



White Paper: RSS Feeds Community IT Innovators (CITI)

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March 2007

In this white paper we examine the potential use of RSS feeds for nonprofit organizations along with a couple of case studies. We also provide an overview of what an RSS feed is and their uses.

Basic definition

From [wikipedia](#):


RSS is a **family of web feed formats** used to publish frequently updated digital content, such as blogs, news feeds or podcasts.

Users of RSS content use programs called feed 'readers' or 'aggregators': the user 'subscribes' to a feed by supplying to their reader a link to the feed; the reader can then check the user's subscribed feeds to see if any of those feeds have new content since the last time it checked, and if so, retrieve that content and present it to the user.

The initials "RSS" are variously used to refer to the following standards:

- Really Simple Syndication (RSS 2.0)
- Rich Site Summary (RSS 0.91, RSS 1.0)
- RDF Site Summary (RSS 0.9 and 1.0)

From the content provider side, the RSS feed takes the form of an XML document (in the case of 2.0) providing title, link, date, and content or summary information for recent content. This document is in a permanent location, and is updated as content changes. The recipient of the content is given a link to this xml, and their reader or website then pulls, parses, and presents the content. The subscription option is simply presented as a link to the XML document, and your browser should prompt you for what program to use to open the link if you haven't established a reader previously.

Many sites offer syndication of content, and orange subscription buttons saying XML or RSS, or using the RSS symbol  are common. There is another protocol – Atom – which is an alternative format for providing the same basic service, though it seems less common.

However, according to an [October 2005 white paper on RSS feeds from Yahoo and Ipsos Insight](#), active, aware use of RSS feeds via an aggregator is low: 12% of internet users are aware of RSS feeds, and only 4% knowingly use them vs. a larger percentage who are getting RSS feeds via portals like My Yahoo! or headlines on other sites. Those who do actively use RSS feeds skew young (under age 34), male, and more highly educated. [A Pew Internet and American Life](#) survey from January 2005, had 5% of internet users using RSS feeds deliberately.

The Yahoo! white paper suggests that some users may be intimidated by RSS feeds, seeing them as over their heads technologically.

The white paper also notes that the average deliberate user of RSS feeds subscribes to an average of 6.6 feeds, and spends 4.1 hours per week reading those feeds. World and national news, and content from mainstream media outlets made up the majority of feed usage, though blogs and podcasts were gaining in popularity at the time the paper was released.

RSS feeds are also used for syndication of podcasts. According to the Yahoo white paper, in October 2005, 28% of Internet users were aware of podcasting, but only 2% subscribed to podcasts. A Pew memo from November 2006 said that 12% of internet users reported having downloaded a podcast (up from 7% six months earlier), but only 1% in both surveys reported having done so in a given day. The Pew memo did not report on subscription rates for podcasts.

iTunes uses RSS feeds for submission to their podcasting library.

Potential use in a nonprofit environment

Though a minority of internet users deliberately uses RSS feeds, their demographics suggest that they are probably disproportionately active on the internet, and influential in the online discussion. They are likely to be active in the blogosphere. Their demographics don't suggest they'd be likely donors.

The prominent availability of an RSS feed on a nonprofit site is probably seen as a marker of tech savvy to most users and an indicator that the organization offers frequently updated content to those a little more familiar with RSS. The RSS feed may also offer an inroad to influential internet users.

Offering an RSS feed has no ongoing cost to an organization, since the feed is (or should be) updated automatically when content is added.

Offering an RSS feed is probably most applicable to organizations which offer regular news, particularly those organizations offering news, analysis, or action opportunities on specific topics. The organization could offer a number of feeds, each one on a specific topic. Blogs regularly offer RSS feeds, and it is a standard feature of most blogging packages.

RSS feed syndication for podcasts may be most useful in making the podcast available in iTunes, which is one of the most common programs used for subscription to podcasts, and also lends a credibility to your content among those who don't know that all you have to do is code some XML to get there. (They'll be asking you to introduce them to Justin Timberlake!)

Organizations can also use RSS feeds to pull content from other sites to offer current news on their own sites. It may help add utility and a feeling of currency to sites of organizations working on specific issues, or trying to spur action on those issues, if specific news feeds are available, or if other feeds can be filtered for relevance. This does give up a certain amount of control over content on your own site, however, and it should not be the only way in which new content is being offered on a site. An example implemented by Community IT Innovators displays news from the National Institute of Health (NIH) on this page: <http://www.aucd.org/ddrcportal>.

As in the Greenpeace example in the case studies, below, organizations can use RSS feeds to provide their own information to other sites in their network.

RSS vs. email

Some sites offer the option to have new content emailed to you, which is like an RSS feed for people who don't want to use RSS feeds. At the RSS kool-aid stand, you'll hear that RSS is a great alternative to bombarding people with email. But really it ends up being sort of an email-like space for people who want to segregate news, blog updates, and the like away from their regular email. And for the pusher, you avoid having to deal with keeping up with subscribes and unsubscribes, navigate spam filters, and other messiness that comes with email. But you lose the ability to know whom you're contacting and what they're doing with the information.

Case studies

According to Steve Daigneault, Director of Internet Communications at Amnesty International USA, Amnesty is getting 10% of their overall web traffic via RSS pulls of press releases, action alerts, etc. This is just a surface reading, as they haven't done much other analysis. It seems to me that RSS numbers are probably not comparable to pageviews – since RSS readers pull the feeds more frequently than the user actually views the information, and even actual views are in the context of looking at what is likely a large number of RSS-fed summaries on a page. It would make sense to me to set up the RSS feed URLs in such a way that you can track how much traffic is driven to your site from those URLs adding a parameter that can be tracked independent from pageviews, or setting up a parallel landing page for RSS-driven traffic.

Brian Fitzgerald, Mass Networking Unit Head at Greenpeace International, says that they mostly use RSS for synchronizing information between sites, and feel that most of their users aren't up to speed with RSS. He mentions using feeds from Technorati and other locations to track news about their campaigns and present this information on their sites. A blog post on this is saved as a pdf in the New Tech > RSS directory, and is available here: <http://blog.brian-fitzgerald.net/?p=129>

Additional resources

Creating RSS feeds will in most cases not be implemented independently – most Content Management System (CMS) and blogging packages offer the feeds as an easily added module or a standard feature. If RSS feeds are a requirement, some research into the specifics of potential software packages and the limitations of their modules is worth the time. There are also usually modules for displaying RSS content on pages in CMS packages.

There are online services, such as [Ponyfish](#), [LinkRSS](#), [Publi.sh](#), [HitRSS](#), and [FeedPublish.com](#) which can provide feeds for sites that do not offer them natively.

RSS 2.0 specifications are here: <http://www.rssboard.org/rss-specification>. The [wikipedia entry on RSS](#) also offers examples of the file structure for the various versions.

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Community IT Innovators (CITI) is an employee-owned company committed to helping socially responsible organizations. We provide objective consulting for software selection, end-to-end implementation services, online engagement strategies, relationship-driven technology support, website and database development and a complete range of network support solutions.

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