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Current awareness in the new millennium: RSS

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ABSTRACT: Keeping current is essential for both patrons and librarians in the health sciences. We receive electronic and photocopied tables of contents. We subscribe to relevant mailing lists, newspapers and magazines. We review Web sites, books and journals. Our desks are littered with current awareness items that more often get old than read. RSS or "Really Simple Syndication" is a means of organizing and simplifying current awareness efforts. Using RSS feeds from a variety of sources along with aggregator software can keep up date with out the clutter. This article will provide a starting point from which to take advantage of RSS and continue the process of active learning.

Introduction

Keeping current is essential for both patrons and librarians in the health sciences. We regularly review information from a multitude of both paper and electronic resources, and it is as challenging to keep track of all the material we should read as it is to find time to do the actual reading.

This situation is familiar to all of us: we receive electronic and photocopied tables of contents from a current awareness service, in addition to subscribing to e-tables of contents from publishers. We subscribe to relevant mailing lists and newspapers to keep up with local and professional news. We regularly review Web sites with substantial content. We have books and journal articles stacked on our desks to read. We spend so much time organizing the physical and electronic clutter that we have little time to read it.

Librarians and patrons alike are frustrated with full e-mail boxes, stacked desks and limited time. Not much can be done about the lack of time, however something can be done about the clutter. Wouldn't it be nice to have information fed into one location that can be accessed when time is available? Combining information and news using RSS feeds and aggregator software makes it easier to deal with the disorder and assists in coordinating your current awareness efforts.

This article is not meant to be an in-depth discussion about the world of RSS, rather an introduction and guide for getting started. It will focus on providing Health Sciences examples to demonstrate some of the possible uses of this web technology and lists of available resources. However it should be kept in mind that the best way to learn about RSS is to actually use it.

What is RSS?

RSS is an acronym with multiple meanings, which are widely debated amongst people on the Web. The most common definition is “Really Simple Syndication”. Still RSS is a hard concept to pin down. Based on XML coding also known as eXtensible markup language, this code is used to mark up news items from a Web site by identifying a title, a URL for the item, and either a summary or the full text. An RSS feed is the URL of the encoded items.

What is an RSS aggregator or reader?

An RSS aggregator is software which takes the XML code and displays it in a format you can read. Once you subscribe to a feed, the aggregator software displays any new unread content. Your aggregator can be set up to check a feed for updated information as often as every fifteen minutes or less frequently.

For simplicity’s sake, there are two types of RSS aggregators, web based and desktop applications. Numerous web aggregators exist, the two most popular being Bloglines <<http://www.bloglines.com>> and Newsgator <<http://www.newsgator.com/ngs/default.aspx>>. Pluck <<http://www.pluck.com/>> and FeedDemon <<http://www.bradsoft.com/feeddemon/>>, are equally as popular, though they are specifically for use on the desktop. A comprehensive list of aggregators is available is available at RSS Compendium - RSS Readers Web site <<http://allrss.com/rssreaders.html>>.

Each type of aggregator software offers a variety of functions, which should be tested to determine which is best suited to meet the needs of a particular individual. The major benefit of web-based aggregators is the ability to access your RSS feeds from any computer that has Internet access. On the other hand, desktop aggregators are known to have a straightforward interface and added functionality.

Who is providing the feeds?

RSS was developed in 1997[1]. Now some six years later news agencies for TV, radio and newspapers are using RSS to disseminate information to interested people. Journal publishers (Oxford University Press and Ingenta, to name two) are now making their tables of contents and in some cases abstracts available through RSS feeds. Governments and institutions (Government of Canada and National Institutes of Health) are finding this

an easy way to notify the public about new reports, events and current issues. Political parties are using RSS as a mechanism to get their message across. Database developers are using RSS as an alternative way to provide Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) services (see PubMed - http://www.nlm.nih.gov/pubs/techbull/mj05/mj05_rss.html). In addition libraries are producing RSS feeds for their news and announcements. OPAC companies (Sirsi[2][3] and open source systems) are starting to develop products which can produce customized RSS feeds from library catalogues. Patrons and librarians are programming RSS feeds based on their library OPACs[4]. These feeds have the potential to notify library patrons when a new item is purchased in their subject area and to act as an alert service for upcoming due dates or overdue information. Finally web logs/blogs are also capable of producing RSS feeds.

How do I find feeds?

You have probably seen an RSS feed but may not have recognized it as such. Most often a site will indicate that you can obtain a feed by using an obscure icon usually in the form of a small orange or blue rectangle with either RSS, XML, ATOM or Syndicate written on it. There may also be a text-based link such as “Syndicate this site”. Clicking on this icon or the link most often reveals incomprehensible XML code, this code is what is read by your RSS aggregator. To subscribe to the feed, copy the URL from your browser’s address window and add it to your aggregator.

You can also use search engines to locate feeds. Try searching on the topic you are interested in and adding in the word RSS. Take advantage of the search engines advanced search capabilities and do a domain name search of a particular site. For example, search Google <<http://www.google.com/>>, Yahoo <<http://search.yahoo.com/>> or MSN <<http://search.msn.com/>> using the following: site:.gov +RSS to see the results of a search for United States government Web sites offering RSS feeds. Another search strategy is to search in the URLs for the term RSS (e.g., diabetes inurl:rss) which is commonly used to indicate that a URL contains an RSS feed.

The most common way to locate feeds is to use one of the many RSS search engines available. Feedfinder <<http://feedfinder.feedster.com/>>, Syndic8 <<http://www.syndic8.com/>>, Topix.net <<http://www.topix.net/>>, Technorati <<http://www.technorati.com/>> and Waypath <<http://www.waypath.com/>> are some of the most well known search engines available.

There are also lists of feeds from a variety of Web sites. For example library related topics may be found at: LISfeeds.com created by Blake T. Carver and Steven M. Cohen <<http://lisfeeds.com/>>, Library Weblogs, and blogwithoutalibrary.net by Amanda Etches-Johnson <<http://www.blogwithoutalibrary.net/>>. Web sites often have subject based lists of RSS feeds dedicated to their interests such as “RSS Feeds in Health Care” <http://umanitoba.ca/libraries/health/internet/RSS_feeds.shtml>

Evaluating feeds

As with most Web sites you must evaluate the feed from a site to see if it will be of interest. Two important considerations for RSS feed evaluation are credibility and content overlap. In the healthcare field, credibility is the most important consideration. Does the news and information come from a trusted source? Is there information about the origin of information (news source or otherwise), is the information current? Content overlap is another point for concern. A large number of the news feeds obtain information from a small number of standard sources. This can cause some overlap in the news items you receive. Generally speaking it is best to subscribe to a feed and review its content over time before recommending it. Unsubscribing is generally easy if the content does not meet your standards.

Customizing feeds

Current awareness needs are highly individual and so may not be adequately addressed by established RSS feeds. This is where customization of RSS feeds becomes necessary.

In the health sciences field one of the best ways to tailor the information you receive via RSS is to take advantage of PubMed's <http://pubmed.gov/> recent release [5] of RSS feed customization capabilities. This allows researchers to keep up to date on the most recent articles in their field. Once a search is completed to your satisfaction, select "RSS feed" from the Send To drop-down menu, click on the "Create Feed" button and you are presented with an orange XML button which supplies the URL for the aggregator software. PubMed will then send daily updates to the aggregator for each RSS feed.

Customized RSS feeds are also available from the search engine MSN <http://search.msn.com/>. This search engine allows users to search and create personalized RSS feeds[6]. Using MSN, search the web and once satisfied with the search strategy scroll to the bottom of the results page. Look for an orange RSS button and click it to obtain the RSS feed URL for the search.

In addition, the Web site FindArticles.com <http://www.findarticles.com/> searches a number of journals and newspapers from the areas of academia, industry and general interest. After searching in the available search window, the results are displayed. Like the other sites mentioned above, look for the RSS feed icon near the top of the page to capture the feed. Note: check the citation information for occasional inaccuracies.

These tools are not the only ones available to assist you in customizing RSS feeds, other notable sites are PubSub <http://www.pubsub.com/> and Feedster <http://www.feedster.com/> which allow you to search blogs and Internet news groups for topical information.

What can I do with this in my library?

Providing RSS feeds is a growing trend for Internet web sites. Once you know what to

look for you notice the icons all the time. Many libraries create print hardcopy and/or e-mail content such as announcements, events, library news, and new acquisitions to patrons. RSS can perform the same function and should be considered simply as another tool to disseminate content to interested staff, patrons and donors.

As librarians we can use RSS feeds and aggregators to help keep us current. While this may not completely eliminate the clutter in your overburdened e-mail and mail box, it will help you focus your current awareness efforts on items of specific interest to you.

In addition you can make RSS work for you in several ways. RSS feeds can be incorporated into library Web sites by creating RSS feeds (easily done with a blog) or display feeds from trusted sources[7]. This helps to make often static library Web pages look dynamic without much effort.

Investigate your OPAC to see if it is capable of generating XML code. If so, you may be able to create RSS feeds. This has the potential to allow patrons to see new materials available from your library. It might also be used to provide a patron an RSS feed of the materials they have on loan which would notify them of impending due dates or overdue items.

Review the sites and feeds listed below under “Health Libraries and Librarianship” for examples of how other libraries are using this web technology.

Health Care RSS feeds

The resources listed here are meant to be a starting point in the exploration of Health Sciences RSS feeds. Links are provided below to web pages which provide explanatory information regarding content, RSS and RSS feed listings. Explore each carefully to see what is available. The RSS feed provided in each case relates specifically to health information. Some of the Web sites contain multiple feeds from which you may select those which will be most relevant to you or your patrons.

News

CBC News - Health & Science

HTML: <<http://www.cbc.ca/rss/>>

RSS feed: <<http://rss.cbc.ca/healthsciencenews.xml>>

Description: The CBC is a news service for radio and television from Canada. This feed provides information on health news of interest to Canadians.

BBC News - Health - World Edition

HTML: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/default.stm>>

RSS feed: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/rss/newsonline_world_edition/health/rss091.xml>

Description: The BBC is news service for radio and television from the United Kingdom. The feed provides daily health news headlines of international interest.

Medscape Medical News (All specialties) Web service.

HTML: <<http://www.medscape.com/pages/public/rss>>

RSS feed: <<http://www.medscape.com/cx/rssfeeds/news.xml>>

Description: Medscape Medical News offers RSS feeds for each medical specialty allowing people to choose their news and also provides one RSS feed to display health news from all specialties.

New York Times: Health

HTML: <<http://www.nytimes.com/pages/health/index.html>>

RSS feed: <<http://www.nytimes.com/services/xml/rss/nyt/Health.xml>>

Description: The New York Times: Health feed displays headlines and brief summaries of articles in the New York Times Health section.

Reuters: Health

HTML: <<http://today.reuters.com/rss/newsrss.aspx>>

RSS feed: <<http://today.reuters.com/rss/healthNews>>

Description: Reuters is an international news wire service which feeds headlines to a variety of news media.

Government and NGOs

FDA Recalls, Withdrawals and Safety Alerts (US)

HTML: <<http://www.fda.gov/opacom/7alerts.html>>

RSS feed: <<http://www.fda.gov/oc/po/firmrecalls/rssRecalls.xml>>

Description: This RSS feed from the United States Food and Drug Administration lists recalls, withdrawals and safety alerts on consumer products. This information is updated as needed.

FirstGov.gov Reference Centre: RSS Library

HTML:

<http://www.firstgov.gov/Topics/Reference_Shelf/Libraries/RSS_Library/Health.shtml>

Description: This is a listing of all health related RSS feeds available from United States government agencies.

Government of Canada: Department of Health

HTML: <<http://news.gc.ca/cfmx/view/en/index.jsp?categoryid=12&rssfeeds=depts>>

RSS feed:

<<http://news.gc.ca/cfmx/RSSServlet?creatorID=6676&languageID=1&department=>>

Description: Includes information on press releases and reports available from Health Canada.

National Guideline Clearinghouse (US)

HTML: <<http://www.guideline.gov/rss/>>

Description: This site offers a variety of feeds from the following institutions: National Guideline Clearinghouse, National Quality Measures Clearinghouse, and Quality Tools.

This is an excellent source for evidence-based medicine. Updated weekly.

National Institutes of Health (US)

HTML: <<http://www.nih.gov/news/>>

RSS feed: <<http://www.nih.gov/news/feed.xml>>

Description: Lists publication announcements for studies funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and topical health content created by the NIH.

World Health Organization

HTML: <<http://www.who.int/about/licensing/rss/en/>>

Description: Offers a few feeds related to news, media releases and current events such as disease outbreaks.

Journals (publishers)

BioMed Central RSS Feeds

<<http://www.biomedcentral.com/info/about/rss/>>

Description: All titles available from this open access publisher have RSS feeds. A nice listing of BioMed Central titles is available from Peter Scott at PScontent.com

<<http://pscontent.com/biomedcentral.html>>.

BMJ Journals Online

<<http://www.bmjournals.com/>>

Description: Most BMJ journals offer tables of contents via RSS. Browse to the journal home page and look for the orange RSS icon under the journal cover image.

Ingenta journals

<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/about/librarians/alerting_and_rss_feeds>

Description: Selected titles have RSS feeds. Browse the medicine list

<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/browsing/BrowseBySubject?j_subject=196>. Click on the journal title. This will display the journal's table of contents. The RSS button is on the right hand side if this service is available.

Nature Publishing Group

<http://npg.nature.com/npg/servlet/Content?data=xml/02_newsfeed.xml&style=xml/02_newsfeed.xml>

Description: The majority of journals available from the Nature Publishing Group offer RSS feeds. The feed URL is located next to each journal title.

Oxford University Press Journals

HTML: <<http://www.oup.co.uk/jnls/online/>>

Description: Browse to the home page for each journal to grab the feed and look for the blue RSS feed button on the journal's home page.

Health Libraries and Librarianship

Info-Rx: Newsletter of the Health Sciences Libraries

HTML: <<http://www.umanitoba.ca/libraries/health/newsletter/>>

RSS feed:

<<http://myuminfo.umanitoba.ca/Feeds/newsFeed.asp?typ=2&sec=857&cou=15>>

Description: This electronic newsletter is written by the staff of the University of Manitoba Health Sciences Libraries for their patrons. Articles range from database searching tips and new resources to library news impacting patrons. The newsletter is published nine times per year.

The Krafty Librarian

HTML: <<http://kraftylibrarian.blogspot.com/>>

RSS feed: <<http://kraftylibrarian.blogspot.com/>>

Description: “Currently The Krafty Librarian is a medical librarian for a hospital in Northeast Ohio. She has been a medical librarian for over 6 years. She tends to be interested in the technology side of librarianship and how it affects all types of library services including the relationship between patrons and librarians.”

Librarians' Rx

HTML: <<http://www.library.ualberta.ca/mt/blog/librariansrx/>>

RSS feed: <<http://www.library.ualberta.ca/mt/blog/librariansrx/index.rdf>>

Description: Written by Denise Koufogiannakis, Public Services Librarian, John W. Scott Health Sciences Library, University of Alberta. This professional blog covers news and events of interest to health sciences librarians.

National electronic Library for Health - Hitting The Headlines (UK)

HTML: <<http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/hth/help.asp>>

RSS feed: <<http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/xmlhelp.asp>>

Description: Reviews health articles in selected British newspapers and comments on the accuracy of the reporting.

nn/lm scr blog

nn/lm scr blog

HTML: <<http://nnlm.gov/scr/blog>>

RSS feed: <<http://nnlm.gov/scr/blog/wp-rss2.php>>

Description: News and information from the National Network of Libraries of Medicine, South Carolina Region.

New books by Subject (Call Number)

HTML: <<http://www.library.ualberta.ca/newbooks/lc/index.cfm>>

Description: RSS feeds are made available by the University of Alberta Libraries from their library OPAC. A nice explanation of how these were created is available from Kenton Good[8].

Conclusion

Librarians and their patrons have developed many methods to address current awareness. Unfortunately, these methods often result in an unwieldy amount of paper and electronic information that can become little more than extra clutter to an already busy life. RSS feeds and aggregators have the potential to help streamline these many methods into one clean, organized tool developed according to your specifications. Take advantage of RSS to rise above the clutter and get back to keeping current!

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