapter, offer one another feedback, and then publish a “collaborative book review.” They often also conduct and publish an interview with the author. In 2024, for example, HASTAC Scholars reviewed Kate Crawford’s *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (Yale UP, 2021) and Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein’s *Data Feminism* (MIT Press, 2020).¹⁷ The Scholars also host Digital Friday forums focusing on their own research, engage in online dialogues, and collaborate on papers, panels at professional conferences, grants, and other cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary opportunities.

¹³ Eventually we changed the name to “Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory.”

¹⁴ Hicks 2006.

¹⁵ Ruzena Bajcsy, email correspondence, October 9, 2024.

¹⁶ Anonymous grant reviewer, for Cathy N. Davidson (Principal Investigator). “Assessing the Impact of Technology-Aided Participation and Mentoring on Transformative Interdisciplinary Research: A Data-Based Study of the Incentives and Success of an Exemplar Academic Network,” National Science Foundation EAGER Grant, Awarded August 2012, <http://www.hastac.org/groups/collaborative-data>.

¹⁷ HASTAC Scholars 2024a, 2024b.

I'm convinced one key to HASTAC's continuing (if improbable) longevity is its focus on mission and on knowledge as a public good. One extended, multi-part research project exemplifies how HASTAC's loose collaborative style has contributed to social impacts well beyond the walls of academe. In 1996, Dr. Richard Marciano, then Research Scientist at the San Diego Supercomputing Center (now Director of the Advanced Information Collaboratory at the University of Maryland), began collecting data on governmental redlining and long-term housing discrimination, focusing first on his own neighborhood, the Mission Hills district of San Diego.¹⁸ Beginning with the explicitly racist, restrictive federal housing laws and financing in the 1930s, he mapped the debilitating and lasting effects of redlining on Black and Brown communities. Richard credits HASTAC as key to some of the project's success. David (an authority on race and racism) invited Richard to be part of HASTAC and to present his research at UCHRI.¹⁹ In 2006, Richard and David, along with Chien-Ye Hou, produced T-RACES, a digitized archive of eight California redlining maps from the 1930s plus local mortgage and municipal regulations that secured segregation in those cities. This invaluable resource has been used in doctoral dissertations as well as by California lawyers and judges in assessing property discrimination cases in the state.²⁰

I had an opportunity to work with Richard again after he moved to the University of North Carolina. He partnered with HASTAC researchers in the state, including at RENCI (Renaissance Computing Initiative), a collaborative effort co-located at Duke University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and North Carolina State University. In tandem with the tireless efforts of the Urban Renewal Impact Collaborative of Asheville, NC, led by Director Priscilla Robinson, Richard and other colleagues helped to develop a multi-pronged data analysis, historical research, and community activism project focused on local incidents of discrimination during so-called "urban renewal" in the popular resort town of Asheville.²¹

As part of my Vice Provost portfolio at Duke, I was helping to develop "Bass Connections," a new form of relevant, connected, and engaged interdisciplinary general education. With Richard serving as a mentor, we created a cross-institutional research-based course, "Making Data Matter," where students, working with community members, studied and then designed data-gathering, ethnographic, photographic, and oral history projects to document and "tell the story" of community devastation experienced as a result of the systematic Asheville redlining.²² This material—compiled and presented by a consortium of scholars, students, and community leaders—helped to provide evidence in a case for discrimination and economic exploitation mounted by Black community leaders against the city. Astonishingly (and I'm condensing a very long story here), on June 17, 2024, the Asheville Reparations committee "voted to approve a settlement for injuries caused by redlining and urban renewal."²³

There are lessons well beyond HASTAC to be learned from this exemplary public project. First, without Richard Marciano's leadership, commitment, and expertise over *decades*, it

¹⁸ Marciano 2022.

¹⁹ Tooby 2007. See also Davidson 2023a.

²⁰ Marciano, Goldberg, and Hou n.d.

²¹ "Priscilla Robinson Receives Preservation Grant Award" 2022. See also the "Urban Renewal Impact" website, <https://urbanrenewalimpact.org>.

²² "Making Data Matter" n.d.

²³ Asheville Community Reparations Commission Meeting 2024.

might not have happened. Second, the project required support from multiple institutions and sectors, both academic and civic. Third, mutual respect was an absolute prerequisite and required communication across the divides of science, technology, the humanities, and social sciences as well as across academic and civic communities. Finally, there was a clear-eyed commitment to the “public good” and the many levels on which the public might be served. This project yielded not only important archives that others may use and contribute to, but ultimately led to a court settlement to help compensate one community that has suffered because of a history of redlining and urban renewal. From DH to reparations: a truly “public” humanities.

4. Lesson #4: To survive, find great partners—and be willing to share and compromise

“Sustainability” is a frequent buzzword of the modern, neoliberal academy. “Precarity” is an even more common one. Those two conditions go together more often than anyone would like in this time of cutbacks and retrenchment. A dues-free nonprofit academic social network needs more than vision and leadership to exist. It also requires material support, prodigious amounts of labor, and voluntary contributions of time and ideas from network administrators and members.

HASTAC has been fortunate to be able to sustain itself through an often-complex combination of grants, foundation support, institutional support, and private contributions (of both time and money). Most recently, in 2022, HASTAC.org migrated to the Knowledge Commons (formerly, the Humanities Commons), a network of networks led by Professor Kathleen Fitzpatrick and her team based at Michigan State University. The Knowledge Commons hosts interactive social networking services for many traditional professional associations including the Modern Language Association, the Association of University Presses, and others. Consortium members pay an annual subscription or membership fee, and we all share a purpose: “to connect, create, share and experiment together.”²⁴

HASTAC’s move to the Knowledge Commons would not have happened without the visionary leadership of Professor Jacqueline Wernimont, HASTAC’s Co-Director from 2016 to 2024. A distinguished scholar, public intellectual, and installation artist who researches and writes on mathematical and computational media and their histories, Jacque brought a range of skills and training to HASTAC as well as generous institutional support first from Arizona State University and then Dartmouth College after her move there as Distinguished Chair of Digital Humanities and Social Engagement. Jacque’s team began by debugging and rebuilding HASTAC’s rickety, woefully outdated Drupal-powered website which had been modded and patched over the course of many years by various HASTAC staff members, postdocs, and students. After moving to Dartmouth, Jacque’s team conducted a user-survey of our membership to help us chart HASTAC’s future directions. Dr. Nikki Stevens, then a post-doctoral fellow at Dartmouth and HASTAC technical lead, worked with the programmers, designers, and coders at the Knowledge Commons to help design a new site and migrate much of the recent content from the old HASTAC.org.

Again, cross-institutional coordination was crucial—and so was compromise. It was decided, for example, that only the last five or so years of the voluminous content on the extant version of the HASTAC.org site, operational (more or less) since 2006, could be transferred to the Knowledge Commons. At the Graduate Center (CUNY), Futures Initiative doctoral fellow

²⁴ “Our Purpose” n.d.



Figure 2. AI-generated HASTAC.org banner for a HASTAC Scholars forum on AI plus a tribute to former Co-Director Jacqueline Wernimont (Spring–Summer 2024).

Christopher McGuinness led the task of archiving pre-2017 versions of HASTAC.org, including thousands of blog posts and multi-site collaborative projects. All the earlier content now resides at the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Duke University.²⁵

During the year-long website migration, HASTAC continued to function IRL (In Real Life, so to speak). The HASTAC team at the Graduate Center kept hosting Zoom events including Digital Fridays and other networking activities and workshops (both online and in person). It was a monumental, coordinated effort that, with special thanks to Jacquie Wernimont and Dartmouth, will ensure HASTAC's survival for the next decade (Figure 2).

Unlike many “free” online networks, HASTAC never sells its user data to commercial interests. On the contrary, HASTAC has been scrupulous about maintaining the security of its member data. However, as another “lesson,” it is crucially important to be aware of how much the present technology climate jeopardizes data privacy. With the advent of virtually unregulated generative AI, commercial bots are continually crawling the Knowledge Commons without permission. Hackers and bots do not abide by community rules, policies, and standards. They are not “good actors.” This is a global problem that every online organization faces today.²⁶ In fact, hackers recently attacked the Wayback Machine of the Internet Archive, the world's largest internet site.²⁷ Data security remains a constant concern.

Since HASTAC does not charge dues or sell data, over the years we have partnered with many institutions, philanthropic associations, and nonprofit organizations to sustain our network. For example, for nearly a decade, David Theo Goldberg and I co-directed the Digital Media and Learning (DML) Competitions as part of the ambitious Digital Media and Learning Initiative led by Constance M. Yowell at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. A monumental

²⁵ Anyone wishing to access content from HASTAC.org that predates 2017 is encouraged to contact the Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Duke University via the contact form: <https://rubenstein.libanswers.com/index>.

²⁶ Stokel-Walker 2024.

²⁷ Wu 2024.

\$200 million undertaking, the Digital Media and Learning Initiative supported research, policy, and technology development with the aim of finding—and inspiring—“the most novel uses of new media in support of learning,” for all ages.²⁸ HASTAC.org served as a shared platform for communication and collaborative project-building and project-management for the applicants and recipients of DML Competition grants.

HASTAC also played crucial roles as part of the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute at Duke University. Managed over the years by executive director Mandy Dailey, an incredibly talented team of staff and students guided HASTAC from its beginnings until 2014, when I moved to the Graduate Center CUNY, and even continued for a few years after my move. Since 2014, HASTAC has served as the external, international arm of the Graduate Center’s Futures Initiative, a program dedicated to advancing equity and innovation in higher education. In this role, HASTAC has been part of two generous, multiyear grants, the “Humanities Alliance” and “Transformative Learning in the Humanities” projects, both from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Again, the lesson I mean to underscore is that leading an academic social network requires many institutions, organizations, and individuals working together and with a shared purpose. Another prime example is the way HASTAC puts on “distributed” conferences. Our conferences are not hosted by the central HASTAC staff and institutions but are fully led, designed, organized, and supported by different institutional members. We have had conferences all over the US (hosted, most recently, at the University of Central Florida, Arizona State University, Michigan State University, and Pratt Institute) and in Costa Rica, Peru, and twice in Canada (York University and the University of British Columbia). We held one distributed, monthly “In/Formation Year” (2006–2007) coordinated across over 15 separate institutions, with a different theme and convening each month, and another year we teamed with a relatively young corporation, Google, to hold a Virtual Conference across several countries using a collaborative tool still at the development stage called “Google Wave.”²⁹ In real time, our industrious members “beta tested” (that is, broke) the platform. At the end of three days, we delivered so much user-feedback that Google soon after withdrew the product from the market (Figure 3).

Professor Chris Alen Sula headed HASTAC’s most recent conference at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, “Critical Making and Social Justice” (June 8–10, 2023). Registration was closed well before the conference began, once a local capacity of 500 participants was reached.

Currently, at the Graduate Center CUNY, I now co-direct HASTAC (and the Futures Initiative) with Shelly Eversley, Professor of English and Interim Director of Black and Latinx Studies (at Baruch College and the Graduate Center). Dr. Adashima Oyo is Director of Programs and Administration for HASTAC, with Roderick Hurley currently serving as Interim Director. We also, in 2024, added two new Interdisciplinary Area Directors, Jade E. Davis (University of Iowa), Director of Digital Learning Impact and Libraries, and Kevin Healy (University of New Hampshire), Director of Experimental Pedagogies and Arts-Based Research.

What should be very clear is that in order to survive, a free, inter-institutional, interdisciplinary, online network requires flexibility, commitment, constant industry—and good fortune.

²⁸ “Digital Media and Learning Competition” 2010.

²⁹ Davidson 2010.

HASTAC
Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory

inFORMATION YEAR 06 || 07

Hosted by universities across the country and available free on your desktop.
www.hastac.org

be in|FORMED !

WATCH & LEARN //
on site, on your desktop, on your iPod ...

SPEAK YOUR MIND //
blog, message, post to forums ...

SHOW & TELL //
share with your colleagues, students, listeners ...

DEBATE & DISCUSS //
hold your own town meetings, seminars ...

TEACH IT //
build into your syllabi ...

KEEP IT //
download for future courses and events ...

<p>SEPTEMBER 28-30 06</p> <p>University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign</p>	<p>INCOMMON</p> <p>"Re/Time: After the Storm" Poetry and performance on civic engagement and social justice, featuring Ann Bishop, Noshir Contractor, John Jennings, Daniel Reed, Daryl Williams</p>
<p>OCTOBER 21 06</p> <p>University of Southern California</p>	<p>INTERPLAY</p> <p>Performance by Leslie Anderson Discussion following with Antonio Damasio</p>
<p>NOVEMBER 9-11 06</p> <p>National University</p>	<p>INCOMMUNITY</p> <p>"Toward a New Civic Culture: Smart and Creative Community Building" Virtual town meeting on technology and civic participation, featuring Harry Boyte, John Eger, Brian O'Connell, Kim Walesh</p>
<p>DECEMBER 8 06</p> <p>University of California, Berkeley; University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign; Mills College</p>	<p>INTERACTION</p> <p>"The Reception," presented by the Resonance Project Tele-immersive dance performance and symposium in cyberspace, featuring Ruzena Bajcsy, Edmund Campion, Katherine Mezur, Lisa Wymore</p>
<p>DECEMBER 06</p> <p>Stanford University</p>	<p>INJUSTICE</p> <p>"The Politics of Presence" Performance and lecture by Lynn Hershman Leason</p>
<p>JANUARY 23 07</p> <p>University of Michigan</p>	<p>INTEGRATION</p> <p>"Digital Partnerships: Libraries, Museums, and the Remediation of Culture" Address by John Wilkin on the Google Book, demos, and a panel on the future of English studies</p>
<p>FEBRUARY 23 07</p> <p>Wayne State University</p>	<p>INVITATION</p> <p>"The Art and Science of Social Robots" Address by Cynthia Brezazal</p>
<p>MARCH 1 07</p> <p>University of Washington</p>	<p>INTERFACE</p> <p>HASTAC INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE</p>
<p>MAY 07</p> <p>University of California Humanities Research Institute</p>	<p>INNOVATION</p> <p>"Californnovation: Surfing California's Techno Waves" Demos across the disciplines at Calit2 UCSD</p>

INTERFACE
HASTAC INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
APRIL 19-21, 2007
DUKE UNIVERSITY
RENCI

ELECTRONIC TECHNOLOGIES, THINKING AT THE INTERFACE
PANELS, MEETINGS, AND WORKSHOPS
DURING

Rebecca Allen, James Boyle, John Seely Brown, John Unsworth

Figure 3. Poster for the in/Formation Year, a 15-part conference series organized via HASTAC. Design and permission by Jason Doty.³⁰

5. Lesson #5: Work together to define what you value—and defend it

From the beginning—before we even had a name or a website—HASTAC was firmly, passionately committed to inclusion. Early on, we adopted a methodology we call “Collaboration by Difference” and the motto “Difference is our operating system.” HASTAC, by design, celebrates diversity and creates infrastructures to support those differences, especially ensuring the inclusion of voices marginalized both in academe and in the world of technology.

³⁰ Davidson, Goldberg, and Jones 2010.

A lesson we learned early on—and that is particularly relevant in the current historical moment—is that “inclusion” is not synonymous with “anything goes.” On the contrary, from the start, we were concerned about the damage that trolls could cause online. To address this issue, we decided that, although dues-free, HASTAC would still require registration. Part of registering to the site entails consenting to uphold a set of standards developed by the community. We held a number of online forums and hackathons where early adopters collectively developed “community values.” If someone writes an offensive blog or comment that does not abide by these values, they are asked to edit or remove the content. Basically, we adhere to the “harm principle” articulated by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* (1859): “The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”³¹

Not everyone liked this structure. A few open-source tech advocates were dismayed that HASTAC only permitted registered members to publish on the site. Some argued that anyone should be allowed to write anything, without any censoring of comments deemed offensive to other members. Intriguingly, in its 20-plus years of existence, HASTAC has rarely had to ask people to remove comments or to leave the network. Nor have there been many cases where someone wanted to join without signing on to the community rules and then had to be denied permission when they declined. I can think of really only one flagrant violation, where a tenured full professor at a flagship campus was warned that he’d be asked to leave the network after he repeatedly used words like “idiot” and “moron” in his comments on blogs written by students. He (not so quietly) decided HASTAC wasn’t for him and un-registered himself.

In the last few years, we have had to step up our surveillance due to the advent of heinous “Zoom bombing” by automated bots pre-programmed to find and disrupt internet events focusing on race, gender, or sexuality. We’ve had to exert special controls at our HASTAC Scholars’ Digital Fridays after bots pummeled webinar participants with vile obscenities, pornographic insults, and outright hate speech in screeching decibels. We now carefully monitor registrations to Digital Fridays and have adopted protected formats where comments are kept separate from the videoconferencing, ensuring that the broadcast itself cannot be disrupted or hijacked.

This brief, personal “how to” essay is not the place to examine the complex relationship between free speech and implied power and privilege. But given this historical moment, when many campuses are confronting this issue or where students, faculty, staff, and even college presidents are being harshly disciplined based on different constructions of what “free speech” might mean, it’s useful to think about HASTAC’s process and how it might apply to any academic social network—or other public forum. “No censoring” sounds like a good principle. However, in practice it too often masks lopsided privilege and power. In Mill’s terms, we need to ask whose public words can cause harm to others? Who arbitrates? “Free speech” does not operate value-free. Too often, free speech can be a synonym for bullying, harassing, name calling, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of trolling and hate speech that are *de facto* silencing of other members of a community. These behaviors are unacceptable in a free, value-based online academic social network that exists by volunteerism, contribution, participation, and interaction.

Our methods at HASTAC have had wide public application beyond—and sometimes far wider—than we imagined. In 2022, Christina Katopodis (coauthor of *The New College Classroom*) and I

³¹ Mill 1859.

were approached by “Dr. Alice” – Alice Wilder, Lead in Children’s Educational Development at WW Video at Apple. She wanted to know more about “collaboration by difference,” especially its pedagogical applications that Christina and I discuss in *The New College Classroom*.³² Dr. Alice asked if we would be interested in translating this method for preschoolers. We were delighted to do so and served as “Transformative Learning Experts” for an Apple-TV children’s series based on the vastly popular *Duck and Goose* books by Tad Hills. Here’s the tagline for the TV series: “Feathered friends Duck and Goose couldn’t be more different, but in this preschool show, they learn how to bring out the best in one another.”

Duck and Goose may not be John Stuart Mill or the UN Declaration of Human Rights, but this is a pretty accurate enactment of the principle of collaboration by difference, and a unique example of “public humanities” in action.

6. Lesson #6: Learn how to weave

At the recent HASTAC conference at Pratt Institute, scholar-educator-artists Nikki Stevens and Molly Morin showcased their beautiful art installation called “1055113200.” It is an interactive sculpture, a weaving machine that *literally* generates the “receipts” (in the form of Unix timestamps) from twenty years of HASTAC.org. The work’s title “1055113200” is itself a Unix timestamp referring to June 8, 2003 – twenty years to the day before the work was installed and roughly the same year that HASTAC.org launched. The artists write:



Figure 4. Photograph of the *1055113200* installation at Pratt Institute, constructed by Nikki Stevens and Molly Morin. Reproduced by permission of the artists.³³

³² Davidson and Katopodis 2022.

³³ Davidson 2023b.

1055113200 includes nearly 1,000 feet of dot-matrix receipt paper printed with patterns, icons and imagery made entirely of ASCII characters... Like many all-volunteer networks, HASTAC has been built on the labor of committed community members who often find themselves overworked, underappreciated, burnout-adjacent while still committed to keeping HASTAC alive. However, this labor is frequently invisible and taken for granted.

With *1055113200*, Morin and Stevens focused on making this labor visible, so that it could be “seen, felt, experienced, understood. As an artwork, *1055113200* gives material and visual form to a set of activities, feelings and experiences that cannot be clearly pinned down. It honors not a singular event or unified group, but rather the less defined assemblage of people, actions and things that have made HASTAC over the last twenty years.”³⁴

I can think of no better way to end this “how to” essay than with appreciation of precisely the “weaving” of “people, actions, and things” that, for over twenty years, has defined and sustained the “world’s first and oldest academic social network.” That’s the crucial lesson: *Never stop weaving!* (Figure 4)

³⁴ Morin and Nikki 2023.

Addendum

Projects

HASTAC PROJECTS

*Listed Alphabetically**African American World Music: The Genome Project of African American*

Music. Indisputably, African American music has had the single greatest impact on the development of popular and classical world music in the long twentieth century. What, exactly, does that mean? This project would include the sonification of the vast archive of African American music and its worldwide influence--through Cuba, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and even Asia. ...more

CLICK (Creating Literacy in Computer Knowledge). CLICK is a technology literacy program sponsored by the John Hope Franklin Center for Interdisciplinary & International Studies at Duke University. The curriculum was designed by the ISIS (Information Science + Information Studies) program at Duke in 2001-2002 to prepare students for the North Carolina 8th Grade Computer Competency Exam. ...more

Cultural California. Various regional projects in the US map state or regional culture (see, e.g., *The Handbook of Texas*). Almost all are archival projects collecting available information into a digital library of more or less vigorous proportion. "Cultural California" is an ambitious online project bringing together as comprehensively as possible a mapping of the history of cultural developments and contributions throughout the state of California. ...more

The Global Body and the Virtual Cyborg. "The Global Body and the Virtual Cyborg" attaches culturally specific meanings to the universal body and relies on advanced computer technologies to move beyond the "robot" to a variable representation of the human body with enormous educational functions. The Virtual Cyborg will embody an innovative, complex rendering of the cultural determinants of human medicine. ...more

Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics. At NYU, scholars of anthropology, the performing arts, and cultural studies use web-based networks across the Americas to create team-taught courses and collaborative research projects with professors in Latin America. Their scholarship and classes explore the role of expressive behavior (performance) in social and political life. ...more

Historical Geography in Action: Linking Information Technology to Urban Planning Policies. The collaboration brings together visual artists, librarians, historians, urban planners, with research scientists and engineers At the San Diego Supercomputing Center to analyze the lingering impact of historical policies on urban housing. ...more

How they got game: cultural implications of interactive simulations and video games. At Stanford's Humanities Lab--a founding member of HASTAC--this project explores how video games shape local and global culture. Once the late-night amusement of nerds and hackers, video games and interactive media have emerged as one of the most vibrant elements of today's entertainment and military industries. ...more

hpsCollaboratory. The hpsCollaboratory serves as a central node in a growing network of humanities scholars, designers, teachers, artists, and programmers interested in developing interactive multimedia approaches to collaborative academic research. The group is committed to providing simple but powerful digital media tools to further expand the boundaries of collaboration and innovation. ...more

Institute for the Future Book. The mission of the Institute for the Future of the Book, which is a collaboration between the Annenberg Center and Columbia University, is to play a central role in developing the form and function of books in the digital era. While it may be argued that the form of printed books (pages bound together by a spine) was inevitable, the new screen-based books have no such inevitable physically imposed form. ...more

ISIS. The mission of Duke University's Information Science + Information Studies (ISIS) program is to study and create new information technologies and to analyze their impact on art, culture, science, commerce, society, and the environment. The ISIS program is currently divided into three main foci: the ISIS Certificate Program, the ISIS Research Group, and the ISIS Events Forum. ...more

Mapping Virtual and Real Diasporic Communities. Long before most scholars were using the Internet, Nigerian exiles were using email to communicate, to track one another's relocations, and to maintain a virtual community. Email, websites, list serves, and other "born digital" correspondence is the only historical record we have of these movements, of the ways the internet preserved community across distance, poverty, political oppression, and secrecy. ...more

Multimedia Humanities Communications & Displays in a Smart House. A number of institutions, including Duke University, Sixth College at UC San Diego, UC Berkeley, Georgia Tech, MIT, and Carnegie Mellon, have brought together electrical engineering, computer science in "smart house" residences for students to offer creative and communicative possibilities for their learning environments. ...more

The New Ancient World. One of the most exciting developments in scholarship of the pre-modern world is the creation of an entirely new map of ancient trade, missionary, artistic, military, and commercial routes and a different understanding of the hybridity of the ancient and medieval worlds. This project would create new maps of these worlds, coupled with environmental data of the era, to understand the conditions that prompted migration, ...more

RECENT NEWS

1-10-05: USC launches groundbreaking online academic journal - *Vectors*. The inaugural issue will be showcased with a gala event at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) on Thursday, March 3, at the USC Annenberg Center. Please read the [press release](#) for more details.

9-23-04: The Arts, Culture, and Technology Studios at Duke. In the Smith Tobacco Warehouse -- Groundbreaking

[Download the .DOC file](#) for full details.

9-21-04: HASTAC IV details now available!

[Download the .DOC file](#) for full details.

6-30-04: HASTAC's first press release can be seen on [GridToday.com](#).

[Read the press release](#) on GridToday

...more news

The Sikh 3-D Virtual Museum. "THE FUTURES OF OUR PASTS: Three-Dimensional Representations of Culturally Significant Objects and their Humanistic Implications--the Case of Sikh Cultural Artifacts" (NSF application pending). ...more

USC Digital Connections. USC Digital Connections is an interactive database at the University of Southern California designed to connect researchers, academics, students and others interested in the collision of digital technology with society and culture. Various collective areas of research relating to digital technology and communication have been identified that contribute to the construction of meaning in a digital world. ...more

Vectors. "Vectors: Journal of Culture and Technology in a Dynamic Vernacular" is a new, international electronic journal dedicated to expanding the potentials of academic publication via emergent and transitional media. While not a journal about new media, Vectors brings together visionary thinkers with cutting-edge designers and media artists to propose a thorough rethinking of the dynamic relationship of form to content and mobilizes emerging technologies for the productive convergence of new ideas, forms and audiences in a global context. ...more

Projects Listed on an early "HASTAC Projects" page. Dated 13 Feb 2005, retrieved 19 Sept 2024.

Cathy N. Davidson is the Senior Advisor on Transformation to the Chancellor of the City University of New York (CUNY), Founder of the Futures Initiative, and Distinguished Professor of English, Digital Humanities, and Data Analysis and Visualization at the CUNY Graduate Center. She is also R. F. DeVarney Professor Emerita of Interdisciplinary Studies at Duke University. The author or editor of over 20 books, she co-founded the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory (HASTAC.org or "Haystack") and has served as its director or co-director since its inception. Davidson's many prizewinning books include two in her recent "How We Know" trilogy, *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux* (2017) and, co-authored with Christina Katopodis, *The New College Classroom* (2022), both recipients of the Frederic Ness annual prize from the American Association of Colleges and Universities. She has served on the board of directors of Mozilla, was appointed by President Barack Obama to the National Council on the Humanities, and has twice keynoted the Nobel Prize Committee's Forum on the Future of Learning.

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