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INTERNET CONNECTION

Staying Informed With Really Simple Syndication (RSS)

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Really Simple Syndication (RSS) is a term seen all over the Web, from online newspapers to subscription databases. Although the RSS icon, an orange box with curved lines radiating out of a circle, is ubiquitous online, use of RSS is not. RSS has not caught on with a broad audience, although it is difficult to locate precise usage data. RSS is an interesting way to approach research, with information streams being sent to a user, rather than a user manually pulling in work from disparate sources.

RSS is a specification that allows users to be notified when new content is posted to a site (“Really Simple Syndication 2.0” 2012). Feed readers, like Google Reader (reader.google.com), are used to make RSS human-readable. For instance, if a user regularly goes to multiple sites each day to see whether new content is posted, she might consider RSS. The user could add each site’s RSS feed to her reader and visit the reader to see which, if any, sites have been updated instead of visiting many separate sites. Most sites with frequently posted content offer an RSS feed. RSS feeds are not just for text-based content, either. They are also used for video and audio content, so that users are notified when the new content is released, regardless of its format.

RSS is most useful for tracking and filtering content. While most frequently updated sites provide an RSS feed of their content, many less frequently updated sites also provide one. Using an RSS reader is helpful in this application, because if a site is not updated regularly readers often begin to forget to visit the site. RSS allows users to have all of the content they wish to track sent to a single interface, freeing up the user from having to check multiple sites for new content. Most users can remember to check

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a site daily. For many, the challenge is remembering to check a site weekly, or even less frequently.

RSS is also an effective filter. It allows users to specify the content they wish to see. For instance, a user could add the RSS feed for the entire *New York Times* website and see every piece of content published in her feed reader. But given the amount of content published each day, the feed would be challenging to parse, a veritable flood of information. But if a user were to create a feed of *The New York Times* based upon a specific topic, she would see everything published on that topic across the various sections of the site, freeing the user from regularly checking the site for information on her topic. The *New York Times* lists all of its feeds at <http://www.nytimes.com/services/xml/rss/index.html>. The RSS feeds on this page are based on the different sections of the *New York Times* site. Users can also search for *New York Times* Topics RSS Feeds via the main RSS page. The Topics RSS Feeds are more granular than the feeds listed on the main RSS page. Many news sites offer this kind of RSS segmentation, allowing users to track areas or authors rather than an entire site.

RSS feeds can also be created from subscription databases. Collections like Project MUSE, EBSCOHost, and ProQuest all export RSS feeds based upon searches. For users, this means that rather than regularly searching these platforms for their research area, they can set up persistent searches via RSS. To see if new content has been added, the user can check her RSS reader, rather than searching multiple platforms.

For example, Project MUSE offers an RSS feed for each of its journals. So a user wishing to regularly examine a journal without having to subscribe might add the journal feed to her reader, where she would be notified when new content from a particular journal was available within Project MUSE. Project MUSE has extensive documentation on its RSS feeds here: <http://feeds.muse.jhu.edu>. Interestingly, the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, a subscription collection of data sets, uses RSS to notify users when a study receives a substantial update, which is a helpful feature in that many researchers might not think to check to see whether a study or data set has changed since last accessed.

Users might also wish to track topics more than specific journals. For instance, a user might wish to track articles about gender and sports across disciplines. EBSCOHost allows users to create RSS feeds of searches, with the user selecting how far back the search should go and how frequently it should be run. This can be a very useful application. The user can run a successful search that yields useful articles from a particular database. The user will select the articles she wants, but will need to periodically rerun the search to capture newer content that might be entering the subscription database. But by taking the RSS feed of the search, the user does not need to remember to rerun the search. Instead, the search will be run periodically for the user, with results showing up in the RSS reader.

This kind of functionality is not new. Many subscription tools have a search alert feature that allows the results of searches to be emailed to users periodically. RSS is very similar, except the results of the search are not appearing in an e-mail inbox. Given how inundated so many users are by e-mail, the ability to remove even a few items from an inbox can be a huge relief. In this case, RSS can be seen as a way to help ease the e-mail burden under which so many academics operate.

In terms of choosing a reader to translate RSS feeds, Google Reader is probably the easiest way to start. It's Web-based, so it does not require the user to download any software. Instead, the user just adds RSS feeds to the Web interface and sees content as it is updated. Google Reader also gives users the ability to organize feeds into folders. Users who are uncomfortable entering the Google ecosystem might try Netvibes (<http://www.netvibes.com>), which is another Web-based reader, or My Yahoo (my.yahoo.com), a Web-based news service that allows users to add RSS feeds. Many Web browsers, including Firefox and Internet Explorer, allow users to subscribe to feeds using the browser itself, but in many cases users would only have access to those feeds from the local computers on which they subscribed to the feeds. There are also client-based RSS readers for desktop computers. There are also many feed reading apps for mobile devices, making it fairly simple for users to travel with mobile access to their RSS content.

As mentioned previously, there is some debate about how widespread RSS usage is, especially outside of technical communities. A 2008 report from Forrester research put usage at around 11%, which generated some discussion within the technology community (Hopkins 2008). In 2010, Google shared data on Google Reader usage, showing an increase in users over time (Parparita 2010). TechCrunch, the popular technology blog, shared its referral data in early 2011 and reported a decrease in traffic originating from Google Reader (Siegler 2011). Cassidy, Britsch, Griffin, Manolovitz, She, and Turney surveyed students at Sam Houston State University, both graduate and undergraduate, and found 16.4% reported subscribing to an RSS feed, while 22% said they did not use RSS feeds but were interested in them (2011, 385). Stocker, Griffin, and Kocher surveyed criminal justice students at two separate colleges, with 55% of respondents reporting they were unfamiliar with RSS feeds and 71.5% saying they never or almost never used them (2011, 85). It seems challenging to find precise data on usage, but the format still seems to be well supported on sites and relatively popular among certain types of users.

As with just about any technology, the utility can be debated. One advantage to RSS is that it allows users to dictate everything that appears in their reader. Users don't necessarily control the content itself, but they have a strong hand in controlling the subject of content or from where the content is pulled. Content curation is another avenue for users to be track news.

Socially curated content is not necessarily as focused as the content one might gather from RSS feeds, but the trade-off is that it potentially broadens what users might encounter. With RSS, users are limited, to a certain extent, to what they know to request. With socially curated content, as one might find via social networks like Twitter, Facebook or Google+, users might encounter unexpected content.

Users of social networks tend to post links to items of interest. So by following or friending people who share a research interest, users gain access to content they are posting. It is the online equivalent of asking a colleague what he is currently reading. The efficacy of this depends upon finding the right people to follow or friend. Finding someone with a shared research interest is not very helpful if he does not post much content. Conversely, finding someone who posts a lot of content is not helpful if it is not relevant.

With the rise in popularity of mobile devices and tablets, more apps and tools are being developed to allow users to mix self-selected RSS content with socially curated content. One popular example is Flipboard (<http://flipboard.com>), the mobile app designed to bring users curated and beautifully formatted content. In addition to presenting users with curated content, Flipboard also allows users to import their RSS subscriptions via their Google Reader account. Pulse (<http://www.pulse.me>) is a similar product that also integrates with Google Reader. In general, RSS subscriptions are relatively portable, with most tools supporting the Outline Processor Markup Language (OPML) that allows RSS subscriptions to be moved between readers without having to manually resubscribe to each feed. Users interested in using all or most of their current RSS subscriptions in something like Flipboard or Pulse should be able to export their current subscriptions as an OPML file out of their current reader and then import that file into Google Reader, certainly not the easiest workflow, but perhaps preferable to manually resubscribing to a lot of feeds in a new tool.

RSS feeds represent a different way of considering research and news-gathering. Rather than moving from site to site, users can have content pushed to them into a centralized digital repository. Of course, there is a model for this sort of thing. Journals are centralized collections of scholarship that are pushed out to users via postal mail. But RSS is also flexible enough to pull in content across publications, so a user might receive information representing content from more than one journal title, with all of the content available in the single interface of the RSS reader.

This way of processing information is not for everyone. Some users prefer to actively retrieve their own content. Some users have trouble filtering and selecting feeds and quickly become overwhelmed by the content. Some users create feed reader accounts and then quickly forget about them. And some users work in research areas that don't lend themselves to this kind of research workflow. But for users who do find themselves trying to track information across various sites and platforms, and for users who might be

using mobile devices, RSS is an interesting way to access multiple information streams in a single interface.

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