

RSS Feeds and its Application in Library Services

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Abstract

The paper discusses the features and benefits of a Web format called RSS, and give a brief technical overview of it and its application in Library Services. The paper discusses the step-by-step process of creating, publishing and using RSS Feeds. It also highlights the Do's and Don'ts of RSS Technology.

Keywords: RSS, XML, Copyrights, HTML, Search Engine, Web 2.0, Splog

1. Introduction

RSS is an acronym for Really Simple Syndication and Rich Site Summary. RSS is an XML-based (eXtensible Markup Language) format for content distribution. Webmasters create an RSS file containing headlines and descriptions of specific information. While the majority of RSS feeds currently contain news headlines or breaking information the long term uses of RSS are broad.

RSS is a defined standard based on XML with the specific purpose of delivering updates to web-based content. Using this standard, webmasters provide headlines and fresh content in a succinct manner. Meanwhile, consumers use RSS readers and news aggregators to collect and monitor their favorite feeds in one centralized program or location. Content viewed in the RSS reader or news aggregator is place known as an RSS feed.

RSS is becoming increasing popular. The reason is fairly simple. RSS is a free and easy way to promote a site and its content without the need to advertise or create complicated content sharing partnerships.

2. History of RSS

RSS was first invented by Netscape. They wanted to use an XML format to distribute news, stories and information. Netscape refined the version of RSS and then dropped it. UserLand Software to control of the specification and continued to develop it releasing a newer version. A non-commercial group picked up RSS at the same time and based on their interpretation of the Netscape's original concept of RSS they too released a new version. UserLand was not happy with the non-commercial version and continued development of their own version of RSS (Really Simple Syndication), eventually UserLand released RSS v2.

3. Advantages of RSS

There are a number of advantages to RSS, and it looks as though the Web-browsing world is embracing the technology. First and foremost, with RSS it is possible for Web surfers to see what's out there without opening a browser and enduring the associated horrors of long loading times, banner ads, pop-up windows and flashing graphics. In addition, the "feed checks" that deliver new content by the RSS reader are automatic, saving the tiring keystrokes and mouse clicks associated with heavy Web surfing. Another plus: the user won't need to



give out an e-mail address for a subscription to a site’s RSS feed. There is no fear of spam outside of what may be published in the feed. Nothing is sent to the user via e-mail. Lastly, it’s easy to delete any feeds the users find boring or useless. No messy e-mail process—just a click of the mouse or keyboard, and the RSS feed is gone.

4. Application of RSS in Library Services

RSS is a convenient way to keep the library users up-to-date with new content on the library website. Instead of having to click through the various sections of the library’s site to see what’s new, users can have that information pushed directly to their computer! RSS has been adopted by many news services (The New York Times, National Public Radio, The Wall Street Journal, BBC News, etc.), blogs, and other commercial sites (WebMD, ESPN, Orbitz, People, Salon, Yahoo!, eBay, etc.). Even the government has embraced RSS.

RSS can be applied to some of the following Library & Information Services:

- ◆ Selective Dissemination of Information
- ◆ Current Awareness Service
- ◆ Bibliographic Service
- ◆ Bulletin Board Service

4.1 RSS for Marketing Library & Information Services

RSS is a technology that has the potential of overcoming many of the Library and Information Marketing challenges we are facing today and becoming a preferred tool to get 100% of our content delivered to the users, as well as a tool to help us making the library website top searchable site.

The simple RSS explanation from the marketing point of view is that RSS is a simple to use content publishing tool for librarians and publisher. It

allows getting your content delivered to end-users, without the fear of spam filters stopping your messages, and to other “content consumers” (other websites, search engines and so on). RSS gets your content delivered, period. And it helps you increase your site rankings and drives new traffic to your site.

But some marketers are still afraid that not enough internet users are using RSS feeds. While achieving not more than marginal penetration, its usage is growing with astounding speed. According to a report from the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 5% (6 million) Americans online consume news and information through RSS aggregators. So the market is already out there!

5. Technology Tools for RSS

To take advantage of the convenience of RSS, one needs a special piece of software (called a “newsreader” or “aggregator”) to collect, organize, and display all his feeds.

A variety of free and commercial readers are available. Some (such as Bloglines, Google Reader, NetVibes, and My Yahoo) are web-based, others (such as FeedDemon, AmphetaDesk, or NetNewsWire for Macs) have to be downloaded to one’s computer. Some browsers, such as Firefox and Safari, offer integrated feed readers.



Figure-1 Safari identifies all RSS feeds with an icon in the address bar.

5.1 Steps to Create & Promote RSS Feeds

5.1.1 Build a Feed

There are a number of desktop and web applications available that make feed creation easy. Most desktop software applications for building a feed include a wizard and context-sensitive help, simplifying the process of creating a feed. Following a few simple steps in a wizard generally will produce an RSS feed in just a few minutes.

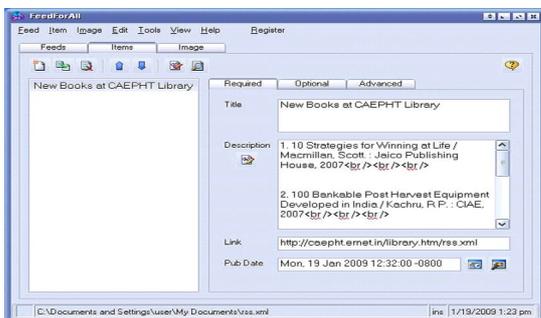


Figure-2 Creating a RSS Feed in FeedforAll Software

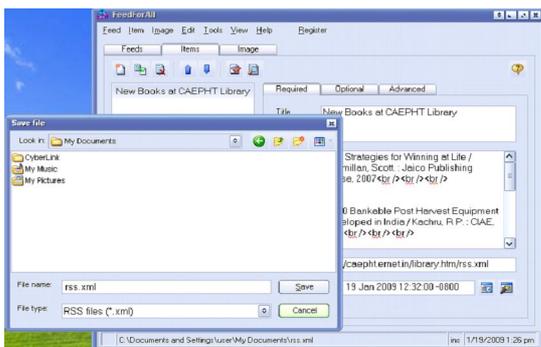


Figure-3 Saving the file (rss.xml) in My Documents

Publishers control what information is syndicated in the RSS feed, so ultimately it is the publisher's decision as to whether to include teaser copy or full articles. Consider what you are trying to accomplish and who your target audience is when building the feed.

5.1.2 Transfer the Feed onto Your Server

Once you have constructed an RSS feed you will need to transfer the feed to your server. This can be done using a standard FTP client (if it is not built into the feed creation software). The feed is usually placed in the domain's root directory like this: <http://www.mydomain.com/nameoffeed.xml>, but as long as you know where it is it doesn't really matter.

5.1.3 Display the Feed on Your Website Using a Graphic of Some Sort

In order to signal to website visitors that an RSS feed containing content related to the website is available, include a colorful graphic on the website like  **RSS** or **XML**. It has become a standard that nearly all websites that have RSS feeds available use colorful graphics such as flags as indicators that RSS feeds are available for specific content.

5.1.4 Include Information in the HTML of the Web Page so RSS Readers Auto-Detect Your Feed

After publishing an RSS feed it is important to let visitors know that the feed exists. Aggregators will automatically detect RSS on a website if you add a small bit of code in the header field of an HTML page.

```
<link rel="alternate" type="application/
rss+xml" title="RSS" href="http://
www.yourdomain.com/rss.xml">
```

Be sure to replace <http://www.yourdomain.com/rss.xml> with the URL to the RSS feed.

5.1.5 Display the Feed's Content on a Website

Contents contained in an RSS feed can be added to a website, providing site visitors an alternative method for viewing the content. The information

will also help increase search engine interest. Displaying the feed as HTML can be accomplished. Providing fresh content on a regular basis will encourage site visitors return.

5.1.6 Submit the Feed to RSS Directories and Search Engines

As a rapidly increasing number of content sources, new and old, migrate or add RSS as a key distribution channel, and as more people utilize RSS newsreaders and aggregators to keep themselves informed, the ability to maintain high exposure and visibility is gradually shifted from complete attention to major search engines and content optimization techniques to an increasing awareness of RSS feed directories and search tools.

In order to increase exposure of an RSS feed it should be submitted to RSS search engines and directories. This can be done manually. Just as you would submit the URL of a website or web page to a search engine you will need to submit the link of the actual feed located on your website to the RSS directories. There is a large list of RSS directories at <http://www.rss-specifications.com/rss-submission.htm>

5.2 Steps in Using RSS

Is RSS for you? There is only one way to find out: Give it a try. If it's not for you, uninstall the RSS reader, and you're done.

5.2.1 Get an RSS feed reader

This is the program that checks the websites for changes and updates. It will periodically scan those sites and alert to what's new. Some readers are separate software applications that need installation; others are Web-based programs, or perhaps are offered by major search sites such as

Google and Yahoo. There are a number of free RSS feed-reader programs available, and other programs that offer a free trial version. The following three RSS readers are free and run under Windows:

- ◆ SharpReader (www.sharpreader.com)
- ◆ RssReader (www.rssreader.com)
- ◆ FeedReader (www.feedreader.com)
- ◆ AmphetaDesk: (www.disobey.com/amphetadesk)

Google (www.google.com/reader) and Yahoo! (<http://my.yahoo.com>), as well as many blogging services—like Bloglines (www.bloglines.com) and Newsgator (www.newsgator.com) offer RSS feed-reading as part of their site's services.

5.2.2 Find a site that offers an RSS Feed

Many Library, News and Web log (blog) sites offer an RSS feed, but there are many that don't. The appearance of the image  or indicates that RSS is available. These icons have become the standard flags. The RSS feed file will have its own link or address.



Figure-4 RSS Icon in CAEPHT Library Website

5.2.3 Copy the URL (link or address) of the RSS feed file into the RSS reader

In most reader programs, there is an “Add Feed” or “Open RSS Feed” selection in the File menu, plus a matching button on the toolbar. Selecting this “Open” or “Add” option should open a dialog box where the Internet address of the desired RSS feed can be entered. (If there is an address field, such as the one available in SharpReader, the address can be entered directly into that field.) If you paste the link into your browser (e.g., Internet Explorer below version 8.0), you will see only the XML code for the feed, or in some cases, you’ll be sent to a special page for RSS instructions. Internet Explorer 8 Beta 2 has provision for subscription of a New Feed similar to adding a website in Favorites menu with a desired name for that particular feed.

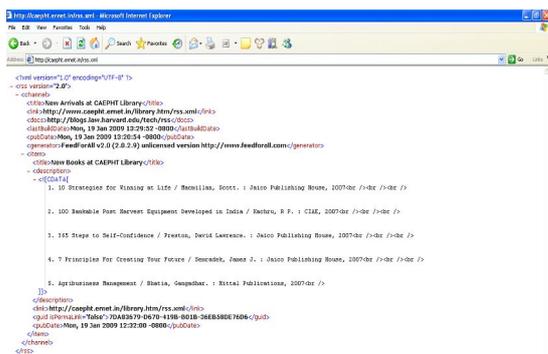


Figure-5 XML code as generated in Internet Explorer 6.0

5.2.4 The reader reads the contents

Once you’ve added the new feed address, your RSS feed reader will read the contents of the file. (In many readers, this is a temporary display and you will need to subscribe or execute another command that permanently adds the feed to your list.) The reader processes the file looking for changes since the last reading, then displays those changes. The

contents, usually titles and dates of articles, are displayed in a window. Upon clicking on a title, a third window will display a summary with links directed to the actual article. The number of listings and the format will vary with the RSS reader’s setup. The setup usually can be modified to suit your preferences. Setup options may include loading at computer startup, opening an article in a separate browser, time between updates, duration of alert pop-ups, selection of alert sounds, and many other features. If, based upon the displayed titles and summaries, you feel that these articles are the type that you want to continue to receive, then, if not already automatically permanently added, subscribe to the feed. In Safari, bookmark the feed under News. This will embed the selection in its menu. Otherwise, a stroke of the Delete key when the offending feed name is highlighted will remove it.

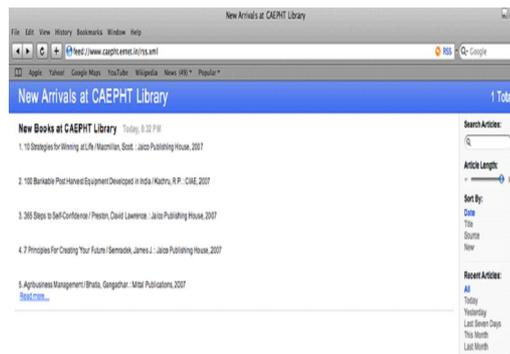


Figure-6 Safari displays the feed (rss.xml) as created Above.

5.2.5 Enjoy your feedback

From then on, whenever you open your reader or reader service, you will see the latest news from all your feeds. If you keep the reader running, it will continue to check your sites and alert you with an audio alarm and/or a pop-up when there is new information added. Once you’ve selected your preferred RSS reader and subscribed to a few feeds,

you may decide that it's one of the best and easiest ways around to stay up to date with news reports or updates to your favorite Web sites with very little effort—or not.

5.3 Top RSS Do's and Don'ts

RSS is not quite a household word, but technically astute individuals are adopting the use of RSS feeds at an alarming rate.

5.3.1 RSS Do's

- ◆ **Titles and Descriptions**
Always include meaningful keywords in your RSS feed's Channel title and description. Many readers will view or search for topic specific RSS feeds using keywords or keyword phrases. If you have descriptive keywords in your RSS feed's title and description the feed is more likely to be located and subscribed to by interested parties.
- ◆ **GUID Format**
Always include a GUID with each feed item. The GUID is a globally unique identifier. Each post should use a different GUID. The GUID will in some cases assist RSS news readers and aggregation software in determining when new content has been added to the RSS feed or when existing content in an RSS feed has been modified.
- ◆ **Publish Date**
Always include a publish date on feed items. The publish date should be used even if the content is timeless. The Publish Date will help readers determine that status of the content contained in the feed item.
- ◆ **Polish Your Feed**
Consider including images within your RSS feed. While the added images will not

necessarily improve ranking, they will add a polished look to your RSS feed and help brand your feed.

◆ **Feed Hosting**

Either host your own feed, or set it up to forward to a third party from your website. This will allow you retain complete control over the RSS feed.

5.3.2 RSS Don'ts

- ◆ **Plagiarize**
Do not plagiarize content in your RSS feed, there is little more to be said. Written words are considered protected in most countries. Posting someone else's work and taking credit for their work is wrong and will damage your reputation as a credible source.
- ◆ **Spam Blog or Splog**
Do not create splogs by automating feed creation. Splogs just clutter the search engines and directories and make it difficult to locate RSS feeds with meaningful content.
- ◆ **Violate Copyrights**
Do not violate copyrights by republishing an RSS feeds contents. If you quote content from another RSS feed, credit the source and provide and link to the original source of the content. As a rule of thumb, editorial content should exceed the length of the quoted material in the post.
- ◆ **Violate TOS (Terms of Service)**
Do not republish RSS feeds without confirming that feed syndication is allowed. The terms of use are not always apparent, so it is important that you check the terms of service on the publisher's feed subscription page prior to syndicating the contents of another publisher's RSS feed.

◆ **Provide Multiple Feed Formats**

Do not provide multiple feed formats for the same content. As far as the subscriber is concerned, the version of RSS that you are using is irrelevant. Multiple versions of the same feed simply cause confusion. Almost all RSS readers and news aggregators support all versions of RSS, simply choose a version and provide a single feed.

6. Conclusion

RSS feeds and other related technologies provide users a way to syndicate and republish content on the Web. Users republish content from other sites or blogs on their sites or blogs, aggregate content on other sites in a single place, and ostensibly distill the Web for their personal use. Such syndication of content is another Web 2.0 application that is already having an impact on libraries, and could continue to do so in remarkable ways.

Already libraries are creating RSS feeds for users to subscribe to, including updates on new items in a collection, new services, and new content in subscription databases. They are also republishing content on their sites. But libraries have yet to explore ways of using RSS more pervasively. It is conceivable that this syndication will replace browsing and searching through library websites for content. RSS aggregator applications, installed in a library's system and coupled with the social network of the library, will enable users to have a single, customized, personal library page that syndicates all the library content of interest to them and their research, eliminating irrelevant information. And users will, of course, control that page and that content. RSS is not only about text. It can be easily use to deliver audio content, video

content and even PowerPoint presentations and PDF files. By adopting good feed practices, LIS Professionals can reap the benefits of having an RSS feed. Provision should be included in Library Automation Softwares for auto generation of RSS Feeds. Digital Library Softwares like DSpace has got provision for auto generation of RSS Feeds for some communities and collections.

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