

RSS Feeds: Your Information on Your Terms

By Michael Wahlster

If you are like most people, you visit several websites regularly. You might seek out professional organizations for industry news and events or visit software product sites for reviews and online help—or perhaps you simply want to check out the BBC for the latest cricket scores. Yet, the Internet is an information jungle, and navigating it on a daily basis (or even several times a day) is time-consuming and tedious. How do you find what you are looking for quickly and easily, and, more important, how do you manage the information you receive? The answer is RSS.

What is RSS?

RSS, or Really Simple Syndication, is a data file format used for delivering regularly changing web content. Content in an RSS document (called a *web feed* or *channel*) can be read using a software application called a news feed reader (also known as an *aggregator*). Many news-related sites, web logs, and other online publishers syndicate their content as an RSS feed for subscribers. Every time the site is modified, the RSS feed is updated with a summary of the new information. The

feed reader will capture this change and display the information from the feed in a format that subscribers can easily read on their computers. An RSS subscription lets subscribers keep up with their favorite websites automatically, without having to go around to various websites checking for updates.

How does it work?

Typically, a content provider publishes a feed link on its site, which end users subscribe to using a news feed

Figure 1 on page 33). When instructed, the feed reader checks the user's subscribed feeds and asks all the servers in its feed list if they have new content. If so, the feed reader either makes a note of the new content or downloads it to the subscriber's computer. Feed readers can be scheduled to check for new content periodically. When websites provide web feeds to notify users of content updates, they frequently only include summary information or website links in the web feed rather than the

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reader program located on their computer or online. Initiating the subscription process is usually as simple as dragging the link from the web browser to the feed reader or by clicking on the RSS feed icon in the browser (see

full content itself. Web feeds are operated by many news websites, web logs, schools, and podcasters.

This form of information syndication was first adopted by web logs and other social network sites. At the end

of 2002, *The New York Times* started to offer RSS feeds for different news topics, and this is generally considered the breakthrough that led to the widespread application of news feeds. Today, feed links are available on most sites that offer frequently updated information.

In-box for the Internet

How does RSS help us manage the information we find online, and why should we find out about news feeds? Google has a short video, available at www.google.com/reader/view, for those who sign up for the Google feed reader. In the video, Chris Wetherell, an engineer at Google Reader, explains the value of RSS feeds:

“When you have an e-mail in-box, for instance, you don’t have to check with Larry, Cheryl, and Sergey to find out if they sent you e-mail. It just comes in your in-box and you get to read it whenever you want. Google Reader is a little like that, but for the entire Internet. You don’t have to go to this site, or that site, or the other site to find out when something is updated. In Google Reader, it just all comes in to you, and you get to read it whenever you want.”

RSS is not the only way users can be notified of changes to informational content on websites. E-mail notification is another common way users choose to be alerted to updates. For example, you can ask CNN to send you an e-mail notification whenever there is a news item that fits your parameters, and *The New York Times* will send you headlines. However, there is a downside to e-mail notification:

- Each sender uses a different method to notify subscribers of

Figure 1: Square RSS Feed Icon

Until recently, there was no uniform icon to designate RSS feeds. Text links and designations such as XML, RSS, and Atom are still found on many sites. This square feed icon is emerging as the de facto standard icon for news feeds. It is mostly colored orange, but there are also blue versions, notably in the Apple universe.



content updates, so that news from different sources is not presented in a uniform fashion.

- News updates show up among your other e-mail and can get lost.
- Updates can be mistaken for spam and might be filtered out of the mail stream.
- You have to make your e-mail address known in order to receive notifications.

RSS has none of these disadvantages. Some advantages of RSS notification include:

- Subscribers are not required to disclose their e-mail addresses, so there is no increased exposure to threats associated with e-mail, such as spam, viruses, phishing, and identity theft.
- If users want to stop receiving news, they do not have to send an “unsubscribe” request, but can simply remove the feed from their feed reader.
- All feeds show up uniformly and are easily grouped, sorted, and compared. The feed items are automatically “sorted” because each feed URL has its own set of entries (unlike an e-mail box, where all messages are in one big pile and e-mail programs have to resort to complicated rules and pattern matching).

Since RSS is a news channel, there is a sender and receiver: the website author, who syndicates the content; and the visitor, who subscribes to the content. The author maintains the RSS feed on the website, and visitors who are interested in receiving updated content can subscribe to the feed.

There is one caveat to this method: RSS feeds are not individualized web searches. The content delivered by feeds is what the website author puts into the feed, not what the subscriber would like to get out of it. There are also no search words or filters, which is why organizations like BBC News go to such lengths to divide their feeds into ever smaller categories. This is because the narrower the category, the more focused the content.

RSS Reader Software

Think of the RSS reader as the “e-mail program” for the Internet. As you visit sites you want to keep track of, you subscribe to their RSS feeds. The RSS reader, in turn, will keep an eye on all your subscribed feeds. Any changes to a website’s content are listed in the reader so that you have a quick picture of what is new every time you open your RSS reader.

As with most things Internet, RSS readers are anything but standardized, and there are many choices of RSS readers available. Some are free and some incur a license fee. Some reside on your computer and some are online. For example, Internet Explorer and Firefox both offer RSS subscription functions. Some RSS readers ➡

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work through your mail program. Different programs offer different ways of organizing feeds. So, to a large extent, it is a question of personal preference, and you should try a few different programs to see which you like best.

Since it is so easy to subscribe to RSS feeds, your subscription list can grow very long, very quickly and your reader can end up storing a really large amount of data. Because of this, I would stay away from using browsers or software that integrates with an e-mail program. This will

make the local files of a browser or e-mail application very large.

I prefer to use online readers because I can access them from any computer. Since I started using RSS feeds early on, I use a program called Bloglines, but I think that, given the ease of interface and functions such as tags and trends, Google Reader offers the most “bang for the buck” at this moment. Here is a short list of readers and where to find them:

Google Reader

www.google.com/reader

Web: feeds.redd.it

<http://redd.it.com>

Bloglines

www.bloglines.com

Mac OS X: NetNewsWire

www.newsgator.com/Individuals/NetNewsWire

Windows: SharpReader

www.sharpreader.net

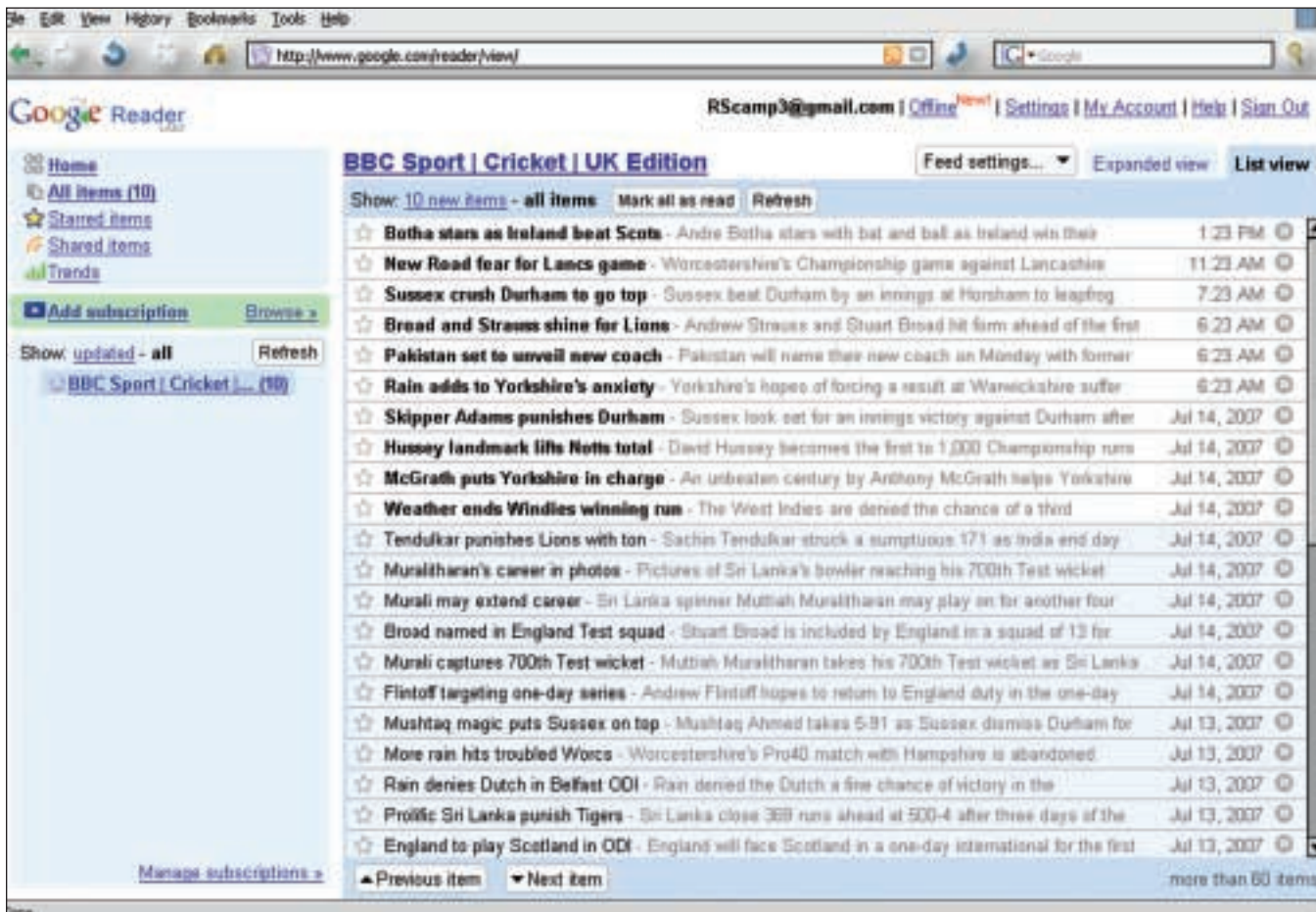
Linux: Straw

www.gnome.org/projects/straw

Figure 2: In Google Reader, copy the Cricket RSS feed URL into the Add Subscription field to subscribe to the feed.



Figure 3: Cricket-related news items published by BBC News appear, from the most recent to the oldest, in the right panel; the subscribed feed shows in the left panel. Note that this is “List view.”



How to Subscribe to Feeds

If you would like to use an online feed reader, you need to register as a user. With Google (as with other large services), your e-mail user account will also work with the feed reader. When you find a website you would like to monitor, identify the RSS link. Most often, the link shows up as the orange square feed button that is shown in Figure 1 on page 33, or else a rectangular button with the letters “RSS” or “XML.” Sometimes it is a text link that says “Syndicate this” or a similar phrase.

Copy the link into the “Add subscription” field of the RSS reader. If you are using your browser as the reader, you simply click on the subscription button (see Figure 2 on page 34).

The reader software will now monitor that feed and all subscriptions. You can make groups and organize

the feeds. You can display just the headline of the feed, or the headline and the first couple of lines of the content. If you are interested in one of the items listed, click on it and it will take you to the full article on the website it came from.

The RSS reader gives you, in one place and organized in a uniform format, all new items and changes that

have taken place on the websites you have subscribed to. At a glance, you can decide which items you are interested in, and with a click go directly to the original website and source material to read the full text. It is possible to create folders for feeds, tag news items using keywords, and structure the display in different ways to make the result more meaningful

If you are the author of a website that has frequently updated content, such as news, an events schedule, membership lists, or “Top 10” lists, you can use RSS feeds to generate more traffic for your site.

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(see Figure 3 on page 35). Using an RSS feed is much less time-consuming and more productive, since you only access material you really want to find out more about.

Syndicate Your Own Site

If you are the author of a website that has frequently updated content, such as news, an events schedule, membership lists, or “Top 10” lists, you can use RSS feeds to generate more traffic for your site.

RSS feeds are not only convenient tools for readers, they also provide additional links that are indexed in search engines. Moreover, there are many feed lists out there that specialize in tagging and listing feeds. Such lists can help make your site more visible. Web logs alone come in staggering numbers.

So how can you give your website a feed to make it attractive to readers and indexable by RSS-specific listings? A number of publication applications, in particular content management software, automatically create RSS feeds. Well-known names in the open-source sector are Mambo, Drupal, Movable Type, Expression Engine, and WordPress. Blog software, such as LiveJournal and MySpace, also creates RSS feeds. If your website does not use any of those content systems, you may be able to

create feeds with the help of Feedburner, a web-based application. Please check out the following sites for more information:

Drupal

<http://drupal.org>

Expression Engine

<http://expressionengine.com>

Feedburner

www.feedburner.com

Mambo

www.mamboserver.com

Movable Type

www.movabletype.org

WordPress

<http://wordpress.org>

Conclusion

RSS feeds are time savers and make it easy to scan a large number of websites quickly for content that is new and potentially interesting. They require the initial investment of setting up the reader program, but the time required to do that is negligible compared to the time saved once the reader takes over the regular monitoring of the feeds. It is not uncommon to monitor hundreds of feeds in a very small amount of time, which would be impossible to accomplish if you had to visit each site separately. If you are surfing the web regularly for information that changes on an unpredictable schedule, you should seriously consider letting an RSS reader do the work for you by bringing the information to your computer automatically.

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Need Help with Feeds?

If you would like to use feeds as content on your own website and your programming skills are not up to speed, you can Google for ready-to-use widgets that let you insert RSS content into your web pages. Check out <http://snurl.com/1qj1j> to see a web page built exclusively from feeds I subscribed to in an account I created to illustrate this point.

Save in San Francisco with Visa Preferred Travel

From rental cars to complimentary desserts, appetizers, and free parking, you can save big in San Francisco every time you use your Visa card at participating merchants from now until June 30, 2008. For more details on how the program works, visit http://welcometosf.com/preferred_travel.