

TechMatters

RSS by any other name...

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RSS is a technology that goes by many different names: RDF Site Summary, Rich Site Summary, or Really Simple Syndication. But setting terminology aside, what you really need to know is what this technology does, how it's used, and how it can help you do your job more effectively.

What is RSS?

Simply put, the purpose of RSS is to syndicate and thereby share the content published on a web site. In order to do so, an RSS feed or channel is produced which consists of a list of new items added to the site. Typically, each item includes a title, a brief summary, and a link to the full content.

Once a feed is produced and made available, its content can be published on other web sites, indexed by RSS-based search engines, or collected and read via RSS aggregators or newsreader software. As a busy instruction librarian, these features can assist in your day-to-day tasks in two very significant ways: by helping you keep up with trends in the field and as a means of advertising and marketing your programs.

RSS as Current Awareness Tool:

As all librarians know, keeping up with advances in our field is an ongoing challenge. News about new information sources, instructional techniques, and technologies seems to emerge on an almost daily basis. If you are like me, then you likely struggle to keep up by monitoring multiple news sites and relevant blogs. RSS can make this task much easier. By using RSS-based search engines and news aggregator software, you can eliminate the

need to visit a site unless you know that new information of interest to you has been posted.

RSS Search Engines

RSS search engines differ from regular web search tools in that they index specific items from feeds rather than individual pages. Accordingly, the index is refreshed multiple times per hour and new content from RSS feeds is made searchable and accessible very quickly.

Examples of RSS search engines include Feedster [<http://feedster.com/>] and Blogdigger [<http://www.blogdigger.com/>]. Feedster indexes over 17 million feeds from news sites and blogs, while Blogdigger focuses on indexing only blog content. In addition to providing traditional search results, both tools also allow users to subscribe to their search in the form of an RSS feed. By doing so, you can monitor your search via an RSS aggregator and receive notification anytime a new item matching your search terms is indexed.

RSS Aggregators

The most common way to monitor, read, and manage news from feeds is via an RSS aggregator, also known as a newsreader or news aggregator. By using an aggregator, you can subscribe to the feeds from any number of news sites and/or blogs you want to monitor, and receive notification when new information is posted.

There are two main types of aggregator software available: online aggregators that are accessible via the web and downloadable aggregators that you install on your own computer. Popular online aggregators include Bloglines [<http://www.bloglines.com/>] and NewsIsFree [<http://www.newsisfree.com/>].

www.newsisfree.com]. Downloadable aggregators can be standalone software such as Feed-Demon [<http://www.bradsoft.com/feeddemon/>] or plug-ins that works with an existing a program you already use such as NewsGator [<http://www.newsgator.com/>], which integrates with Microsoft Outlook.

Regardless of which aggregator you choose, they all display information in more or less the same manner. Generally speaking, a panel on the left-hand side of the screen displays a list of the feeds to which you subscribe, one on the upper-right displays all the items included in the feed, and the lower-right displays the content for the selected item. Most aggregators also include a notification feature to alert you when new content becomes available.

Locating Feeds

There are several ways to find RSS feeds to which you might like to subscribe. You can start by visiting your favorite news sites to see if they offer feeds. Most sites identify their RSS feeds with one of these small icons:  ,  , or  . Alternately, you might consider consulting a directory such as Blogstreet's RSS Discovery [<http://www.blogstreet.com/rssdiscovery.html>] or Syndic8 [<http://www.syndic8.com/>] both of which are searchable by subject.

For library specific feeds, try LISFeeds [<http://www.lisfeeds.com/>]. LISFeeds is actually a public aggregator that compiles information from over 275 library related blogs. The feeds that they monitor are searchable, and results provide links to feed URLs that you can use to subscribe via your own aggregator.

Subscribing to a feed

Once you have selected an aggregator, and located an interesting feed, subscribing is a

fairly quick process. Simply right click on the icon or feed link, select "copy shortcut", and paste the feed URL into your aggregator. Alternately, some aggregators also provide a searchable directory of feeds containing subscription links that you can follow directly in order to add feeds to your list.

RSS as Marketing Tool:

Now that you have a basic understanding of what RSS feeds are and how they work, I suspect that you are starting to see the potential benefits of creating your own feeds to publicize the resources and instructional programs that you offer. By syndicating your content and publicizing the availability of your feeds, you can create another avenue to share news about library services and market your events.

Creating a feed

Although creating an RSS feed is not a terribly complex process, a full explanation of the process is beyond the scope of this introductory article. If you are interested in creating your own feed, however, I would recommend the following two articles:

1) *Making an RSS Feed - Search Engine Watch*

<http://searchenginewatch.com/sereport/article.php/2175271>

2) *Making Headlines with RSS - Jeffrey Eisenzopf*

<http://www.newarchitectmag.com/archives/2000/02/eisenzopf/>

Both offer clear, concise instructions that should make creating and syndicating your own RSS feeds a snap!