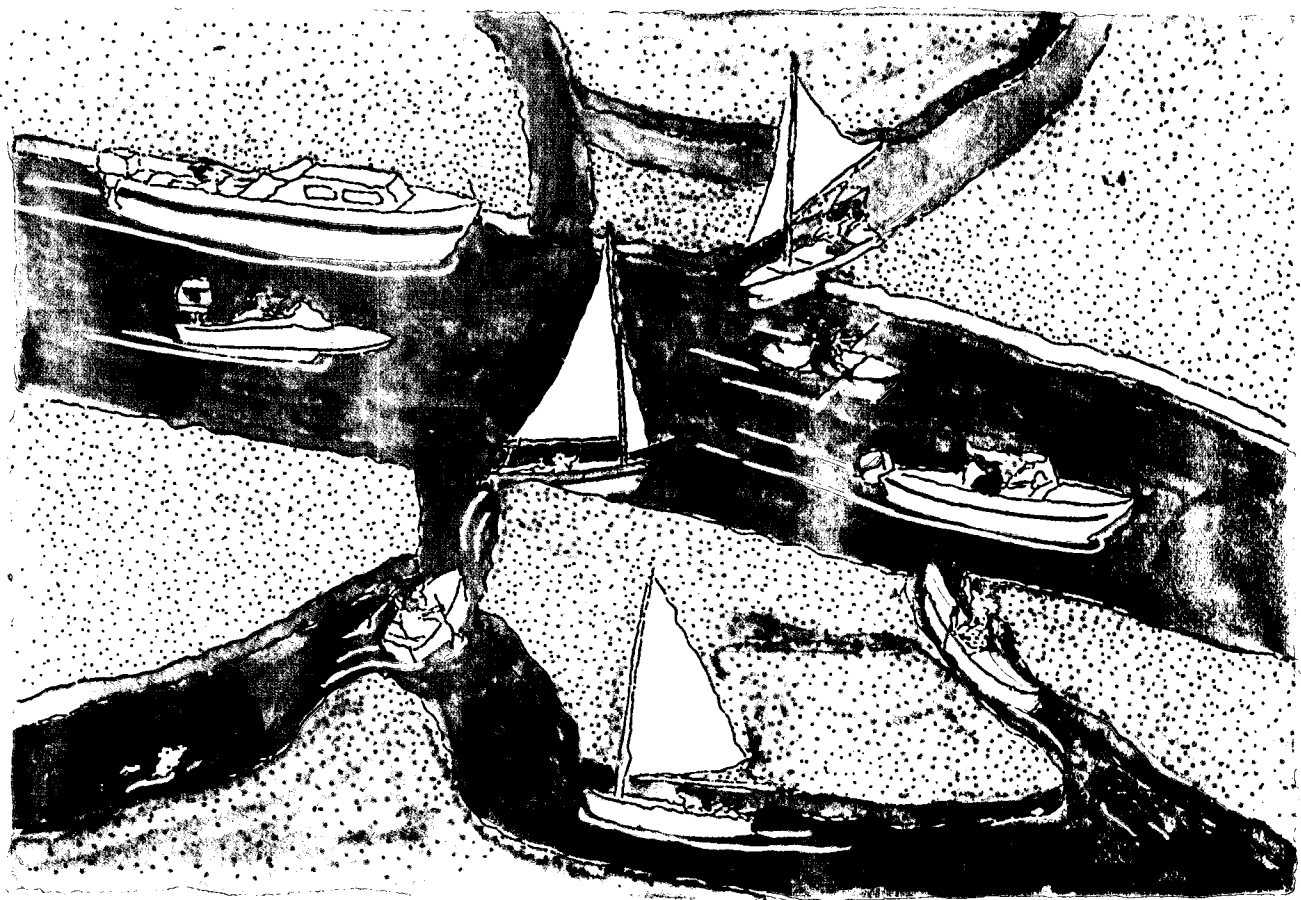


Merrily Down



RSS makes it easy to gather information

IMAGINE A WORLD where relevant information comes to you instead of you having to search for it. A librarian's fantasy, to be sure. Well stop imagining and start learning about RSS or Real Simple Syndication, a technology that allows you to do just that, subscribe to "feeds" or streams of information from any number of content producers, including traditional media outlets and blogs, all for free.

With RSS, you can connect to more information in less time, thus keeping track of news, ideas, and conversations almost as they happen. Instead of pointing and clicking through dozens of sites to learn what's new, RSS brings it all together in one place.



the Stream

It's just one of the powerful new technologies that are allowing users to manage, create, and share online content as never before. Collectively, these tools are helping make Web 2.0 a reality, transforming the way we live in the 21st century—and the way we learn (See "School Library 2.0," May 2006, pp. 50–53).


So what are some of the ways that RSS feeds can be used in schools? Let's say a class is studying global warming, and the teacher wants the latest news on the subject. After first acquiring an aggregator, a program designed to collect Web feeds, you log on to a news compilation service, such as Google News (news.google.com), type "global warming" in the search box, and then click on the RSS link in the left hand column of the results page. Add the URL to your aggregator, and you'll start receiving links to any mention of the topic in the 4,500 sources tracked by Google News. If that's overwhelming, you can limit your feeds to as few as one publication.

Do your teachers or students use blogs as part of the curriculum? Help streamline their research by subscribing to the RSS feeds of pertinent blogs. If they create their own blogs, you can use RSS to collect their work into one convenient location. If anything, RSS saves you a lot of time.

Let's Get Started

There are just two components of RSS: the syndicated feeds of information you want to collect and the aggregator that does the collecting. Again, you simply select your feeds, add them to your aggregator, then sit back as new content comes streaming in.

First you need an aggregator. Perhaps the simplest one to start with is the free Web-based tool Bloglines (bloglines.com). With a Bloglines subscription, you can check your feeds from any Internet-connected computer. (For other options with expanded features, Newsonfeeds.com has a great list of both Web and desktop aggregators.) On the Bloglines homepage, click the link "Sign up now." Once you've gone through the registration process, you can start adding feeds.

Say you're in professional development mode and you visit the blog of librarian Meredith Farkas, "Information Wants to Be Free" (meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/index.php). You like what you see and want to subscribe. On the right-hand side of Farkas's homepage, you'll see , a small orange box with the letters RSS or XML, the code used to generate RSS feeds.

(On some sites, the link appears as "RSS" or "Syndicate.") When you click on the orange box, you will see a page of scary looking code, which, thankfully, you can ignore. Take careful note, however, of the Web address or URL of that page. You'll need to copy and add it to your aggregator.

On Bloglines, log in to your account. Click the "Add" link that appears just under the top tabs in the left-hand frame. Paste the URL of your RSS feed into the subscription form that comes up, and click "Subscribe." You can then choose various options for organizing your feeds, including folders and category headings. And that's it. You're up and RSS-ing!

So Many Feeds, So Little Time

Another option for adding a feed also appears on the Farkas site. Just under the orange XML box is the link "sub bloglines." Clicking this will take you directly to a Bloglines subscription page, with the Farkas URL already in place. Just hit "Subscribe" and you're set.

There are other ways to locate feeds of interest using search terms, as mentioned in the Google News example above. You can also find feeds by performing a general Web search on search.msn.com. Once you've entered your search term, scroll down to the bottom of the results page and click on the RSS button to capture the feed. Then, any time the top ten search results for your particular query changes, you'll automatically be notified.

By now you've got several feeds in the ol' aggregator. The next step is to make it a regular practice to check your account. In Bloglines, whenever new content is available for a particular feed, the feed's name will appear in bold, along with the number of unread entries. Click on the feed, and the content will appear in the right-hand frame of the page.

A word of caution: go slowly. It's pretty easy to load up on RSS feeds, only to find that you can't keep up with the resulting flood of content. I suggest limiting your consumption to 20 or so feeds, at least in the beginning.

Tagging and Sharing

Not only can you track what people are writing about a topic, you can also use RSS to find out what people are reading. Social bookmarking sites like Furl (www.furl.net) and del.icio.us

By Will Richardson

Lifesavers

(del.icio.us) allow users to store their links and categorize them by assigning “tags” or keywords. For example, if you searched either of those sites for links that users had labeled “global warming,” you could snag the RSS feed for those results. So anytime anyone else came to Furl or del.icio.us and saved a resource with that tag, you would receive a notification in your aggregator. It’s like having an army of researchers locating relevant information on your particular topic of interest.

Now instead of taking all of those RSS feeds and pulling them into your personal aggregator, what if you could start creating Web pages of information with your feeds? Well you can do just that with the help of some nifty new online apps.

One of those options, Suprglu (suprglu.com), another free service, allows you to enter as many RSS feeds as you like to create a single stream, a so-called “river of news.” So let’s say that you create global warming search feeds for *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the BBC on Google News. Instead of aggregating each of those feeds in Bloglines, you can combine them into an automatically updated, blog-like Web page at Suprglu. But wait, there’s more. In a particularly cool feature, Suprglu will create a single RSS feed from the three, four, ten, or more feeds that you collect there.

A River of News for Your Library

Just imagine the possibilities for a “river of news” Web page in the context of library services. If students in a class have created their own blogs, for instance, their work could be displayed collectively on a Suprglu page. Or have your classes save interesting resources to del.icio.us with a unique tag, such as “ABCHigh-GeographyLinks.” Then drop the RSS feed for that tag into Suprglu and watch the page update automatically as your students bookmark additional sites. And that’s only the beginning.

Two other options for creating Web pages with RSS are Netvibes (www.netvibes.com) and Pageflakes (www.pageflakes.com). Both services allow you to make a columned page, similar to a newspaper, out of your RSS feeds—as many as you want to include. By using a relatively new programming language called AJAX, Netvibes and Pageflakes allow you to easily drag and drop boxes of feeds, so you can design a page to your liking. You can also add contacts, to-do lists, and other elements to further personalize your creation. So imagine having your own resource page of informative feeds, including your calendar, let’s say, and a feed of pictures from Flickr, the photo-sharing site. The best part is that it’s all free.

But what if you want to place an RSS feed in a regular old Web page that you created using Dreamweaver or FrontPage. No problem. Thanks to a great little service devised by education technology maven Alan Levine, you can turn feeds into JavaScript, which you can then place on any page. At Feed2JS (jade.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/feed), you just plug in the address of the RSS feed, check off a few display options, and click a button. Just copy and paste the resulting JavaScript into the body of your HTML, and presto—you’ve added an automatically updated, dynamic element to your previously static page.

In a library setting, this could work any number of ways. If you started a blog, for example, where you listed new book arrivals or provided mini reviews, you could take the blog’s RSS

RSS feeds can help you tame the torrent of information online, both in and out of the classroom. Here are a few links to help you get started.

The RSS Compendium Resources List

allrss.com/index.html

Probably the best site for listings of RSS directories, feeds, and aggregators.

RSSFeeds.com

www.rssfeeds.com/links.php

There’s no easier way to find feeds of information for the things you are interested in. Just enter your keywords and click “Search.”

RSS Feed Factory from the BBC

www.bbc.co.uk/feedfactory/

The Feed Factory does about as good a job of explaining RSS as any site. Point newbies here.

RSS Ideas for Educators

tinyurl.com/pcce2

A nice RSS primer by Quentin D’Souza, the author of the TeachingHacks.com blog.

The Librarian List of RSS Feeds

www.pubsub.com/lists/librarian.php

A great list of library-oriented blogs that you can subscribe to via RSS.

RSS Quick Start Guide for Educators

www.weblogg-ed.com/wp-content/uploads/2006/05/RSSFAQ4.pdf

A how-to guide to getting started with RSS that I created specifically with educators in mind.

The Weather via RSS

www.rssweather.com

Just plug in your zip code, post the feed in your aggregator, and kiss the Weather Channel good-bye.

feed and drop it into your main page. And that’s just a start. RSS can deliver not only text, but also multimedia (podcasts and video) and any other type of file (Word documents or PowerPoint presentations). While that gets a bit more technical, it’s nowhere near as difficult as you might think.

So if you desire greater control over the information that you access and consume—and so better serve your students—you can achieve it all with RSS.

Will Richardson is the author of Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts and Other Powerful Web Tools for the Classroom (Corwin Press, 2006) and the blog www.weblogg-ed.com.

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