Leveraging and Repurposing RSS

By Brian Westra

While many of us have enjoyed the prospects that RSS promised, it generally remains an unused tool among those we support in our organisations. Perhaps it's due to lack of experience with the software or services, resistance to changes in information workflow, confusion or poor understanding of the benefits, or simply that users feel they already have too much information to manage. My own experience and conversations with staff indicated that a lack of familiarity with RSS, coupled with a point of need justification for delving into RSS, were significant factors in the low level of adoption.

About the Author

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Worth the effort

Of course if you are looking at using RSS for yourself or your organisation, the first step is to determine if it provides the kinds of benefits that can justify the effort. In my case, employing RSS arose out of the need to more efficiently monitor a diverse set of information resources for myself, while providing value-added benefits to staff and the public by pre-screening a number of feeds and selecting items targeted to our specific services and projects.

My employer at the time had approximately 65 staff employed by several city and county government divisions and departments. Project and service level teams were sometimes composed of staff from more than one of these offices, and the makeup of those teams often changed over time.

To facilitate communication with these individuals and teams, I created a web application through which staff could post and receive information via subscription to self-selected topic areas. While the design was modeled on ResourceShelf (http://www.resourceshelf.com/) and other blogs, I developed a set of authentication, subscription, and authoring tools that were intended to integrate personalisation and internal information sharing. Staff expressed interest in using the system to keep themselves up to date, but they rarely posted items themselves. On the other hand, I was monitoring between 30 and 40 RSS feeds on a regular basis as the source for my frequent posts to the system.

In further conversations with staff, they commented that they liked to receive content focused on their project and team needs through the items I was passing along, though it was clear they weren't interested in doing much posting themselves. For this reason, I set aside this home-grown web application to explore RSS-based tools for selecting and aggregating RSS feed items.

Facilitating RSS access

If there is relevant RSS content for your organisation, there are at least two ways in which you as a librarian or other information professional can facilitate its use to update and inform your organisation. One option is to promote and enable widespread use of RSS by staff, through outreach and training. Highlighting easy-to-use tools and training staff in the basic concepts of RSS can increase adoption.

A complementary approach is to increase the value of RSS to the organisation by repurposing specific, targeted posts into feeds that meet individual and team needs. The large number of feeds one can find and search is likely to provide some useful content, but sifting through a high volume of content for useful information can be a disincentive to maintaining multiple subscriptions. If you or someone in your organisation is willing to filter and select the relevant content, similar to the news clipping services of times past, such a service will help reduce the chaff and enable staff to more easily locate and track the information they need. Anything that can help people manage their information overload is sure to be welcome. Providing this kind of service and making it part of the value proposition for staff involved is likely to be the greater challenge.

Like a normal RSS feed, filtered or selected feeds can be output as subscription services, channeled through RSS management tools, and displayed via widgets in web pages, accommodating those that don't use RSS readers. Another component to RSS is to use tools for filtering on the front end, that is, for you as the information services person, so you have less to review before passing them along to your staff.

In keeping with the theme of ease of use, and to minimise implementation costs and effort, I chose Google Reader for the workshops I held with staff at my organisation. I find Reader easy to set up and use for my own needs, and using a web application meant that IT staff were not required to install software on user desktops nor in the classroom. An introduction to Reader also dovetailed with exploring other Google applications that might interest staff, such as the iGoogle homepage and Google Docs.

Teaching about a web application while everyone was logged into their own account made it easy to do hands-on training in configuration and feed subscription that would then be accessible for the participants from their own desktops. It is critical to actively engage attendees with the tools or resources in a workshop, since this allows them to apply their training in the moment, gaining immediate feedback and concrete outcomes. Creating a workshop that incorporates experiential learning can mean more work for the instructor, but it improves retention and seems to be a better model for adult learners. An additional benefit of a successful hands-on class is that the participants come away with learning and resources that have a tangible impact, which can be an incentive for participation in future workshop opportunities.

Filtering the feeds

Training staff in how to use an RSS reader is one part of the picture. It may be another challenge for you to devote the time necessary to monitor feeds and select relevant content for your subscribers. My approach to this second issue was to build on the concept of the original home-grown system and use Google Reader for selecting and posting items for specific target audiences in the organisation. With 65 staff there was a comparatively large number of project teams and services to support. These ranged from industries (e.g. auto, dry cleaning, dental) to products (e.g. fire retardants, pharmaceuticals), as well as possible impacted populations, and other subjects.

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There are several options for filtering and mashing RSS feeds based on keyword matching and other automated processes. Past articles on Yahoo! Pipes in November 2009 (http://web.fumsi.com/go/article/find/4342) and Google Reader in December 2009 (http://web.fumsi.com/go/article/manage/4394) have reviewed these. In addition, Reader supports a more granular, manual selection approach, via tagging items for display through clips, which I find to better meet my organisation's needs.

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The clips option, once set up, is a fairly seamless method through which you can select and syndicate items from the feeds you monitor. Essentially, items that you tag in Reader can then be displayed via embeddable JavaScript widgets, called clips, in your web pages. Tagged items are visible on the web page almost immediately (once the page is refreshed). The clips method also provides a view all link at the bottom of the window to a Google page that has a subscription link, and lets you page back through past items. The view all pages don't offer many configuration options for branding or layout, but they do provide access to all past items. Reader also enables you to create an embeddable widget to display a blogroll of the feeds you are monitoring.

Here's a screen shot of one of the pages I use for displaying items.

Fig. 1

The clips can be fed through the Google AJAX Feed API if you'd like greater control and more options for configuring the display through CSS customisation and API methods. However, unlike the instantaneous update of Google clips, the Feed API relies on an hourly feedcrawl to update the displayed items. Another limitation is that it restricts the display to only the current items on the page (i.e. no view more option to scroll back), although this list could be set to display up to 250 items.

Email applications

Email is another option for distributing your selected feed items, particularly for those who are reluctant to subscribe with an RSS reader. By running the clips feed through Feedburner, you can create an email subscription option to display on the web page for your feeds.

The flexibility to select and display individual feed items from across a range of sources may open up new opportunities for you to distribute truly targeted information. For instance, you can use TicTOCs (http://www.tictocs.ac.uk/) or other journal table of contents feeds to select articles to include in a research guide or research project page.

Some other options include:

- new books lists

- conference announcements and reviews

- research highlights

- development and donor news from local, regional, and national news sources.

By training staff, integrating useful feeds and flexible delivery channels, you can leverage some of those promised RSS benefits to improve not only your information harvesting and distribution services on behalf of staff, but also the management of your organisation's diverse information resources.
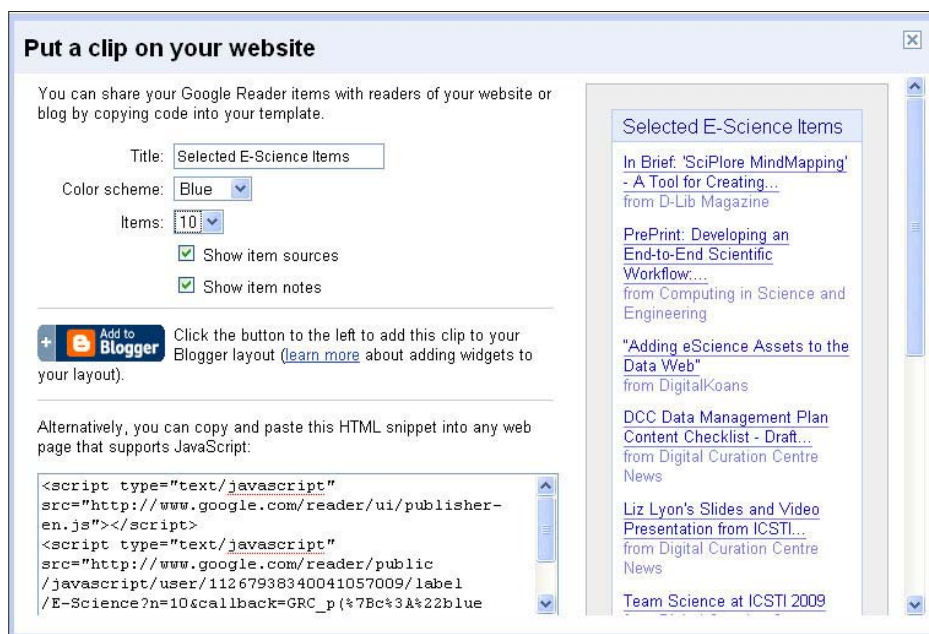

Fig. 2: Clips feed

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