

Syndicating Agriculture News With RSS

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Abstract

Rich Site Summary, also known as Really Simple Syndication (RSS), is a technology used to distribute news and information from a Web site. RSS is a particularly useful tool for news organizations since these syndication feeds automatically notify the end-user that fresh information has been posted to a Web site, and it also avoids the use of e-mail. This innovation can be an effective way to distribute news releases and breaking news items. Instead of clicking on a Web site to see if fresh content has been posted, individuals that have news reader software programs running on their desktop computers receive the information as soon as it is posted to the Web. Texas A&M Agricultural Communications, an early adopter of RSS, began implementing an RSS feed in September 2003 and received national attention for this innovation in the February 2004 edition of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Since implementing an RSS feed on the <http://agnews.tamu.edu> Web site, more than 1,500 additional hits have been recorded each month. The new technology also has been discovered by journalists, who are finding RSS a much faster method of receiving news and story ideas.

Introduction

Rich Site Summary, also known as Really Simple Syndication (RSS), is a technology used to distribute news and information from a Web site. RSS is a particularly useful tool for news organizations since these syndication feeds notify the end-user that fresh information has been posted to a Web site.

This innovation can be an effective way to distribute news releases and breaking news items without the use of e-mail. Instead of clicking on Web sites to see if fresh information has been posted, individuals download a free or fee-based news reader software program of their choice. This software program runs separately from other applications on the desktop.

With the news reader program, users can subscribe to news sites that offer RSS feeds. By entering the RSS feed URL into the news reader program running on the desktop, the application automatically fetches fresh content

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posted to a Web site. No longer does a user have to manually check these sites for new information.

Major newspapers and wire services have adopted RSS technology, including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Reuters*, the *Boston Globe*, *Dallas Morning News* and *Yahoo! News*. RSS is “spawning a content revolution that is only now beginning to be understood and appreciated. It could well become the next mainstream method of distributing, collecting, and receiving various kinds of information” (Gillmor, 2004).

Texas A&M Agricultural Communications, one of the early adopters of RSS, began implementing an RSS feed in September 2003. Having no previous computer programming experience, the author read reference materials on Web sites, collected books from the campus library, and also studied content made available by Dave Winer, former chair at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University.

Winer is considered the father of RSS, having developed the technology while working at Netscape in the late 1990s. He is also author of the popular Weblog, *Scripting News* (<http://www.scripting.com>).

Methods/Process

The actual RSS news feed file consists of a short synopsis of news articles in chronological order by date and a link to where the news article resides on the server.

To view an RSS feed, end-users must be running a news reader program. Several free news reader software programs are available for download on the Web. For the PC, those include: Sharpreader (<http://www.sharpreader.com>), Feedreader (<http://www.feedreader.com>), and NewsGator (<http://www.newsgator.com>).

For the Apple Macintosh, the most popular news reader program is distributed by Ranchero and is called NetNewswire (<http://www.ranchero.com>). Apple has also recently incorporated RSS into its Safari Web browser with its new OS X Tiger operating system.

Once the RSS feed resides on the server, a link and an orange XML button is placed on the Web site. When the user sees these elements, he/she can copy the URL link and paste it into his/her newsreader program and subscribe to the RSS feed.

RSS feeds provide flexibility as well. If users find that the RSS feed is not providing news and information of their liking, they can simply “unsubscribe” to the RSS feed by deleting the feed from their newsreader program.

When a user subscribes to an RSS feed, perhaps a news feed, the newest

news item is listed first and dated. Each time the user clicks on a headline, the Web page is displayed in the viewer pane. This allows the user to quickly scan a list of news stories without ever using a browser.

It is conceivable that a user could scan as many as 25 news sites in a short amount of time without ever opening a browser. RSS brings the news to the user.

Perhaps the best feature about RSS is its affordability. Many land-grant institutions already serve information in HTML on Web sites. Anyone with a server who can code a RSS feed to specification can implement this technology without additional expense. This is an important factor considering the fiscal requirements of many land-grant universities. The only investment on the part of Texas A&M Agricultural Communications was the author's time devoted to research and writing code. This was done in between daily tasks of writing news stories, answering media calls, and other responsibilities.

To form an RSS feed and place the file on a server, the information is formatted into a programming language called eXtensible Markup Language (XML). To code the feed, the content developer can create the feed by simply as opening a Notepad document on the PC or a Text edit document on the Apple Macintosh.

Texas A&M Agricultural Communications' RSS feed includes the following code elements:

- <title> Name of the RSS feed
- <link> Points to the URL of the home page
- <description> What the RSS feed is about
- <item> Refers to the RSS entry
- <title> Headline of the news item
- <link> URL to where the news item resides on the server
- <description> Brief description of what the news item is about, usually the first paragraph of the news story

There are three ways to code a RSS feed by using the standard specification: 0.91, 0.92 and 2.0. These specifications can be found at <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/tech/rss#whatIsRss>. Texas A&M Agricultural Communications serves a 0.91 RSS feed.

Results/Outcomes

The RSS project has led to increased awareness both from the general public and from the farm press.

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The new innovation captured the attention of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, which profiled the Texas A&M project in its February 13, 2004 edition. *Beef Today* uses the RSS feed to receive Texas A&M Agriculture Program news in addition to traditional e-mail distribution. Steve Cornett, editor of *Beef Today*, said "(RSS) is like having an encyclopedia in the bookcase."

Since implementing a RSS feed on the <http://agnews.tamu.edu> Web site, more than 1,500 additional hits have been recorded each month. In addition to Steve Cornett with *Beef Today*, Marilyn Pokorney, a freelance writer in New York, recently began using RSS feeds: "I just started using a RSS reader within the last week. Amazing how these coincidences happen! Anyway, I added your site and read several of the articles. It's a fine idea."

Most of the news media and farm press in Texas and abroad have yet to embrace the technology, and in some cases, have never heard about RSS. An online survey distributed in August 2003 to journalists who subscribe to Texas A&M Agricultural Communications' listserv revealed less than 1% knew anything about RSS.

In August 2004, the author demonstrated the use of RSS to Donnis Baggett, publisher of the *Bryan-College Station Eagle*, the daily newspaper in Bryan, Texas, where Texas A&M is located. The newspaper implemented RSS feeds in June 2004 for the daily newspaper and also for its *Land & Livestock Post* agriculture publication published twice monthly.

Discussions/Conclusions

RSS feeds can be used for more than just news distribution. Land-grant universities can develop RSS feeds to announce new Extension publications, video and audio releases, promote internal newsletters, etc.

RSS technology has been embraced by Apple Computer Corporation. Microsoft Corporation has also announced plans to incorporate RSS technology into their new Longhorn operation system targeted for a future release date.

RSS can be found in most blogging Web applications. Blogs, or Weblogs, are short entries of information displayed in reverse chronological order. To keep track of fresh posts to blogs, many blogs have their own RSS feeds. These feeds enable readers to subscribe to the RSS feed and keep track of the latest information posted to the Web.

Blogs were in the spotlight for the first time ever at the 2004 Democratic National Convention as media credentials were issued to 35 bloggers. These bloggers, some who had no journalistic background, offered opinions, facts and other relevant information posted to their Weblog instantly. The main

attraction of blogs is their immediacy—there is no news cycle. As soon as news breaks, the information can be posted to the blog.

CNN, the Associated Press and other media outlets featured Weblogs during their convention coverage. With blogs appearing to gain more popularity by media outlets, RSS will ride the wave of their popularity.

To push the technology to the forefront, land-grant universities can provide education and training to the news media so that both can get their news and information out faster and more efficiently to all audiences.

End Notes

Specification information for coding RSS files can be found at <http://reallysimplesyndication.com>.

A complete roundup of RSS sources and implementation of the technology was presented at the 2004 Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Life and Human Sciences meeting at Lake Tahoe. To view, go to <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/mt/ace2004>.

References

Gillmor, Dan (2004). *We The Media: Grassroots Journalism By The People, For The People*. O'Reilly Media Inc.

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