

# **LIBRARIES AND RSS**

**By Richard W. Boss**

A number of libraries, especially public libraries, are offering RSS (Really Simple Syndication or also known as Rich Site Summary or RDF Site Summary) “feeds” to their patrons. A “feed” is a broadcast to those who have subscribed to the service. In the case of libraries, the feeds can alert patrons to new acquisitions, library events, exhibitions, changes in hours, etc. They can also be used to connect subscribers to feeds that a library has harvested. An example of harvesting is providing linkages to Web sites appropriate to the interests of a subscriber.

## **Definition and History**

RSS is an XML-based tool for constantly scanning the content of a Web site for updates and then broadcasting those updates to all subscribers through a feed. While RSS feeds have been used primarily with news sites (BBC, CNN, Forbes, Wired, Salon, ZDNet, etc.) and blogs (a Web site that contains brief entries arranged in reverse chronological order and updated regularly), they can be used with any server to disseminate information. When an update is sent out to PCs, PDAs, and cell phones, it is limited to a headline and a small amount of text. The recipients need to click to read more.

RSS was developed by Netscape for MyNetscape, its portal service. Beginning in 1999, Netscape allowed anyone with a MyNetscape account to publish news headings on his/her pages. It designated its technology RSS 0.9. When Netscape discontinued its portal, UserLand continued to develop RSS using Netscape’s version RSS 0.91 as a base. It designated its versions RSS 0.92, 0.93, and 0.94. A non-commercial group sought to standardize RSS by releasing RSS 1.0, but UserLand did not adopt it. Instead, it released RSS 2.0. All versions of RSS except 0.90 were in use in early 2006.

## **Advantages**

The advantage of RSS over posting information on a Web site is that patrons do not have to log onto the Web site to look for information. The advantage over electronic newsletters for both libraries and their patrons is that the information is fed as soon as it is available, rather than sent at the next scheduled time. There is considerable anecdotal evidence that libraries that offer RSS have seen an increase in traffic to their Web sites.

Other advantages to the subscribers are:

There is no need to send one's e-mail address anywhere to subscribe to an RSS feed, therefore, privacy is assured.

Spam-like publishing is not possible.

Annoying feeds can be cancelled with only a few keystrokes. No 'unsub' e-mail needs to be sent.

## **Creating RSS Feeds**

Before creating an RSS feed document, one must choose among the many versions of RSS. In most cases, the most suitable one is the latest version of RSS 2.0 because it is straightforward and easy to use.

A library with a Web server can use it to provide space for an RSS file and can add an RSS icon to the Web page. An excellent tutorial in creating feeds is Ben Hammersley's "Content Syndication with RSS." The ISBN is 0-596-003838. It was published in 2003 and was out of print as of early 2006. However, used copies are available on the Internet.

RSS feed creation software is available for downloading from a number of sources. UserLand's ([www.userland.com](http://www.userland.com)) Manila is used by many news feeds. At \$1,099 per year, the license is the most expensive one on the market. It should probably be considered only by libraries that plan to create scores of feeds. One of the most widely used inexpensive packages, priced at under \$40, is FeedForAll ([www.feedforall.com](http://www.feedforall.com)).

Several vendors of automated library systems now offer RSS feed capabilities in their products. One of the most common applications is updating of lists of new books and other library materials on an hourly basis. However, libraries with large acquisitions budgets will need to group new acquisitions into broad subject groupings so that subscribers will not be overwhelmed.

Another option is to use a Web-base service for RSS feeds. Such a service provides online access to software to create the feeds, provides hosting, and tracks use. One of the largest such services is FeedCraft ([www.feedcraft.com](http://www.feedcraft.com)).

Urchin (<http://urchin.sourceforge.net>) is an open source tool that can be used to aggregate RSS content on a library's Web site.

### **Identifying RSS Feeds**

Syndic8 ([www.syndic8.com](http://www.syndic8.com)) maintains a directory of more than 25,000 feed sources. LISFeeds.com ([www.lisfeeds.com](http://www.lisfeeds.com)) is both a directory and an aggregator. It specializes in library-oriented news.

### **Receiving RSS Feeds**

In order to receive RSS feeds, subscribers must have an aggregator (aka a feed reader). A number of them are available online, including free ones. One of the most popular free ones is Feedreader, an open-source product that is licensed under GPL and downloadable from [www.feedreader.com](http://www.feedreader.com); another is Bloglines ([www.bloglines.com](http://www.bloglines.com)). A list of other feed readers is available at [www.RSSfeeds.com](http://www.RSSfeeds.com).

The Mozilla Firefox browser and the Opera 7.50 browser have built-in feed readers. NewsGator ([www.newsgator.com](http://www.newsgator.com)) integrates into Microsoft Outlook. It is free to individuals and available to organizations at \$1.99 to \$11.95 per year. Web-based newsreaders are offered by Yahoo and Google.

Many sites that offer RSS feeds have an “RSS” or “XML” button on the homepage that can be clicked for adding that feed to an aggregator. In some cases, an aggregator may require that the URL be copied and pasted into the program. A feed can be deleted from an aggregator with a single click.

Almost all feed readers can read all versions of RSS.

## **Libraries Using RSS**

At least 100 libraries have implemented RSS projects—most of them pilot projects to see how people will use the service. Approximately half of the libraries that have implemented RSS are using the RSS features of their automated library system.

The National Cancer Institute has created a database that includes feeds gathered from the Internet. It also creates feeds that combine some of this information with information about its own collections and services. The service is limited to registered NCI users.

The Marin County Free Library has launched a service that it calls “blogspot” ([www.marincountyfreelibrary.blogspot.com](http://www.marincountyfreelibrary.blogspot.com)). It updates patrons on what is happening at the library,

best-selling books, great Web sites, book clubs, and author appearances. The library has gone to great lengths to describe RSS and how to use it.

The Kansas City Public Library ([www.kclibrary.org](http://www.kclibrary.org)) puts subject guides on its web site in RSS.

The Seattle Public Library ([www.spl.org](http://www.spl.org)) offers feeds that help patrons remain current on their accounts, track favorite authors, and track new materials in a subject area.

The Maricopa County Library District of Arizona (<http://mcl.d.maricopa.gov>) has implemented a pilot project that informs subscribers of new materials using the RSS features of its Polaris automated library system.

### **Evaluating the Effectiveness of RSS**

The number of subscribers to RSS feeds is not the best measure of its effectiveness because the information being fed may not be useful, or wanted information may not be fed. It is important, therefore, to obtain feedback from subscribers by adding a brief questionnaire to feeds from time to time asking whether the information was useful and easy to use, and soliciting suggestions for future RSS feeds.

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