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Developing current awareness services

Virtual reading rooms and online routing

Current periodical sections of libraries were once places to browse and read, showcases for all the new issues of the latest literature. As libraries cancel print subscriptions and an increasing number of journals are available only online, fewer people need to come to the print issues at all, and keeping up with all the latest articles in a field becomes more difficult. With wider adoption of RSS feeds by database vendors and journal publishers, the ability to push journal content has become easier and more feasible across a wide range of subject areas. In an attempt to increase journal use and current subject awareness, journal alerts and virtual reading rooms allow librarians to provide a valuable service for faculty, staff, and, possibly, students.

RSS is a Web format used to notify subscribers of updated or new content on a Web site. An RSS feed comprises a series of items (usually a title, a link, and a description) and lends itself for use with content that is updated frequently, such as blogs, or, as in this case, journals.¹ A great number of academic journal databases now offer RSS feeds to provide notification of new content, usually in two forms: a) new journal issues or b) new results on a search. Both can prove useful in pushing current awareness materials, though this article will focus on the former use. Journal publishers are also adopting RSS for new content at an increasing level. Between these two possibilities, it is fairly easy to find or set-up an RSS feed for most journals.

Finding the audience

The first, and one might say primary, step in creating current awareness journal alert ser-

vices is finding the audience, followed closely by journal selection. The authors each found their audience in a different way and used different methods for journal selection.

In one case, the audience may come through a direct request for such a service (or some related service). A faculty member in Science Education at Temple University talked to the librarian about creating a journal reading room in the area of the faculty offices. The physical requirements of such an endeavor and the frequent lack of physical copies of important journals made this project untenable, so an alternative in the form of a virtual reading room was offered. As this was focused on a particular field, the faculty members in the department were queried to identify what they considered their primary journals. A list of approximately 20 journals was created to best cover the literature for all the faculty in the field. Similarly, in the field of Substance Abuse, a journal list was created by using the ten journals with the highest impact factor.

An audience can also be solicited and created by offering a service that most would not think of on their own (but which would prove useful once established). At Gwynedd-Mercy College, a journal list was offered to faculty and staff through SurveyMonkey, an online survey service.² The audience chose from among 54 journals in four categories: general higher education, specialized higher

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education, general college teaching, and specialized college teaching. The librarian selected journals that are available to the campus community through a subscription database and that cover higher education or college level teaching. Faculty and staff also had the opportunity to request alerts for journals not listed. Since each patron would get an individualized alert package, creating journal alerts in this manner would not scale well. Librarians at larger institutions can undertake a similar initiative by offering set packages of journals to targeted faculty and staff. One advantage of preselecting journals to offer through a current awareness service is the ability to introduce subscribers to new or previously unexplored journals in their fields.

Obtaining journal feeds

With journal list in hand, the time-consuming process of gathering RSS feed URLs begins. Experience shows that feeds directly from the journal's publisher will generally provide better data than those from aggregate databases; in particular, abstracts tend to be included, which are valuable for more productive browsing. On the other hand, one must be aware of access issues. If a library has access to a journal through a database, but not the publisher, URLs from the publisher's feed will not provide direct access to full-text content. This can be mitigated at institutions using link resolver software, but that would still require extra clicking and/or searching. URLs gathered from an aggregate database feed will generally be stable and proxied (if the library is using such a method for access), thus providing the simplest access to full-text content. In larger institutions where journals may be available from different sources, one will find feeds from certain providers to be more useful and reliable than others.

The ticTOCs project³ from Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) is still in beta but shows promise as an aggregate of journal feeds. By collaborating with publishers, such as Emerald and Sage, and other groups like ProQuest and the Directory of Open Access Journals, ticTOCs brings together a variety of

journal feeds with a single interface to search, gather, and browse content. Users can read the feeds at the ticTOCs Web site or export their selected feeds as an OPML file that can be imported into most RSS readers (for more on OPML see below). At this point, the coverage is not broad enough to be a single source of journal feeds, but it is a growing and increasingly valuable tool. Once again, one should keep in mind issues of full-text content access when using feeds from the site.

The method for obtaining journal feeds from databases varies by provider. In EBSCO databases, feeds are offered for each publication. Alerts can be established and set up by creating and logging into a MyEBSCO account. Other database providers, such as Wilson, only offer search alert feeds. In this case, an alert for an ISSN search will replicate an alert for one specific journal. If full-text articles are available through the database, check with your provider to find out how to append the library's proxy address to the RSS links. This will enable your subscribers to access the full text of articles from off-campus.

Once a list of feeds has been created, either selected by individuals or compiled by the librarian, the feeds need to be disseminated to the patrons. For patrons already making use of RSS feeds and readers, a librarian could take the gathered feeds and create a single OPML file to send out. OPML is a structured outline format that can be used to organize a selection of RSS feeds. Most RSS readers can import an OPML file of feeds and subscribe a user to each feed in the file. This would give the more adept user greater control over browsing feeds and controlling which feeds are read when.⁴

For patrons not using RSS, the selected feeds can be combined into one feed for easier dissemination. The authors used Yahoo! Pipes to combine feeds. Yahoo! Pipes is a visual editor for combining and remixing various content sources, including RSS feeds, HTML pages, Flickr photos, and maps. Pipes can be used to create one feed from multiple feeds through use of the Fetch Feed module. Depending on the number of feeds being combined, the

feeds may need to be truncated (limited to a certain number of feeds).⁵ Truncation and additional types of manipulation, such as sorting and filtering, are available as other modules in the Yahoo! Pipes service.⁶

Once a single feed that mixes all the requested journals has been created, a number of dissemination methods become possible, including RSS, e-mail, and syndication on a Web page. RSS users can be sent the URL for the single feed. For the majority, who still don't use RSS, this can be an opportunity for a practical tutorial on feeds and feed readers, but, more likely, alternate delivery through e-mail will be preferred. Feedburner is one Web service that will take an RSS feed and provide e-mail delivery, e-mail list management, as well as statistics and branding options.⁷ For users who

desire neither RSS nor e-mail delivery, a Web page can be set up to display the feed. A widget from Grazr takes an OPML file and creates a browsable outline view of feeds.⁸ RSS2HTML offers a PHP script to download and host on your server.⁹ The RSS2HTML script, combined with a template, allows for more control of styling and layout of your RSS feeds on a Web site.

The result is a list of articles in new issues of the selected journals delivered (by the chosen means) to the user as the articles become available. Users will receive links to the original source database/publisher, as well as the article title, citation, and, depending on the source of the feeds, abstract.

In the discussed cases, the service was offered at differing scales. The process of individualized alerts can be time consuming and may not scale well to a large institution, where preselected subject alerts offer a more practical solution. As RSS adoption increases, both options will become easier, particularly

in light of services like the aforementioned ticTOCs project. The benefits of such a service are numerous. For librarians, pushing out content can help increase the use of subscription resources, and specialized services like this help librarians remain relevant by adapting our selection and organization skills to the digital environment. For patrons, pushed content can offer an increased possibility for

serendipitous discovery of information, not unlike browsing the stacks, a form of information discovery that is often lost in the increasingly search-heavy information environment.

Notes

1. For a quick introduction to RSS, see Common Craft's RSS in Plain English video, www.commoncraft.com/rss_plain_english.

2. Alternatively, user requests could be collected and organized through a quiz or survey module in a course management system or by creating an online form. See SurveyMonkey, www.surveymonkey.com.

3. The ticTOCS project can be found at www.tictocs.ac.uk.

4. For information and an application on creating OPML files see support.opml.org/download.

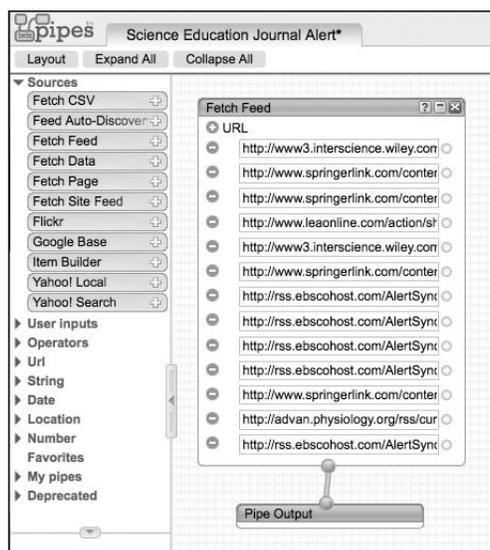
5. See examples from this article: Science Education Alert (pipes.yahoo.com/madinkbeard/sci-ed) and Lourdes Library Example Alert (pipes.yahoo.com/lourdes/journalalert).

6. Theoretically, it should be possible to use Pipes to reproxy URLs for multiple libraries. Neither author has yet tried this on a practical level.

7. Feedburner can be found at www.feedburner.com.

8. Grazr is at www.grazr.com.

9. Visit RSS2HTML at www.rss2html.com. 



Yahoo! Pipes Fetch Feed.