

RSS: When the Web Comes to You

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RSS: When the Web Comes to You

RSS feeds are one way to keep your content out in front of your audience. RSS help you keep tabs on your favorite sources of information. This month we'll review RSS, how it works, how to publish a feed, and how to use an RSS reader.

And of course, our newsletter is now available as an RSS feed. Just point your reader to <http://feeds.newfangled.com/WebSmartNewsletter>. Don't know how to do that? Well...

Managing Information Overload with RSS

The web is making all of the world's information accessible. Isn't that great?

It really is great, but the world is a very big place and contemplating all of its information makes my brain hurt. I have a limited capacity to absorb information. The more that's available, the bigger the traffic jams in my head. I am freshly reminded of how much information is out there when ever I write one of my newsletters. As I research my monthly subject I have to get my head around many sources of information. It seems like every discovery leads to ten more potential sources. On top of evaluating multiple sources I am often sidetracked when I stumble across other intriguing leads. Dealing with so much information can be overwhelming.

RSS to the Rescue

One way to manage information overload is through the use of RSS. RSS stands for (at least most people say it stands for) Real Simple Syndication. Content providers like bloggers, traditional news outlets, and Newfangled can utilize the simple RSS format to allow people to subscribe using their RSS readers. I'm sure you've seen plenty of sites that have those RSS or XML graphics next to articles. Those icons indicate that you can subscribe to that site's RSS feed.

An RSS reader keeps an eye on all the feeds you've subscribed to. Whenever new content is posted from one of these sites, your reader displays the new headlines. Peruse the headlines of your favorite sources of information and if one is particularly interesting you can click to get details or click through to site and read the entire article. RSS feeds are updated continuously and so as new information is released, a cursory glance at running headlines keeps you in the loop.

Unlike email newsletters I am in complete control over my RSS intake. Once I give up my email address to a newsletter I am at the mercy of the unsubscribe button to be removed from the list. With an RSS reader I can simply delete an address from my RSS reader and the information from that content provider is no longer delivered.

By the way, you may also run into feeds referred to as "Atom" feeds. These are just an alternate standard for defining your XML file. Pretty much all the readers and services support both types, so just consider RSS and Atom feeds synonymous.

Google RSS Feed Reader

Finding a Reader That's Right for You

There are many kinds of RSS readers out there. Depending on your platform and whether or not you use the same computer all the time, you will probably choose between web based RSS services or application driven tools that you install on your computer.

As Google fans we'll start with Google's RSS tools

Google Desktop (desktop.google.com) - We've written about [Google Desktop](#) in the past, and if you've download Google Desktop you can

extend it's capabilities with an add-on extension called gdRSS Reader. It sits among the other desktop widgets and displays your RSS feeds as they come in. This is a simple tool and I use it as my default reader. It lacks the more sophisticated controls of a full blown reader such as grouping, organizing feeds and keeping track of read versus unread items. But I like the fact that it's always visible and I can quickly see whenever something new shows up.

Google Personalized Homepage (www.google.com - click "Personalized Home" in the upper right corner) - The Google Personalized homepage is itself an RSS reader. It can display a lot of other personalized information too, but by clicking on the "Add Content" box in the upper left corner of the screen you can choose from some RSS presets, or add your own by copying and pasting the RSS link into the "Create a Section" box. The only downside I can see to the Google Desktop RSS reader is that it does not allow you to preview an item's abstract. It simply links over to the publisher's site when clicked. There is also limited screen real estate on the Google Desktop. So if you subscribe to a lot of feeds you'll quickly run out of room to display them all.

Google Reader (www.google.com/reader) - Google also has a feature-rich web-based RSS reader. It is more robust than either of the other Google options. It allows you to manage which items you've read, save them, organize them and add tags (labels) to items for future reference. It's a very clean and quick interface (what else would you expect from Google?). It even has keyboard shortcuts for power readers.

Browser Based RSS Readers

Browser Based RSS readers

Another breed of RSS reader can be integrated into your web browser. Since feeds ultimately link over to sites, adding a reader into your browser is a pretty good way to access feeds. As applications that get installed into your browser, these options are fairly sophisticated and usually offer significant organizational control over your feeds.

Pluck (www.pluck.com) - Pluck is a downloadable application that adds RSS capability to your web browser. It's available for Internet Explorer and Firefox (or as an online service - see below).

Sage (sage.mozdev.org) - Sage is another browser based RSS reader but it's only available for Firefox. Both Pluck and Sage are free downloads.

Web-Based RSS Readers

Online Services

If you don't want to download and install a reader you can also use a personalized online service. These kinds of tools are especially helpful if you use different computers at home, at work or at school. An online service keeps all your feeds accessible wherever you may be.

Netvibes (www.netvibes.com) - Netvibes seems to be the most popular web based RSS reader. It is very simple, free, and easy to use. In fact you can start personalizing your feeds immediately upon hitting their homepage without even setting up an account. Of course if you want to access your reader from another computer you'll need to set up an account to get a user name and password.

Bloglines (www.bloglines.com) - Bloglines seems like it's the up and coming online reader. It's a little more sophisticated than Netvibes and allows for more customizable content and foreign language capability. Of course in the RSS software space, sites leap frog each other with their capabilities all the time so by the time you're reading this the opposite could be true.

RSS Desktop Applications

Downloadable Software

Another category of reader is the downloadable application. These are by far the most sophisticated systems - as stand alone applications they should be. Some of these products do cost money, but not very much. I have not purchased these applications so I cannot vouch for their quality. Personally, I use Google's tools, (all three versions) and I've messed around with the online and browser based tools. I can't imagine what else I'd need to do with RSS feeds that I would need a dedicated application. But if you're a serious news junkie you may need such a tool.

NewsGator (www.newsgator.com) - Newsgator offers several versions of their application. They are available for both Mac and PC. It's priced between \$20 - \$30 with a free 30 day trial.

GreatNews (www.curiostudio.com) - GreatNews (PC only) is free, but it's still in beta.

KlipFolio (www.serence.com) - This software (PC only) is a modular desktop RSS dashboard, available for free download. It is probably the smallest and most customizable solution available, and with many different skins, it's definitely the most stylish. One advantage to KlipFolio is that you can have a new module for each RSS feed you add. Each module can be sized and shaped however you like. Giving different sources different looks can help you visually parse through your incoming information.

For more information about Feed Readers check out a recent article on Techcrunch - www.techcrunch.com/2006/03/30/the-state-of-online-feed-readers.

Finding RSS Feeds

Finding and Subscribing to RSS Feeds

So once you're set up with an RSS reader it's time to tell the reader what sites/feeds you'd like to follow. Of course you can add feeds manually as you encounter RSS links off your favorite websites, but you can also find interesting feeds from **RSS search engines**.

Google Reader - Google Reader, of course, has a built in search system that will locate RSS feeds based on your interests.

Feedster (www.feedster.com) - Feedster is another search engine for RSS feeds. You can search between News outlets, Blogs, Podcasts or all sources.

Netvibes and Bloglines, as well as most of the other readers, have search or browse discovery tools for finding RSS feeds built into them.

Managing RSS Feeds

Creating an RSS Feed

Now that you're all excited about RSS feeds, I'm sure you're wondering how you can create feeds of your own. Well it's pretty easy. Creating content is the hard part. The feed part is basically just using a standard format that tells readers which parts of your page relate to the RSS bit - title, abstract, date, link and such. This is done using XML which is simply a standard way of surrounding the relevant parts of your content with tags that tell the RSS reader what part is the title, what part is the abstract, body, link, etc. If you're a Newfangled client we can set up and automate RSS feed generation for any site content you like.

Promoting Your RSS Feed

If you have content that's been set up with an RSS feed, you'll want to get the feed out in front of the reading public. Unfortunately, submitting your RSS feed to all the Readers is a lot like how it used to be to submit your site to search engines. Before Google and Yahoo pretty much carved up the search engine world between themselves, submitting sites used to be a cumbersome process. Remember all the "submit your sites to 100 search engines for \$xx" spam email offers? Well since RSS is still relatively new, there is no dominate feed reading tool. As a result you'll have to submit your feed to lots of different sources out there. Here's a handy page I discovered that lists 167 RSS services you can submit to - www.masternewmedia.org/rss/top55.

Analyzing RSS Traffic

Analyzing RSS traffic

When you have RSS feeds on your content, and all the readers are letting the world know about your feed, how can you keep track of RSS traffic? How many people are subscribing to your feed, what kind of traffic is resulting, and other feed based analytics? RSS analytics is a relatively new area of web services. I have not reviewed these tools so I cannot vouch for them from experience. From my research though, there are two current players in this space, Feedburner and SyndicateIQ. Both tools exist to help you know how many subscribers you have, how many click through to your content and so on.

Now You Have it All

You have all the world's information and a mechanism to help you keep it all straight. What else could you possibly need?

What? Social bookmarking, collaborative tagging, democratic popularity engines and community link clouds? Oh dear. Good thing I can subscribe to more RSS feeds to keep up with such latest developments so I'll be ready to write another newsletter. Hum... that one looks interesting - see ya!