

It's All About Skimming

by Chris, February 2008



[Mark](#) and I recently had a chat (of which [you can read a transcript](#) on his blog) about how anyone could possibly keep up with the amount of information delivered via RSS to our computers every day. Every day you gasp? How about every hour!? I mentioned to Mark that one of the most important skills to develop (I can't believe I'm calling this a skill, but...) is to be able to skim through that information well. Good skimming means that you can quickly scan an article and determine if its content is relevant to you, then either decide to read it more closely or file it away for future reference, and maybe even share it with a friend who will find it interesting while you're at it. If you can't skim well, you'll never keep up!

Skimming might not be necessary if everyone blogged in the same manner. Think about it: if every blogger decided to post one substantial and high-quality post a week, readers would have more time to digest the information. We'd probably have to subscribe to fewer blogs in order to feel like we're keeping abreast of things, too. However, this is just not the reality. Even magazine and newspaper columnists, who have traditionally written daily, weekly, or monthly columns, these days keep blogs on which they post several times a day (if not several times an hour). This is just the pace at which information moves now. However, because there is so much information being passed back and forth, it's likely that much of it won't be relevant to you. Unfortunately, you won't know one way or another unless you start sifting through it.

From your **84 subscriptions**, over the last 30 days you read **4,715 items**, starred **2 items**, shared **27 items**, and emailed **0 items**.



Reading trends

Your item reading trends for the last 30 days

Subscription	# Read	% Read
The Daily Dish By Andrew Sullivan	1,281	98%
Slashdot	575	100%
Matthew Yglesias	548	99%
Crunchy Con	173	98%
Wired Science	169	100%
Threat Level	140	100%
del.icio.us/chrbutler/websmartlinkfriday	139	100%
Epicenter	131	100%
Ross Douthat	116	98%
Web Worker Daily	100	100%

Show: [top 10](#) - [top 20](#) - [top 40](#)

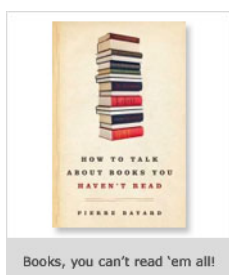
Subscription trends

Your subscription trends for the last 30 days

Subscription	Items/Day	% Read
The Daily Dish By Andrew Sullivan	43.6	98%
Slashdot	19.2	100%
Matthew Yglesias	18.5	99%
Crunchy Con	5.9	98%
Wired Science	5.6	100%
Threat Level	4.7	100%
del.icio.us/chrbutler/websmartlinkfrida	4.6	100%
Epicenter	4.4	100%
Ross Douthat	3.9	98%
Web Worker Daily	3.3	100%

Show: [top 10](#) - [top 20](#) - [top 40](#)

If you take a look at my Google Reader trends (see image above), you'll get a better sense of what I am talking about. Notice that over the last 30 days, I read (skimmed, more likely) through 4,715 feeds- that's around 157 feeds a day! You can tell from the chart that most of my feed reading (skimming, again) is done earlier in the morning. This is a good time for me to catch up on this stuff before my phone starts ringing. Good thing I'm a morning person... Also, notice that some of the feeds I subscribe to update between 10 to 40 times a day! Granted, some of them are from fulltime journalists who are paid to do it, but this gives you an idea of the pace and frequency I mentioned above. Believe me, my job keeps me plenty busy, so I don't have time to settle down and really read all of this content- and I wouldn't really want to, either. Remember, much of it is not going to be relevant to me. But, some will be very relevant to me, so if I don't skim through all of it, I won't find the 'some' that is worthwhile.



One last point. Most people who value reading (myself included), will be initially disgusted by the notion of skimming as a means of staying informed, especially when it comes to content that is professionally relevant. In this regard I think two ideas are important. First, blog content is meant to move at a faster pace, so reading a blog post and reading a book are going to be very different experiences. Blogs will not render books (actual books or ebooks) irrelevant anytime soon. This is a good thing. While ideas can be batted around in blog posts and stimulate lots of conversation, books are still needed to present ideas in a well developed and well researched manner. Second, the accelerated pace of blog post publishing is similar to that of book publishing. In fact, statistics from 2004 show that [a new book of fiction is published in the United States every 30 minutes](#). And that's just fiction. Only in the United States. In 2004! This is why a recent book titled [How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read](#), by Pierre Bayard, shouldn't be scoffed at. Bayard points out that the only way for anyone, especially scholars, to keep up with the amount of information being put out there is to simply be aware of what's being published, because let's face it, you can't read it all. He even points out that sometimes it's more important to be

aware of how a book fits in to the larger trends/mood/zeitgeist (wow I've used that word twice in one week on this blog) than to have actually read it. Have I read Bayard's book? No. ...His point, exactly! If skimming is legit for books, it had better be legit for blogs.