

The Baby and the Bathwater. Or why independence does not always mean freedom.

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We are responding to a proposal from the current chair and vice chair of GO::DH, Alex Gil and Roopika Risam. We would like to discuss the pros and cons of their proposals and make some proposals of our own.

In summary, we agree with Risam and Gil that GO::DH needs to do something about the lack of regional representation on our executive and that there is more we can do to promote activity within the community and on our list. We disagree, however, with their suggestion that we should also withdraw from our current status as a Special Interest Group (SIG) within the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO) and that such a proposal would do anything to improve the functioning of our community. Our (loose) association with ADHO has helped us become the success we are by helping to provide a forum for our work. Withdrawing from our current association would only reduce our relevance and value to the broader community. This would make it more difficult, not less, to address the other problems Risam and Gil raise.

Finally Gil and Risam also argue against pursuing a closer relationship with ADHO by seeking status as a Constituent Organisation (CO). We believe that we simply do not know enough about what would be involved in requesting this status to make an intelligent decision on the matter. We can see potential positives and potential negatives to such a relationship and believe that it would be prudent to develop a better understanding of what would be involved before making a decision one way or the other.

The recommendation

So in short, we recommend the following as an alternative to the proposal by Gil and Risam:

1. A serious discussion of the merits of the proposal by Risam and Gil to develop a constituency-based model for electing members to our executive;
2. Encouraging activity on and off the list by members of our community through activities such as guest moderators and other means;
3. Maintaining the status quo as an ADHO Special Interest Group (SIG) while investigating whether or not it is in our interest to become more closely associated with ADHO by seeking membership as a Constituent Organisation.

We would now like to discuss the proposal by Risam and Gil, explaining where we agree and disagree with it and justifying our own counter proposals.

The “Independence” proposal

Risam and Gil’s proposal has basically three parts:

1. A call for reinvigoration of the list and community;
2. A call for a new structure for our executive--moving to a constituency model in which different regions and demographics would have guaranteed representation on the GO::DH executive;
3. A call to withdraw from our current status as a Special Interest Group (SIG) Alliance of Digital Humanities Organisations (ADHO) and not investigate the possibility of becoming a Constituent Organisation (CO) parallel to many other linguistic, national, and other types of organisations.

The rationale for this call within the paper itself rests on three main claims about the state of GO::DH:

1. A perception that GO::DH is less active now than it has been in the past and that there are fewer activities going on than in its opening years;
2. A belief that the membership of both GO::DH and its executive is too Northern--and that people representing the majority of the world (i.e. outside the Global North) are having having a hard time gaining access to GO::DH’s leadership;
3. A belief that “achieving more influence within ADHO” has replaced “projects and lively intellectual community” as the main focus of GO::DH’s leadership.

We would like to discuss these now, beginning with the place where we are in the most agreement and ending with the place where we fundamentally disagree. We would like to stress that while we disagree with some aspects of their proposal, we have the greatest respect for their efforts within in GO::DH and do not consider anything in their proposal nonsensical or something that GO::DH should not do under any circumstances. Where we disagree, it is primarily about the degree to which one course of action is better or more efficient than the other.

Our most important task: Addressing the over representation of researchers from North America and Western Europe in our executive

In our view, Gil and Risam’s paper underplays what is actually the most important problem facing GO::DH as an organisation: the over-representation of members working and living in North America and Europe on our executive and their structural advantage in GO::DH elections.

This has been a problem since our foundation and, in our view, Risam and Gil diagnose its origins correctly: the people who get elected to our executive are those who are best known in the community (i.e. have the broadest networks)--and members who work in English and in the Global North have a structural advantage over people who work less in English and/or do not live or work in the Global North: Northerners live where the things that make you well-known happen and they have access to the funds and networks that allow you to pursue opportunities as they arise.

We also believe that Gil and Risam propose a potentially very effective solution to this problem--rewriting our bylaws so that seats on the executive are reserved for specific constituencies rather than our current system, by which all members are elected "at large." Exactly what the details of this new system should be requires some discussion, however: should it be organised on a purely geographic basis, for example, or should we somehow incorporate other types of constituencies (e.g. linguistic, employment status, or similar); and if it is geographic (as we suspect it should mostly be), how many and what regional divisions should we observe? We believe that we should go to such an arrangement and that the model proposed by Risam and Gil should be developed further and presented to the membership for approval.

Having said that this problem exists, it is worthwhile noting that GO::DH has succeeded in other ways in ensuring diversity among its executive. Since GO::DH was founded, Anglophones have always been a minority of its executive membership. It has also, for the most part, been well balanced in terms of (male/female) gender expression (it has yet to have a executive member whose gender is expressed in non-binary or other terms). It has always had a majority of executive members with lived experience in the Global South--though mostly in the form of members who were born in the South and immigrated to the Global North. And finally, the executive of GO::DH has generally been much younger and more junior than the leadership of other DH organisations. Tenured full professors have always been a minority on the executive and we have often had a plurality of members from alt-ac or other positions outside the professoriate.

But while we can be pleased that we have done a good job of encouraging many forms of diversity in our leadership, it remains the case that we have never succeeded in the one form of diversity most relevant to our mission: leadership by researchers currently active in the Global South. We have always had one or two members of the executive active in such regions (members of the executive have included researchers active in South America, Africa, and India). But our leadership has always had a plurality of members who are active in the Global North.

"Withdrawing" from ADHO will do nothing to address this problem and may end up making it worse. The structural network advantage enjoyed by Northerners during our

elections is not a result of our status as an ADHO SIG, but rather a broader structural issue. People vote for Northerners because they know who they are because of their participation in international events and activities. This will be still true whether we are or are not an ADHO SIG.

But withdrawing from ADHO may make things worse by reducing the international visibility of participation in GO::DH. As Gil and Risam note, participating on the executive requires some effort. Currently those who agree to do this are “rewarded” with the ability to claim on their CVs that they are members of an internationally recognised ADHO SIG and by having an influence on decisions made by the body that organises our major conference and journals--i.e. gain some network bandwidth from their participation in an international SIG. This raises their profile. By “withdrawing” from ADHO, we reduce the attractiveness of participation in the GO::DH executive and (potentially) reduce the visibility of those who put the most effort into it. This will not reduce the structural network advantage of members from the Global North who work predominantly in English, since they have many other avenues to prominence in this sense (e.g. they can join the executives of their Northern COs), but it will reduce the opportunity for people outside this structurally advantaged community to gain access to similar networks.

In our view addressing the problem of the lack of representation from the Global South in the leadership of GO::DH requires both a change in our bylaws similar to that proposed by Risam and Gil, *and* continuing association with ADHO, at least as a SIG. Given that CO status would likely give our executive the ability to appoint or elect representatives to the various boards and committees that run the main conference and journals in our community, it may also be an argument for investigating closer association with ADHO. But we don't know enough about the costs and benefits to say if such a closer association is worth the effort.

Declining activity on and off-list

The second problem Gil and Risam discuss involves what they argue is the declining vigour of the organisation as a whole. They argue that intellectual discussions on the list have become far fewer and far less lively and that we are seeing fewer new projects. In addition to withdrawing from ADHO, they propose a number of steps that could be taken to address this, including having rotating moderators on the list, moving discussion of everything but administrative matters off the executive list and on to the community list, and so on.

We think it is inarguable that there is less intellectually vigorous discussion on the GO::DH mailing list than there was in the beginning and that we are seeing fewer new

projects at the moment. We also think that many of their ideas for possible solutions are likely to lead to at least temporary bursts of activity from the membership and on the list.

At the same time, however, we believe that Risam and Gil overestimate the degree to which the problem they point to is in any way unique to GO::DH. The type of decline they discuss has, in fact, been characteristic of most if not all email-based Communities of Practice since the advent of the mailing list in the late 1980s. It is perfectly predictable and, indeed, is a function of how they are formed and develop: they begin inevitably with a splash of activity as the founders work on definitions and the rules (formal and informal) that govern the collective; they then (equally inevitably) become more quiet after that initial splash, as the rules are established and members go back to their day-to-day business of research and study (this pattern long predates GO::DH: O'Donnell has [recently written about it in relation to the earliest academic mailing lists](#) from the 1980s and 1990s).

Activity off the mailing list associated with such organisations also rises and falls over time. When a community like GO::DH begins, it initially provides a context for activity relative to its mandate that is already in progress. Thus, GO::DH, for example, provided an intellectual context for *Around DH in 80 days*, a project that was begun independently of the SIG's foundation. It also developed its whisper (translation) campaign in part on the model of the accommodations developed by Cubans for the INKE "Birds of a Feather" meeting, held in Havana the year GO::DH was founded--while this project was developed at GO::DH, its impetus came from activity that was happening coincidental to its foundation.

In other words, much of the early activity in a Community like GO::DH is inherited or brought to the organisation by its early members: such communities succeed and grow quickly in the beginning because people are already working on projects related to their mandate and they bring these projects to the community as they join. At a certain point, however, the people who have existing projects related to the mandate of the new organisation have, for the most part, already brought them; at this point, the pace of new projects begins to decline. If the community continues to be relevant, then new projects do come along, albeit at a much slower pace, and the membership continues to increase, but at a slower pace as well. This is what has happened to GO::DH, and it is what has, for the most part, happened to every other listserv-based academic community we can think of: Ansax-I, Medtext-I, Digital Medievalist, Digital Classicist, Digital Americanist, Digital Victorianist, even, to a certain extent, Force11, and Humanist-I (while that list continues to have occasionally vigorous discussions more than twenty years after its foundation, a relatively small number of people are responsible for provoking these discussions compared to the breadth in its early days).

Here again, withdrawing from our current status as an ADHO SIG does nothing to address the issue and may in fact end up making it worse. We have seen no evidence to suggest that people are not posting to GO::DH because of its SIG status. In the course of the last two years, however, almost every major discussion on our list (and most of the projects that have arisen since our founding) have been related to issues in the larger community: our [working paper on diversity](#) (prepared in response to the call for papers from ADHO in response to the “diversity debate” in the runup to DH 2016); the translation tool kit (launched initially at DH 2014); our participation in the second RedHD conference; our sessions on diversity at DH 2015, and so on. Not all of these have involved ADHO-sponsored activity (though many have); almost all of our activities and discussion, however, have come about in response to our Community’s engagement with the larger world of DH. Withdrawal will do nothing to advance this and may hurt our ability to engage with others.

Maintain the status quo and *explore* a closer relationship to ADHO

Thus far, our recommendations have echoed those of Gil and Risam, except insofar as we believe that withdrawal from ADHO will hurt our ability to solve the problems of the diversity of our leadership and the (perhaps) declining vigour of our community. In both cases, indeed, we believe that our association with ADHO has been a reason why we have been as successful as we have been thus far and that this association gives us tools for addressing the issues Risam and Gil identify.

As this suggests, we believe that we therefore should not withdraw from our current association with ADHO. We have been as interesting and effective as we have been in part because of this association, and the association provides us with opportunities for carrying out our mission--encouraging a global understanding of and participation in a diverse DH--that we would lack if we set out on our own without this connection.

Whether we should go farther than this and actually increase the strength of our connection to ADHO by seeking CO-status remains in our mind an open question. On the one hand, we do not believe that we have a clear understanding of what such an association would involve, either positively or negatively. While we are aware of some very general talk, extending back about two years, suggesting that both GO::DH and ADHO might benefit from a closer connection, we do not believe that this discussion has ever proceeded to the point of investigating what such an association would actually involve--what GO::DH could expect to gain from such a relationship and what the costs would be, in terms of time, changes in mission, or simply change in “feel.”

On the one hand, it is possible to see how a closer connection with ADHO might benefit GO::DH: current COs of ADHO are guaranteed a basic annual income including support for a journal or similar publication; they also have voting representatives on the core

committees and boards that oversee ADHO's activities including the DH conference and the journal DSH (the governance of ADHO is changing and these changes will affect the benefits COs will receive in the future, including their representation on such committees and potentially income and journal support).

On the other, it is also possible to see how a closer connection with ADHO might not be in GO::DH's interest. GO::DH already has a very strong influence on ADHO activities (the recent changes in how the conference is organised and awarded are a direct and explicit result of our influence). Becoming a CO might require us to devote more effort that we wish to organisational matters (as a rule, GO::DH is much more flexible and far less bureaucratic than ADHO's current COs). And it might indeed, as Gil and Risam suggest, distract attention and effort away from dealing with the other kinds of intellectual and organisational issues they identify. Volunteers only have so much energy available to spend on an organisation. We might decide we simply don't have enough to devote to a closer relationship with ADHO.

At the moment, however, we do not have enough information to decide whether the benefits of such an association are worth the costs. We do know that ADHO has preemptively moved to address one of our major concerns by developing some kind of a no-membership fee model we could use; but because we haven't pursued further discussions, we don't know exactly what this would entail. Beyond this, however, we know nothing: becoming a CO could create conditions that address all the other issues raised by Risam and Gil; or it could prove entirely irrelevant to them; or perhaps it might turn out to hinder us in solving them. Until we ask, and then discuss this in the membership, we will never know.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that our colleagues who make up ADHO--including many of our own members who serve on committees and boards in ADHO and on the other COs--have a great affection for an interest in GO::DH. The SIG programme was created at our request; ADHO has changed the way it does many things in response to our input and influence; and ADHO has shown itself to be willing to accommodate even very difficult aspects of our organisation such as our lack of membership fees. We see no reason to believe that ADHO will not do its best to accommodate our needs should we wish to go beyond the status quo and seek CO status. However, we also believe that deciding whether we should seek such status requires the kind of careful thought and discussion that is only possible once we know what is on the table. While it is not essential that we investigate joining ADHO as a CO, we believe that it would be in our interest to do so. And if it turns out to be more trouble than it is worth, decide against joining.