

H-France Review: Policies, Procedures, and a Bit of History

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H-France Review's birth and rapid growth paralleled that of the Web 1.0 in the mid 1990s and early 2000s. New technologies and possibilities blossomed around us, yet those of us involved in this grand experiment often did not know where technology would take us next or how to adapt existing practices into these new formats. We experimented, and sometimes those experiments failed, but we learned and tried again. In the essay that follows, I do not intend to rehearse the entire history of *H-France Review*. Rather, after a brief statement of *H-France Review's* origins, I will set out the policies and practice of *H-France Review* as currently constituted, with occasional reference to our history along the way.

In 1991, as the new technology of email spread across college campuses, Raymond Jonas created an email list named Francehs to allow historians to continue the conversations often begun in the corridors of the Archives Nationales or Bibliothèque Nationale. In early 1994, James Farr assumed leadership of Francehs, and in September 1994, Farr joined with Bertram Gordan to affiliate Francehs with the H-Net network of lists, adopting the name H-France. H-France began to publish book reviews in 1997 under the leadership of its first book review editor, Michael Carley, with 78 reviews published between 1997 and 2000.¹ When difference arose with H-Net in mid-2000, H-France suspended the publication of reviews. Michael Carley chose to step down at the end of the year, and in February 2001 H-France re-commenced publishing reviews but now on H-France's own website and in affiliation with the Society for French Historical Studies.²

After efforts to resolve the differences with H-Net collapsed in mid-2001, H-France built an organizational structure which would allow it to function effectively. Throughout the remainder of 2001 and 2002, H-France drafted bylaws and established its status as a not-for-profit organization with the United States Internal Revenue Service. During this time, an editorial structure for the book review program began to form, and in 2003 *H-France Review* was formally launched with recognition from the United States Library of Congress. The reviews published since early 2001 were retroactively fitted within an annual volume structure, and the team of editors took shape. In March 2004, Michael Wolfe assumed the leadership of *H-France Review* as Chief Review Editor, a position he has held with great aplomb ever since.

¹ These reviews, for which H-Net holds copyright, are available through the *H-France Review* web site under the link "reviews published before 2001" <http://www.h-france.net/reviews/olderreviews.html>.

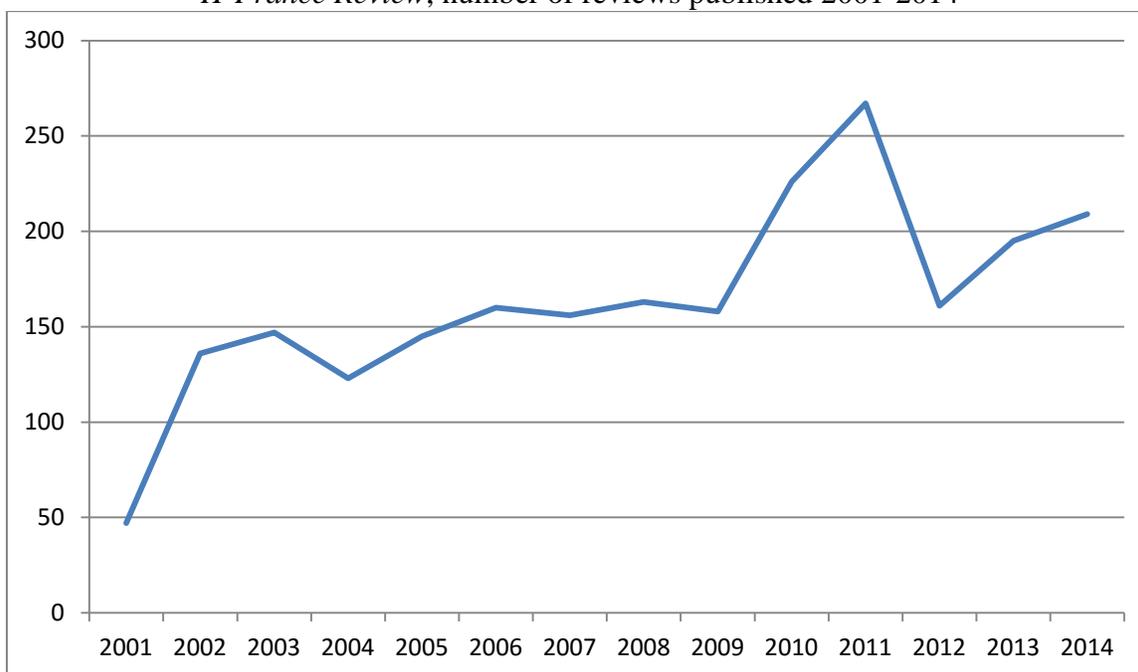
² The main page for H-France is <http://www.h-france.net/>. The *H-France Review* main page is <http://www.h-france.net/reviews/list.html>.

The reviews published in *H-France Review* follow a distinct path that will provide the structure of this essay. As we follow this path, I will set out both our procedures and policies, with occasionally references to how these have changed over time.

1. The Remit

Before books arrive for review, a more fundamental issue appears: what is *H-France Review*'s remit? What are the subject areas in which it seeks to review books and other digital media sources? Having emerged from among historians, *H-France Review* initially focused on historical scholarship. Early in *H-France Review*'s existence, the Editorial Board determined that its remit should include not simply France itself but also the French colonial and imperial world—a rather obvious decision given scholarly trends. In practice, we review works on former colonial lands as long as the issues under study substantially are tied to or legacies of the former colonial relationship. For example, in Southeast Asia, we review books about Indochina, but we do not review books about the American War in Vietnam unless there is a substantial (and historiographically important) consideration of the legacy of French imperialism.

Chart 1
H-France Review, number of reviews published 2001-2014



As the number of reviews published grew in the early 2000s (Chart 1), books on literary criticism and art history began to arrive for review, and some of these book were reviewed. In fields such as theater history and the Enlightenment, as well as much of the history of the Middle Ages, scholars trained in history and in literary studies work side-by-side, and inter-disciplinarity itself is a laudable goal. As a result, around 2005 the Editorial Board decided that *H-France Review* should expand it remit, which now includes history, literature, art history, film studies, philosophy, and music history—largely, the humanities, with the primary exception of

linguistics. Religious studies and theatre also are included to the degree that the focus is historical (roughly defined as pre-2000). Last year, the Editorial Board discussed what to do with contemporary philosophy as we had begun to receive many books on fairly technical issues within contemporary philosophy (The history of philosophy has always been included within *H-France Review*'s remit). As a result, the Editorial Board decided to make decisions on individual bases so that theoretically influential contemporary works, especially those of relevance to literary criticism and art history, would receive attention.

As the remit of *H-France Review* expanded, editors with training in various fields were brought into the editorial team (and also on to the Editorial Board) in order to draw upon the different disciplinary traditions in editing reviews.

2. Obtaining Books for Review

As a new journal in 2001, *H-France Review* consistently strove to obtain books for review, contacting presses and requesting review copies of books. Some presses have effective systems in place to send all books on French topics to H-France; however, other presses are poorly organized for review copies. As a result, we have maintained a team of Book Solicitation Editors³ who review press catalogs and web sites and request review copies. Without question, however, authors informing their presses that H-France should receive a review copy is easily the most important source of new books for review.⁴

H-France Review established itself rather quickly among Anglophone presses; however, it has taken considerably more time to build relationships with French presses, which typically allot only a few copies for review. Many of the French-language books published in our first decade were sent by the books' authors themselves. Nevertheless, within the last few years we have begun to regularly receive review copies from French presses and have established systems with some presses which allow us to efficiently obtain review copies.

3. Weeding the Stack

As books arrive, a determination is made whether or not a specific book will be reviewed. Generally, any scholarly work that falls within *H-France Review*'s remit is reviewed. Quickly weeded out are cookbooks, children's literature, travel guides, contemporary novels, and similar publications. In addition, *H-France Review* does not review second editions of scholarly works. The most difficult decisions typically relate to collections of essays, which often struggle to find opportunities for review. With reviews longer than those typically found in print journals, *H-France Review* offers a more effective venue for the review of collections of essays and has been sympathetic to such collections. Reviews of collections of essays always include the list of all of the essays at the bottom of the review, which allows readers a better appreciation of the contents of the volume. Our general rule-of-thumb is that at least one-quarter of the collection's essays must be relevant to France.

³ The names of all of the current editors in the positions identified in this essay are available on the H-France Editors Page: <http://www.h-france.net/editors.html>.

⁴ The address to which review copies of books should be sent is located on the *H-France Review* web page: <http://www.h-france.net/reviews/list.html>.

With works written from a transnational perspective—particularly common for works on colonial or intellectual topics—we tend to err on the side of inclusion as long as it is evident that France or the French imperial world plays a noted role in the issues under consideration. Hopefully, such a standard will remain useful as global histories become more common.

4. The Book Review Advisory Panel

Once a book is selected for review, the Book Review Advisory Panel (BRAP) is consulted. BRAP is composed of about fifty established scholars representing different disciplines, eras, and topics of study. BRAP is sent a list of recently received books and the urls for the press web pages for the books. These scholars then recommend potential reviewers for the books based upon their knowledge of the field. BRAP was established in 2002 as the number of reviews began to expand, and the membership of BRAP is renewed every few years so that new recommendations arrive, helping to maintain a large pool of potential reviewers. As the members of BRAP send their recommendations, these are collected together, and for each book, these names, along with bibliographic information on the book, the press url, and a copy of the Acknowledgments Page, are sent to one of the Book Placement Editors.

5. Selecting Reviewers

The Book Placement Editors are the individuals who invite individuals to review specific books. These nineteen editors are divided by time period and discipline, representing history, literature, art history, music history, and film studies. A few formal policies guide the Book Placement Editors. First, in 2001 the Editorial Board had a vigorous discussion regarding the necessary qualifications to review a book. Opinions ranged from, at one pole, the requirement that a reviewer have a published monograph in the field of the book to be reviewed to, at the other pole, allowing graduate students to review books. In the end, the Editorial Board compromised between these two poles so that all reviewers must have completed the Ph.D. before being asked to write a review and have research experience in the book's general topic or era. Certainly, we strive to have highly qualified reviewers well versed in the book's topic. Second, around this same time, in order to ensure the integrity of the review process, the Editorial Board established the policy that reviewers may not volunteer to review specific books. Instead, a Book Placement Editor "commissions" a review by inviting an individual to review a book. And third, a policy was established that individuals thanked in the Acknowledgments Page (or endorsing the book on the back cover) would not be permitted to review the book. Beyond these policies, all Book Placement Editors are advised to give special consideration to an author's first book, often a book tied to tenure or professional advancement. These books should be reviewed by experienced hands established in the field. In the early years of *H-France Review*, while still establishing its legitimacy as a scholarly organization, a particular effort was made to ask well-established scholars to write reviews. Today, Book Placement Editors are advised to seek a mix of senior, mid-level, and new scholars as reviewers.

The Book Placement Editors hold sole discretion to determine which individual to invite to review a book; however, we do have a Black List of individuals who are not to be asked to review books, typically because of the failure previously to finish reviews. Also, Book Placement Editors are not permitted to place for review their own books or books in which they have contributed an essay.

When offering an invitation to review a book, the Book Placement Editor generally gives the potential reviewer two weeks to respond, after which the editor sends out a request to a new potential reviewer. There is neither rhythm nor reason to explain how quickly a book will be placed. Books that one would expect to quickly find a reviewer may take months to place while others on obscure topic are placed quickly. My personal record was a book that required sending out fifteen requests before an individual finally agreed to take on the review.

One important component of placing books with reviewers is included in our standard review invitation letter: “We would ask you to recuse yourself if there are any professional or personal conflicts-of-interest in your reviewing this book.” On many occasions individuals have raised to us the question of potential conflicts—close friendships, previously published reviews by the book’s author critical of the potential reviewer’s research, shared doctoral advisors, etc. Some conflicts are clear, such as those related to job interviews or grant applications currently submitted, and the individual does not review the book. The more difficult situations arise in small sub-fields in which nearly everyone knowledgeable on the topic is well acquainted. In these situations, we ask the potential reviewer, “In spite of your relationship with the reviewer, do you believe that you can honestly and fairly evaluate the book?” Ultimately, the decision rests with the potential reviewer. A reviewer’s consent to prepare a “commissioned” review is formalized when the reviewer signs the H-France Publication Agreement.

6. Review Management System

Once an individual has agreed to take on a review, the relevant information is entered into our Review Management System, and the book, along with a copy of the Book Review Guidelines, is mailed to the reviewer.⁵ This automated web-based system was built for H-France by Ali Benhashem in 2010 to allow for the more effective management of the editorial process. The Review Management System sends out automated notices to reviewers who have missed their deadlines and allows for the online signature of the Publication Agreement. The Review Management System also allows the editors to pass reviews along the stages toward publication and automatically generates galley proofs for approval by the reviewer. The system has significantly eased the organizational burden of *H-France Review* and is currently being revised to allow for some additional features.

7. Receiving Reviews

The most frustrating part of the review process is obtaining finished reviews from reviewers. The large majority of reviewers turn in their reviews within one month of the original due date. Other reviews linger...and linger. For the first three months after the due date, the Review Management System sends out a reminder notice to the reviewer every few weeks. After three months, I write the reviewer directly asking for some idea of when the review is likely to be completed. Some reviewers respond with requests for additional time, which is always granted. There are many reasons a review is late, from illness to new work responsibilities. As long as the reviewer remains communicative with us, we can patiently await a review. The most heart-wrenching cases are when an individual wishes to complete a review in the midst of a personal tragedy. A review hardly seems important when faced with the serious illness of a family

⁵ The cost of mailing books is easily H-France’s largest routine expense, now costing over \$2,500 per year. The H-France Review Guidelines are available online: <http://www.h-france.net/book-review-guidelines.html>.

member; however, for some individuals the review becomes a needed connection to life before the tragedy appeared. When faced with a plea to allow the individual to continue the review even when the individual cannot indicate when the review might be completed, I think our humanity requires that we allow the individual all the time needed.

Much more frustrating are reviewers who simply fail to respond to emails requesting an update on the review. When a review become one year overdue, and especially if the individual has stopped responding to emails, we request either the completion of the review or the return of the book. We certainly are willing to work with individuals as unexpected events delay a review. We simply ask that reviewers communicate with us about the need for additional time. Uncommunicative reviewers eventually have their reviews cancelled and their names placed on the Black List. Fortunately, conversations with officials at various presses have suggested that H-France has a very high publication rate for books placed.

Occasionally, a reviewer will contact us because he or she is considering returning a book rather than prepare a review critical of the book. We always encourage the individual to prepare the review if possible, reminding the individual that negative reviews serve an important purpose within the profession, setting out standards and expectations as well as identifying interpretive, methodological, and theoretical differences. Our goal is not to provoke controversy (which, quite bluntly, requires far more of the editors' time than the typical review); however, a review program in which every book is reviewed as above average is not serving the profession. We remind reviewers that the editors have substantial experience addressing negative reviews, and while we will not alter the content of any criticisms, we will make sure that criticisms are made professionally (more on this in a bit). Most reviewers chose to complete the review, but a few are uncomfortable preparing a critical review and return the book for re-assignment.

8. Editing

Once a review is received from a reviewer and loaded into the Review Management System, the editorial process begins. The In-Take Editor oversees the formatting of the review and performs an initial edit. Reviews written in English may use either the British or American systems for spelling and punctuation, as long as the review is consistent throughout.⁶ The In-Take Editor also considers the issue of length. H-France recommends reviews between 1500 and 2500 words (not counting the bibliographic information, endnotes, or lists of essays in a volume). When reviews arrive that are substantially longer than 2500 words, often we will encourage the reviewer to find some places for concision; however, if the additional length is well used to bring out interesting points or raise significant interpretive issues, we will publish reviews considerably longer than the norm. Similarly, a review that is considerably shorter than the norm might lead the editors to encourage a bit more elaboration on the book's themes.

The H-France Review Guidelines sets out the expected content of a review:

The most effective review will place the work within a broader context, explaining what important issues are worth the attention of scholars. Reviews should include a summary of the scope, purpose, and content of the work and its

⁶ In contrast, with *H-France Forum* and *H-France Salon*, a single issue of either publication will use the same system, either British or American, for all of the pieces published within that issue.

significance in the literature of the subject. Also, reviews should evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the work, paying attention to the use of sources, methodology, and argumentation in light of the work's stated purpose. For works designed for classroom use, the review should consider its success and/or limitations as a pedagogical tool and indicate the level of student for which the work was designed and is appropriate.

The In-Take Editor makes an initial assessment as to whether the review fulfills these goals and may return a review to a reviewer if the editor believes that revisions are needed to effectively identify the book's arguments within the review. In addition, if a review alleges that a book has "misappropriated scholarship," a separate set of procedures is followed. These procedures, which were established after conversations with the American Historical Association's Professional Division and the American Association of University Professors and extensive discussions by the Society for French Historical Studies Executive Committee and the H-France Editorial Board, seek to ensure that allegations of scholarly misconduct are only made with carefully considered evidence.⁷

Once the In-Take editor is finished with the review, he passes the review to the Production Editor, who more directly considers the review's content and clarity, as well as continuing to identify any technical errors in grammar or punctuation. If deemed necessary, the Production Editor may return the review to the reviewer asking for clarifications or the development of certain ideas. In addition, reviews written in French are reviewed by a native Francophone editor. Once the review has been approved by the Production Editor, galley proofs of the review are automatically generated and sent to the reviewer for his or her approval. Any final changes, which must be minor at this point, are inserted into the text, and the text is then passed to the publication stage.

When editing a review, the In-Take Editors and the Production Editors seek to allow individuals to have their own voices within the confines of the *H-France Review* Guidelines. For most reviews, the Guidelines merely shape technical and stylistic issues of punctuation or citation. The Guidelines, however, also specify the professional expectations for reviews:

Whether the evaluation of a work is favorable or unfavorable, reviewers should express criticism in courteous, temperate, and constructive terms. Reviewers are responsible for presenting a fair and balanced review and for treating authors with respect. H-France editors will be responsible for maintaining a constructive review process and may ask reviewers to reword or rewrite sections of their reviews. Reviewers will be given the opportunity to agree to all proposed substantive changes. H-France editors will have final determination on stylistic issues. H-France editors reserve the right not to post reviews and responses that violate H-France guidelines.

Of course, one person's "courteous, temperate, and constructive" is another person's "mean-spirited, outlandish, and injurious." Identifying an acceptable tone—one which fosters dialogue without creating a prison of civility; one which allows the reviewer his or her unique voice

⁷ The complete procedures are outlined at <http://www.h-france.net/policies.html#misconduct>.

without devolving into ill-conceived snark—presents one of the most challenging editorial tasks. Two issues in particular pose persistence difficulties. First, the witty or satirical statement—when not accompanied by the wink of an eye—easily can be read as insulting or disrespectful when not used with great skill. Second, the reviewer who makes assertions about the author’s motives—personal, professional, or intellectual—steps on to unstable ground. It is generally best to identify differences of view or to clearly explain why an author’s position is unconvincing rather than to guess at the author’s motives for holding that position.

H-France has generally allowed individuals to state strongly their positions. We believe that an argument can be stated both strongly and professionally. In addition, *H-France Review* offers an opportunity for the book’s author to respond.

9. Authors’ Responses and Response Essays

Any book author, or indeed any H-France member, may respond to a review published in *H-France Review* by submitting his or her own message to the H-France discussion list. This possibility of response should, we hope, leads reviewers to act responsibly in their roles as critics. Responses to reviews on the list, whether by the book’s author or by other H-France members, are collected together, and a link to them is added to the *H-France Review* index page immediately following the review in question. Because these messages to the list hold a different copyright status than “commissioned” reviews or response essays, they are not adjoined to the reviews themselves or enumerated within the *H-France Review* publication system.

H-France also occasionally invites a book’s author to prepare a commissioned response essay to the review of his or her book. These responses essays hold the same copyright status as reviews and, thus, are enumerated as *H-France Review* publications. The decision to invite an author’s response essay is made by the Production Editor assigned the review, the In-Take Editor (currently the Chief Review Editor Michael Wolfe), and the H-France Editor-in-Chief. The decision to invite a response essay is not simply based on a book receiving a negative review. Some largely negative reviews are stated in terms that point away from fruitful continued discussion. Rather, the editors determine if the issues raised in the review, whether largely positive or negative, will open interesting questions which might be illuminated by further dialogue. If so, then the book’s author is invited to prepare a response essay.

Once a decision is made to invite a commissioned response essay, a set of procedures is followed to both protect the integrity of the original review and allow a fair opportunity for response. Response essays are expected to abide by the same professional standards as reviews. Once the response essay is edited and ready for publication, the review and response essay are paired together on the web site and then published simultaneously to the H-France list. Afterwards, the book’s author, the reviewer, or any H-France member may discuss the review and response on the H-France discussion list.

10. Publication

When the Production Editor finishes editing the review (and any commissioned response essay), the review is passed to the Publication Editor, who prepares the review for publication to the *H-France Review* web site. The publication to the web site marks the official, permanent publication of the review. The Publication Editor reads the review to catch any remaining errors

in the text and assigns a publication number and order to the review. Finally, the Publication Editor sends a copy of the published review to the Chief List Editor, who prepares the review for disbursement to the H-France discussion list. The Chief List Editor attempts to spread out the disbursement of the reviews to avoid more than two reviews per day reaching people's email boxes. As a result, a review might appear on the web site a month or so before it is sent out on the H-France list.

As I hope that this essay indicates, the *H-France Review* editors have sought to create reviewing practices and policies cognizant of professional standards and expectations yet which also avail themselves of the innovations that new digital technologies provide. How we as scholars of French history and culture adapt to these technologies is a story only beginning to be written. And as the Web 3.0 now emerges, we can count on yet more changes in the future.

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