

The Evolution of Iter: Gateway to the Middle Ages and Renaissance

www.IterGateway.org

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The world of overlapping multi-year plans is so familiar to us nowadays that we tend to avoid using the model except when we are compelled by senior administrators. Yet, I think that this approach is very helpful in describing the nonlinear, organic evolution of Iter.

What, then, is Iter? Iter is a not-for-profit partnership devoted to the advancement of learning in the study of European culture from 400 to 1700 through the development and support of electronic resources. For the purposes of this report, I will divide Iter's life into four stages: its birth, infancy, childhood, and future, or, Iter as electronic card catalogue, rudimentary gateway, niche portal, and knowledge base.

Stage 1: Birth—Iter as Electronic Card Catalogue (1994-97)

In the fall of 1994, John Monfasani, the incoming Executive Director of the Renaissance Society of America, came to Toronto to deliver a lecture at the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies. At this time he asked me to create a bibliography of articles to be distributed on CD-ROM which would replace the *Bibliographie internationale de l'Humanisme et de la Renaissance*, a print bibliography which was

consistently out of date. The possibilities excited me as we discussed them during the following year (1994-95), especially once we dropped the idea of CD-ROM in favour of online delivery. The RSA and CRRS worked up a test model in 1995-96 which limited itself to journal articles. Their partnership was joined in 1996 by the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. But we quickly realized that we needed experts in information studies and technology, and so we invited the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information Studies and the Information Technology Services of the U of T Library to join us, thereby creating a marriage of expertise in Medieval and Renaissance studies with that in information studies and in new technologies. The project was incorporated as Iter, Inc., the name having been adopted in the spring of 1996, largely as a tribute to the *Iter Italicum*, a massive finding aid for manuscripts.

Stage 2: Infancy—Iter as Rudimentary Gateway (1996-2003)

The earliest vision of Iter as a replacement for a print bibliography was short-lived. At least as far back as 1996, we realized that the bibliography as we had conceived it was not enough: what we really wanted was one-stop shopping, so that individuals could find out

about anything relevant to their scholarly interests. Gradually this was amplified to mean that the metadata in our databases would as far as possible point to the object described: the simplest version of this would be to embed appropriate persistent links in our records.

To fulfil this more comprehensive view of our mandate, we began to develop new resources. In particular, we established several resources to complement our bibliography of scholarship, including databases about research projects, institutions, and the scholars themselves, plus specialized research finding aids. In order to point to the objects described, we began working with other publishers' databases and full-text projects (e.g., JSTOR, EEBO) to enable access via links embedded in our records. Iter has also engaged in distributing full-text publications such as *Renaissance Quarterly*. Nonetheless, although we assumed the descriptive title, *Iter: Gateway to the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, in May 1999, there is much that we have yet to do to realize this particular vision of Iter.

Still, what we have now is very useful. Our central bibliography is the largest, fastest growing, and most accessible bibliography for the period. This bibliography now includes more than 600,000 records for articles, essays, books, and reviews: records for dissertations and online resources will be added soon, followed by other media. It is updated daily, with more than 60,000 new records added annually. The current interface offers searching by keyword, title, author and, for selected records, by Library of Congress subject headings, Dewey Decimal Classification, and expert keywords. The interface supports Boolean and positional operators, and allows

limiting by language, publication type, and publication year. Results lists can be sorted by author, subject, title, relevance, or publication year. Records can be marked and conveniently e-mailed or downloaded.

Stage 3: Childhood—Iter as Niche Portal (1999-the present)

There was a further shift in Iter which probably also dates back to 1999. To a certain extent, it was prompted by our realization that we needed to integrate our set of databases, so that our patrons could do global searches of our resources and beyond. But the shift really came about as we attempted to support the institutional needs of the academic societies we serve. These needs included the integration of our *International Directory of Scholars* with various society functions including, for example, online membership and registration, and systems for managing grants and conferences: Iter makes these resources to other organizations as well.

And then, most recently, Iter has been asked to handle some very ephemeral kinds of scholarly communication (e.g., calls for papers, awards, grants, research opportunities). To do this we have created a very powerful service which includes online systems for submitting and categorizing announcements by type and subject (e.g., discipline, geographic area, and time period), commenting on announcements, browsing by type or searching by keyword combined with limits on discipline, and for displaying announcements in various views along with related announcements found automatically by the program. We have also introduced support for RSS feeds, so that the announcements, or

a subset of them, can be integrated dynamically into other Web sites.

It seems to me that, with the realization of these various requirements in 2004, Iter will resemble what some would call a portal site for a niche community. Once all of the pieces are in place, members will have a comprehensive finding tool which will point them as far as possible to the gamut of scholarly objects that are part of life in a community of scholars. They will be able to interact with the site on various levels and they will be able to take advantage of an alerting service which will inform them of new materials which fit their profile.

Stage 4: Future—Iter as Knowledge Base

I must confess that I am not entirely sure what it means to be a knowledge base. Though the term is used loosely, it tends to signify a

centralized body of information with management systems that optimize information collection, organization, retrieval, and dissemination. Iter seems to fit the spirit of the definition right now. Yet, I suspect that what we have is not enough. At the least, I think that Iter will need some form of encyclopaedic function to pull together coherent answers to questions. This could be a matter of linking our resources to existing dictionaries and encyclopaedias, a service which is actually being considered by one of the large aggregators. But I also have a vague sense that there is a more distant horizon, particularly now that we are beginning to assess the possibilities of encoded texts, data exchange, and interoperability. This work leads me to wonder if Iter might evolve into an organic, more substantial connection between metadata and data wherein Iter's resources actually enable the user not only to discover information but to work with it.