

# Creating a Gateway to the Renaissance: The Iter Project

<http://iter.library.utoronto.ca>

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*Iter* began as a response to the need of scholars for a timely, comprehensive, and accessible database of articles and other scholarly writings on the Renaissance. At the time we were motivated to undertake this project, the need for better research tools was quite serious. For example, the main printed bibliography for the period was five years behind the publication date of the books and journals it reported: in other words, the volume for 1991 publications appeared in 1996. Also, it had very limited searching capabilities, largely because of weak subject indexing and, obviously, because of the practical limitations of printed bibliographies. Its coverage of the field was inconsistent. And finally, given the quality of the product, it was expensive.

In the process of defining the project, we moved beyond the initial concern for better access to printed media to include other forms of communication. Thus, *Iter* is a not-for-profit partnership formed to provide the scholarly community with an on-line gateway to all resources for the study of the Renaissance (taken to be 1300 to 1700) and, when the partners decide, of the Middle Ages (that is, 400 to 1500) as well. The name itself suggests a way or a journey, appropriately characterizing the project and its role as a gateway for research.

## A Brief History and Overview

After several months of discussion, *Iter* was conceived in September 1995 as a partnership between the Renaissance Society of America (one of the largest academic societies for study of the period; its headquarters are in New York) and the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies (a research centre at the University of Toronto). For the first six months, we set ourselves fairly basic tasks. Our primary concern was to investigate the practical challenges of such a project by creating a sample database. This was limited to standard bibliographical information for articles printed in 25 to 30 journals going back to 1945 or back to their inception if they began after 1945. We were also to investigate procedures for downloading public access bibliographical databases and to work on subject classifications. In this period, technical support was provided by the Centre for Instructional Technology Development at the University of Toronto at Scarborough.

Two developments during the start-up period dramatically altered *Iter*. In February 1996, the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (Tempe) joined the project as an equal partner. In making this commitment, the Arizona Center had to match the CRRS contribution of sixteen hundred hours per year of student time and

to cover their own indirect expenses. Also, both research centres assumed responsibility for providing equipment and space for the project, a commitment which has been met in large part by the generous support of the libraries of both the University of Toronto and Arizona State University. The second development was also of great importance for, in March, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation gave the project a tremendous boost by awarding it a grant of \$125,000 U.S. to be used at our discretion.

The rapid expansion of the project continued during the ensuing months. At this point it was clearly evident that Iter needed additional professional expertise and more sophisticated equipment. Hence, Iter invited and was soon joined by two new partners. The Faculty of Information Studies (FIS) in the University of Toronto accepted in September 1996, and the Library of the University of Toronto in October shortly before the test site at [www.library.utoronto.ca/iter](http://www.library.utoronto.ca/iter) was made available to the public. The support of these new partners allowed us to significantly upgrade our computer system and gave us essential expertise in the area of information studies.

The impact of these developments is crudely evident in the accelerated growth of the journals database. Beginning with approximately 10,000 records from the pilot project, within 12 months the database had grown to include more than 60,000 articles from about 200 journals. What this comparison does not show, however, is the substantial amount of time required to develop the procedures and quality control for the database of articles; to bring the records created during the start-up period to the desired standard; and to start collecting bibliography for notes, book reviews, and review articles, so that Iter will gradually provide full coverage (as appropriate to the mandate of the project) of the entire runs of allowed us to make substantial progress in

developing procedures for downloading MARC records for monographs; in resolving issues of pricing, marketing, and our legal structure; and in pursuing opportunities for cooperation with internationally recognized societies and institutions.

Finally, we were able to make an intensive study of subject classifications, a matter of critical importance to the future of Iter. A pilot project was started in June 1996 involving faculty, staff, and students of the CRRS and FIS. The final report of the pilot project was completed and then implemented in the summer of 1997. In brief, subject analysis systems for Iter materials are based on Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC). Our goal is to provide users with the ability to search the database for precise topic, time period, and geographic location.

#### Current status

Sketching the work flow for the project may help to demonstrate how the various components of the project currently fit together. Policy is set by the partners, and realized by the Director, with day to day management left in the hands of the project manager. Collection of data begins at the two research centres (ACMRS and CRRS) where students write initial descriptive analyses of the assigned materials. The records are transferred to FIS where they are first converted into MARC records and then edited in accord with international library standards for bibliographic records; this includes revising the subject analysis. FIS students also do authority checking. Once the work at FIS is completed, the records are mounted on the system maintained by the University of Toronto Library. Thus, we have achieved a marriage of sorts between technical, library, and subject expertise.

At present, the journals database has records for over 100,000 articles and 30,000 book reviews taken from almost 300 journals (many of which focus on music). The collection of records for the database of books has started, but there is still much work to be done in culling duplicates, so that statistics are reliable. The system for describing subject matter is in place and is being applied first to articles dating from 1996.

The new web site for the project should be ready in December. If you would like to have a preview, try [iter.library.utoronto.ca](http://iter.library.utoronto.ca). The site contains much more detailed information about standards and procedures. At present, the interface to the database is OCLC's WebZ. We are working on a more sophisticated interface using DRAWeb2. It will have, for example, hierarchical searches through tables taken from DDC.

#### Future Plans

Beyond the expectation that the databases will continue to grow rapidly, and that we

will be able to increase subject access substantially to articles, there are additional goals which have a high priority. Our aim is to allow simultaneous searches of the different databases under Iter's control, that is, not just of the existing databases for journals and books, but also of databases for Renaissance associations and institutions, for scholars and research projects, and for online resources: work on these databases has already started. We also plan to incorporate active links in our records to the objects which they describe so that users will be able to move from fields in Iter to external resources: given the matter of copyright controls, we may not always be able to provide a seamless link to the precise materials required by the user. Moreover, as our systems develop, we expect to enable multilingual access and to allow users to make contributions to the databases. Finally, Iter is actively involved in building partnerships with other parties, particularly in Europe. With these partnerships, we expect to improve our ability to build truly comprehensive databases and to thereby to fulfil our mandate as the gateway to Renaissance studies.

