Do You See RSS in Your Future?

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Recorder

SUMMARY. Paoshan Yue and Araby Greene from the University of Nevada, Reno Libraries presented a broad overview of RSS, an XML technology in widespread use by bloggers and commercial industries to facilitate easy sharing of Web content. Librarians at the University of Nevada, Reno have begun to explore applications of this technology in the library setting. Several Reno Libraries pilot projects utilizing RSS technology were discussed. Finally, future applications of RSS in the serials world were postulated.

WHAT’S THIS THING CALLED RSS?

RSS is an acronym variously translated as “Really Simple Syndication” (RSS version 2.0) or “RDF (Resource Description Framework) Site Summary” (RSS version 1.0). Both versions are applications of
standard XML coding to facilitate sharing of frequently updated Web content. A Web content developer will choose to build with a specific RSS version based on what type of data utilization is intended. For example, RSS version 1.0 is often chosen to deliver content that is rich in metadata. RSS 2.0 contains additional features that may be of greater importance to the developer than the ability to encode metadata.

XML-based publishing formats that are essentially RSS “clones” are also beginning to appear. A new clone called “Atom” is rapidly gaining popularity. Google, for example, utilizes Atom to create syndicated feeds for its Blogger.com service, a popular tool to allow users to easily create their own Web sites with RSS feeds. These sites are referred to as “Weblogs” or “blogs.”

Typical uses of RSS include:

- Monitoring news
- Current awareness for professionals
- Tracking Weblogs
- Sharing technical information, link lists, and photos

In order to view RSS feeds without seeing raw XML markup, the user must acquire a “feedreader.” A feedreader is an aggregator that gathers chosen RSS feeds and formats them for display. The user is ready to select “feeds” (RSS files) available on specific Web sites of interest once a feedreader is installed. A wide variety of feedreaders is available on the Internet:

- Readers that plug into other applications–Pluck (Internet Explorer), NewsMonster (Mozilla), NewsGator (MS Outlook)
- Standalone readers installed on the user’s computer–FeedDemon, AmphetaDesk, Awasu, RSSReader

The ability to read RSS feeds is not dependent on the specific reader that is chosen, but readers differ on various extra features included. CNet reviews (http://www.cnet.com/4520-6022-5115113.html?tag=rss) and RSS Compendium (http://allrss.com) are two good Internet resources to assist the novice RSS user with understanding RSS technology, feedreader options, tools and other useful tips.
EXPLORING RSS

How does the new user begin to add feeds to his feedreader? Finding a feed is the first task. Fortunately, Web sites with RSS feeds can be found in a number of different ways. One of many such indexing Web sites, Syndic8.com (http://www.syndic8.com/), lists thousands of categorized feeds. Many of the feedreaders themselves contain searchable feed directories. Another option is to use a specialized search engine. Feedster is an example of such a search engine (http://www.feedster.com/). It indexes millions of feeds and they are also fully searchable. Finally, many Web sites already indicate that they have RSS feeds available.

Any site with feeds will usually have an instantly recognizable orange button labeled “XML” or “RSS.” Clicking on the button allows the user with a browser-integrated reader to preview the feed and subscribe or, alternatively, copy the link and paste it into the “add feed” section of a desktop reader. After subscribing, the user is notified by the feedreader when new content is added to the Web site. The user chooses a convenient time to read the content, subscribe or unsubscribe, and is even able to read feeds from mobile devices that receive text. Goodbye overstuffed e-mail boxes!

LIBRARY APPLICATIONS

The library world is taking notice of RSS technology. According to a 2004 article, forty-nine libraries worldwide were producing fifty-five Weblogs by October of 2003.1 A later report in April 2005 listed 245 libraries producing hundreds of Weblogs.2 A quick check of blogwithoutalibrary.net just one month later reported 430 libraries producing “who knows how many” Weblogs.3 Clearly, this is a trend to monitor! Blogwithoutalibrary.net (http://blogwithoutalibrary.net/), created and maintained by a librarian, is a useful resource to track what libraries are doing with blogs and RSS technologies.

Examples of how libraries are using RSS for information dissemination include the following:

• library news:
  University of Nevada, Reno Libraries http://www2.library.unr.edu/infoedge/
• subject blogs or guides:
  Georgia State University Library http://www.library.gsu.edu/news/
• new acquisitions:
  University of Alberta Libraries http://www.library.ualberta.ca/rss/index.cfm
• book reviews:
  Colorado College Library http://library.coloradocollege.edu/bookends/
• catalog search queries and personalized circulation information:
  Hennepin County Library http://www.hclib.org/pub/search/RSS.cfm/
• staff communication:
  Oregon Libraries Network http://www.oregonlibraries.net/staff/

The publishing world has also noted the potential for RSS technologies to enhance visibility, usage and convenience for users. Many e-publications now include the capability to subscribe to their content via RSS feed. BioMed Central (http://www.biomedcentral.com), a pioneering open-access publisher, has placed several feed links in focused sections of the site allowing the user to monitor areas of particular interest. Commercial publishers such as Oxford (http://www3.oup.co.uk/jnls/online/) offer feeds for many of their publications.

Commercial media outlets have been some of the earliest adopters of RSS technology. CNN news (http://www.cnn.com/) is only one of hundreds of news sources that includes RSS feed for news headlines. Others include the Wall Street Journal (http://online.wsj.com/public/page/0,2,0323,00.html?mod=TFPP1OSM0I), the New York Times (http://www.nytimes.com/), and USA Today (http://www.usatoday.com/). Even the government has adopted the technology. PubMED (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi) has recently added a new RSS feature that allows the user to send search results to their desktop feedreader.

IMPLEMENTING A PROJECT AT RENO LIBRARIES

The University of Nevada, Reno Libraries has created a number of pages with RSS feeds. One such page is an index of their journals that offer RSS feed for their users: http://www.library.unr.edu/ejournals/alphaRSS.aspx

The process of creating the new electronic journals page is fairly uncomplicated. ASP.NET is utilized and dynamically creates the contents of the page and RSS 2.0 feed from information stored in an SQL server database. Each file contains an .aspx extension to allow the Windows-based Web server to process the embedded ASP.Net script. The script itself is written in Visual Basic.Net language. It connects to the SQL server and requests data from a stored query. Thus, the ASP.Net script creates an e-journals RSS feed from the SQL server and outputs the feed to a memory stream (ejrss.aspx).

The library employs an essential tool to alert site visitors to the existence of RSS feed on a page, the RSS auto-discovery tag. The link included at the head of any document with RSS feed would look like:

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<link rel="alternate" type="application/rss+xml" title="University of Nevada, Reno Libraries–New Electronic Journals" href="http://www.library.unr.edu/ejournals/ejrss.aspx"/>
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Almost any Web site can easily be RSS-ified. Serials librarians deal with constantly changing subscriptions, publication contents, changes at the publisher level, database changes, and so on. The opportunities to utilize RSS technology in the serials environment are endless.

**CONCLUSION**

RSS is an innovative, exciting new technology with a wide array of potential applications. Publishers, news media outlets, bloggers and libraries are only a few of the users eagerly responding to opportunities to use RSS. It is becoming increasingly popular with an Internet audience that demands personal, immediate, and customized information delivery. Perhaps most convincingly, it is an easy technology both to implement as a Web developer and to adopt as a user.

**NOTES**

2. 4-12-05 post at http://blogwithoutalibrary.net (June 9, 2005)
3. 5-15-05 manual count at http://blogwithoutalibrary.net
ARTICLES


MacLeod, Roddy. “RSS: Less Hype, More Action.” *FreePint* (June 17, 2004).  


http://www.ei.org/eluupdate/03_librarians_corner/index.html (June 9, 2005).

BOOKS


CONTRIBUTORS’ NOTES

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