

Web Forums and the Online Journal

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I. Introduction

THE Internet provides a pathway for publishers of professional scientific journals to offer electronic access to scientific papers. The online medium also provides valuable features that are not possible for the print journal like full-text search and the inclusion of hyperlinks, images, presentation slides, and other multimedia files. As more journals use the Web for publication, there is potential for using Web technologies to provide interactivity to complement the journal papers, to parallel how conferences provide interactivity for attendees through poster sessions, Birds-of-a-feather (BoF) sessions, and question and answer periods following paper presentations. A commonly used Web tool that can provide interactivity for the online journal is the Web Forum. As online scientific journals begin to evolve, Web Forums can play a role in helping online scientific communities interact and collaborate,¹ in context with peer-reviewed papers.

II. The Why and How of Creating Web Forums

In many domains, Web Forums serve as the basis for the online community. The Web Forum allows users to post information, ask questions, answer questions, discuss topics of interest, and interact among people with similar interests in an open forum. In the scientific world, traditional means for communicating with colleagues and peers such as e-mail, e-mail lists, paper archives, Web sites, and conference gatherings remain in the forefront. Newsgroups² are a close cousin to Web Forums, but are a more passive form of communication.³ Web Forums can serve as a component of an online journal, extending these traditional methods. Authors and readers could conduct further discussion, follow-ups (because some time will have elapsed since the paper was written and the publication date), feedback, questions, and answers. This kind of interaction is not unlike what happens in a poster session or around a coffee table at a conference.

Creating a Web Forum has been made easy through a host of technologies and tools from commercial and open sources. Web Forum packages^{4,5} are available with options for hosted and non-hosted solutions, with the capability to serve small groups to enterprise class sites. For online scientific journals, the Web Forum can allow posts from members only, moderated topics, and public access to discussions. Forum topics are configurable and flexible. For example, a JACIC Web Forum could follow the journal scope, the current month's papers, and Editorial topics. Creating and administering a Web Forum requires choosing a service or a package to host on a server. The basic setup requirements are establishing the mode of operation (administration, moderators, security) and choosing the basic configuration (the design, discussion topics, topic descriptions). There are sites that provide all of this online through Web forms and administration pages so that getting the forum started can take as little as 30 minutes. Just for illustration, the sample page in Fig. 1 shows a Web Forum created using ezboard, one popular forum service. Forums can also provide a way for the journal's editorial board to communicate with subscribers and get feedback to help improve the online journal.

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Science Journal Example

1 registered members
[Need help logging in?](#)

Welcome to A Science Journal Forum The purpose is take a look at what a Web Forum might provide to our new online scientific journal.

Make a Contribution :: [Direct Payment](#) -or- [Accept Offer](#) | [View Contributors](#) | (2)

We currently have \$0.00 in our chest.
 You can use this space for a personal message about Community Chest. Just go to the My Community tab in your Control Center, click the Manage Community Chest button, and you will see the message space at the bottom of the page (in the Optional Custom Message box). Enter your text, click Apply Display Options, and you are done.

Forum	# Posts	Last Comment	Moderators
Announcements			
Announcements Check here for what's new and important announcements about this online journal.	0	4/13/04 3:01 pm	
Discussion Areas			
Editorials Discussion of JACIC Editorials	0	4/13/04 3:01 pm	
Polls This forum is designed for the creation and management of polls.	0	4/13/04 3:01 pm	
Real-time Systems Discussion Area for journal articles in the Real-time Systems scope.	0	4/13/04 3:08 pm	
Computational Techniques Discuss journal articles in Computational Techniques Scope	0	4/13/04 3:08 pm	
High Performance Computing Discuss journal articles published in JACIC on High Performance Computing	0	4/13/04 3:11 pm	

Fig. 1 Example forum page.

III. Some Examples of Web Forums

Now that we have an understanding of what a Web Forum is and how to create one, there are examples of Web Forums being used today in some areas of science and technology. It is easy to find journals and online publications in the news media, as well as the information technology, education, and medical fields that have Web Forums.^{6,7} However, there are not many examples in the physical sciences.⁸ One observation that can be made from this is that the online journal, even for the basic feature of providing electronic access for download of papers, is still in the experimental stage. Journal publishers and the scientific community are continuing to debate the cost of producing a professional journal, self-publishing, and issues of open archives.⁹ Another challenge is for the scientific community to accept online publication as equal to print, in pursuit of academic recognition and status.¹⁰

IV. Conclusions

Through the use of a Web Forum, journals can begin to become interactive places for an online journal community. While many are concerned about the cost of journal publications to publishers, authors, and subscribers, through the use of technologies such as Web Forums, online journals can increase the journal's readership, which can create new avenues to pay for the online offering such as offering levels of membership for different services and ad revenue. Web Forums provide interactivity for online scientific journal spaces, yet they represent a small step in building a community of practice.¹¹ In the future, as scientists look for better ways to communicate rather than using static Web sites, phenomena like Web Logging (blogging),¹²⁻¹⁴ Social Networking, and community building¹⁵ may be important in the online presentation and sharing of scientific research.

References and Suggested Resources

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