

Analysis of the FICINO List in its Proposed Migration to a Web-based Environment

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Context

The FICINO mailing list was launched September 28th 1990 on a University of Toronto server as an international electronic seminar and bulletin board for the circulation and exchange of information about the Renaissance and Reformation. Founded by William Bowen, Germaine Warkentin, and Willard McCarty, and sponsored by the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies at the University of Toronto, FICINO today serves 885 users in 30 different countries. Operating under the assumption that knowledge is realized in dialogue, FICINO has employed email for twenty-five years to foster interdisciplinary discovery and knowledge creation through exploratory discussion.

The longevity of the list can be attributed to a number of factors. The list's underlying platform, Listserv, is a robust, traditional electronic communication technology. While accessing its advance user features requires arcane commands to be issued by e-mail, most internet users are familiar with the Listserv's basic functionality. As an interface for electronic discussion, e-mail remains a convenient and expedient interface. As it developed in the early years, FICINO chose not to be moderated, promoting subject openness and inclusivity. Since FICINO's founding, the list has served a dual role as a space to make announcements and as the location for a virtual seminar. Initially, FICINO was also used as a file repository system. The list's subscription approval process continues to involve the collection of user's biographical information, helping to ensure FICINO is relevant to a membership base that can imagine itself as a research community with intersecting interests and goals.

Migration Rationale

We are proposing to replicate and enhance FICINO's key affordances within the new Iiter Community environment. Web-based discussion platforms offer advantages over Listserv, including unified discussion threading, greater discoverability, community building affordances, social networking features, and multimedia support. Bringing FICINO to the web will also allow its archive to be searched in sophisticated ways and its index combinable with those of other Iiter resources. During the past two years, H-Net discussion groups that migrated from Listserv to a customized Drupal-based system have typically experienced a temporary reduction in usage only to rebound with increases in activity and membership. Over the past few years, the message activity of FICINO has lessened to about half of its lifespan average of approximately 1000 messages per year. In addition to other advantages of web-based discussion environments, moving FICINO from e-mail to the web might increase the circulation and activity of the list in the years ahead. Integrating FICINO into Iiter Community will allow the list to take advantage of IC environment technologies for wider focused distribution of FICINO content to Renaissance scholars.

Approaches

Three methods of integrating FICINO into the Iter Community environment have been considered: through the implementation of a cutting-edge dedicated discussion platform called Discourse; by distributing and managing the list from a BuddyPress group within the Iter Community Commons platform; and by creating a resource dedicated to FICINO that would combine e-list affordances, a web archive of discussions, and the sharing of select content such as events within Iter Community Commons.

1) Discourse Discussion Platform

The Discourse platform is currently the most sophisticated open source web-based discussion environment available. Users are able to send and receive forum posts entirely through email or via an elegant dynamic web interface. Certain factors discourage the use of Discourse for the FICINO list, however. While Discourse is technically highly extensible using a custom WordPress like plugin system, the platform's youth (first non-beta release 2014) means it has a relatively small development community. As it stands, there is no available method by which the existing FICINO archive could be imported into the Discourse database. The platform would also prevent integrating FICINO search results with those of other Iter resources. Discourse does have excellent internal search, but there is no current avenue by which to integrate a dedicated search engine such as Solr. Discourse has methods for exposing discussions forums in their entirety, but the platform not possess the flexibility of a content management system to allow selective and targeted data sharing.

2) BuddyPress Group

Another potential method of integrating FICINO into Iter Community would be to use the Iter Community Commons platform to manage, present, and distribute the list via the BuddyPress system integrated into Commons-in-a-Box. In this scenario, FICINO would be designated its own group within Iter Community Commons where forum topics would be created. Users would also be able to share media and post events within the private group commons space afforded by BuddyPress. There would be several advantages to this implementation. It would be easy for other Iter Community members browsing the Commons site to discover the FICINO list and request membership. While the BuddyPress discussion web interface is not as refined as Discourse, it is straightforward to use. As in potential Discourse and Drupal configurations, users of a BuddyPress forum are able to respond to and initiate topics via email.

There are several potential concerns in migrating the FICINO list directly into the Iter Community Commons system. As a discussion-based community, FICINO has a twenty-five year history related to, but independent from, Iter. Post-installation, all FICINO users would be required to obtain an account in Iter Community Commons in order to remain on the list. The implications of subsuming FICINO's large membership as a group within a developing Commons environment is uncertain. The group, in its size and function, would

be an anomaly within the Commons environment at least initially. It is possible its presence would set a precedent to be followed by others. It is not yet clear how the group functionality of the new Iter Community Commons will be organically used, but the most active forums on the Drupal Commons iteration were focused working groups, not open discussion groups. FICINO would also be tying its technical future to the iterative development of Iter Community Commons while becoming its largest constituency. Iter Community has its own existing membership base of over a hundred users attained within the relatively short lifespan of the Drupal Commons iteration, users who have helped shape the development of the current iteration of IC Commons. There is no documented method or available approach for migrating a Listserv archive into WordPress; the platform does not have the same data integration capabilities as Drupal. So in this approach the extant archive, representing the cultural history of the group, would be detached from the Iter Community Commons environment that would facilitate the ongoing FICINO list.

3) Drupal Site

A third approach, and the one proposed, is to develop a resource using Drupal dedicated to FICINO that is integrated within the larger Iter Community environment. This resource would provide a robust web-based discussion platform, allowing users as well to receive and respond to messages, and generate new topics, through email. The FICINO site would contain the complete twenty-five year FICINO archive, allowing users to search, browse, and analyze the cultural history of the community. Users would also be able to access a directory of FICINO members including their biographical information. FICINO directory listings could be replicated within the IC Commons site, although somewhat different content fields would be displayed in each.

Exportation of event postings is one way FICINO could be connected to IC Commons. Additionally, the FICINO site could provide an RSS feed of topics, with reading of message content itself from the feed would require approved membership. Ideally, FICINO account creation would take place via IC single sign on, with the existing user base imported into a master LDAP directory. This way, all FICINO members would become IC Commons members, and all IC Commons members could become—in visiting the FICINO site through an RSS link and automatically authenticating using their IC SSO credentials—basic-level FICINO members. An approval process could be put in place, corresponding to the existing functionality of the Listserv group, to allow IC Commons members to request permission to post to FICINO. By default, all current FICINO users would have email notifications set during the importation, while new users, by default, would need to set this feature within their FICINO site preferences.

Implementation Plan

Implementation of the recommended third approach would involve developing Compute Canada server infrastructure for the project, the creation of the Drupal site, importation of the FICINO archive and membership base, and integration within the Iter Community environment. A detailed breakdown of tasks is provided below.

- Creation of Iter Community commons group for FICINO project collaboration and consultation [2 hours]
- Setup of Compute Cloud Computing account and server network (PI: Bill Bowen) for FICINO production site [2 hours]
- Setup and configure Debian Linux server for FICINO project and potentially other future mailing list Iter Community projects [12 hours]
 - Apache, MySQL, PHP, UFW, Virtual hosts, etc.
- Gmail account setup (ficino@itercommunity.org), SMTP configuration, Mandrill account creation, testing [2 hours]
- Update FICINO archive to include messages since 2013 request [4 hours]
- Migrate FICINO Listserv archive to Mailman framework to allow for importation into Drupal via feed importer, development and testing of feed importer [12 hours]
- Drupal implementation (including Organic Groups, OG Mailinglist, and other relevant modules) on IC development server iter-id.uts.utoronto.ca [16 hours]
- Responsive web design and Drupal theming [10 hours]
- Apache Solr implementation on Compute Canada server and configuration for searching with sorting/filtering facets. [8 hours]
- Development of Views for archive browsing [4 hours]
- Gather and organize bios for all FICINO members; import FICINO subscriber list into Drupal, generating profiles; create user directory [16 hours]
- Iter Community integration (RSS feeds, event data exposure, Iter Community logo) [6 hours]
- Develop about page, detailing purpose of Ficino list and its history [4 hours]
- Develop project documentation in IC Confluence knowledgebase [2 hours]
- Testing with a select group of FICINO members; [3 hours]
- Migration of site from development to production; testing [4 hours]
- Coordinate mail transition from ficino@listserv.utoronto.ca to ficino@itercommunity.org [1 hour]
- Develop sustainability and post-implementation plan [4 hours]

Total: 112 hours (three weeks)