Really Simple Syndication

Exploring the World of Newsfeeds
and Content Syndication on the Internet

RSS **XML**

A guide by:
John G. Hendron
http://www.johnhendron.net/
October, 2004
Revised, December, 2004

What is RSS?

According to the Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RSS_%28protocol%29) RSS is:

> RSS can be understood as a web syndication protocol that is primarily used by news websites and weblogs. RSS allows a web developer to publish content on their website in a format that a computer program can easily understand and digest. This allows users to easily repackage the content on their own websites or blogs, or privately on their own computers.

So, RSS is a way to obtain content from the World Wide Web in a repackaged format. Why?

Imagine Jane. She likes to keep up on news about how to use Legos in education. There are several ways to keep up on this news: (1) subscribe to a newslist, (2) visit a couple webpages daily to keep up on what's new, (3) give up, there's too much to read, do, and keep up with!

RSS is the perfect solution for Jane. By subscribing (like the newslist) to a **_RSS Feed,_** she can be alerted by a **newsreader** or **aggregator** program, when new content is available. She can either read all the information right there in the separate application, or click on a link to read the content in a webpage.

Recently, Apple has announced that **Safari 2.0** will have a built-in news aggregator in the browser. Already, Mozilla Foundation's **Firefox** browser supports the subscription of RSS feeds by way of its live bookmarks feature.

"I am still not sure I understand. What is this RSS business for?"

According to the folks at CommonCraft, _RSS feeds tell you when websites have been updated._ Their website (http://www.commoncraft.com/archives/000528.html) has a lot of good information for folks who want to learn more behind RSS.

How do I read, view, or subscribe to RSS newsfeeds?

For this, you'll need a **newsreader**, sometimes called a news **aggregator**.
Here are some of the popular choices for Mac OS X:

- NetNewsWire and NetNewsWire Lite
  [http://ranchero.com/netnewswire/]
- NewsFire [http://www.newsfirerss.com/]
- PulpFiction
  [http://freshlysqueezedsoftware.com/products/pulpfiction/]
- NewsTicker [http://www.nullriver.com/]
- Mozilla Firefox [http://www.mozilla.org/]

Some of these products are free, some are shareware. You can choose your
own favorite!

There is also a plugin for Firefox that expands what you can do with RSS
Feeds called Sage [http://sage.mozdev.org/].

Not to be outdone, there's an extension for Safari called Saft that brings
RSS support to the Apple browser
[http://haoli.dnsalias.com/Saft/index.html].

How do I find Newsfeeds?

Newsfeed links are usually found on webpages, sometimes with the symbols
XML (Extensible Markup Language, the language RSS feeds are written in,
compared to HTML for webpages) or RSS. There are also different versions
of the protocol (.9, 1.0, 2.0) and a competing format called **Atom**.

Some of the programs above help you find newsfeeds. All you do is use the
program and browse a list of available feeds.

The third method for finding feeds is to use a site that groups publically-
available newsfeeds together. One such site is [http://www.syndic8.com/]
that (warning!) contains links to content that might not be suitable for
children. Another is [http://www.feedster.com/], a RSS Feed search engine.

Looking at a News Reader

For this whitepaper, I'm going to use a reader called **NewsFire** for OS X.
Let's take a look at its simple, elegant interface:

On the left:
a list of your subscribed feeds, and the number of unread items in each feed. Most of your pertinent options are found under the Action menu (gear icon). Add new feeds by clicking on the (+).
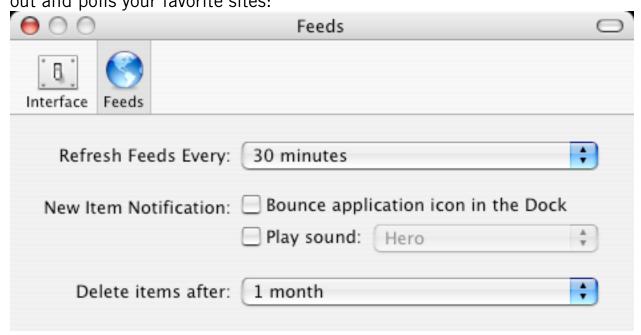
On the right:
a list of items in the selected feed. Click on the feed title to read more, or follow the arrow on the far-right to visit the item on the web. Use the Search area to drill down the number of feed items to exactly what you're after!

The Feeds Menu has a couple handy features:

If you have a hard time looking for those little RSS buttons on sites, use the "Discover Feeds for Site…" command, and have NewsFire search for you!

Under preferences, we discover some settings on how often NewsFire goes out and polls your favorite sites:

I'd recommend every 30 minutes-1hour, but nothing quicker. Like Mail, NewsFire will display how many unread feeds exist by changing your Dock icon.

Creating NewsFeeds

The easiest way to create your own newsfeed is through a content management system, such as a **weblog** tool. Many exist—that's one reason we find so many newsfeeds on weblog-powered sites. A couple popular weblog tools include:

- Word Press
- Movable Type and TypePad
- Blogger
- Blosxom

Certainly, there are other tools out there to read and create feeds. The popularity of this format is just picking up. What's on the horizon?

Podcasting with RSS

A relatively new take on RSS is something called Podcasting**. Podcasting starts when someone publishes audio content on a website**—this could be a clip from a radio show, a piece of music, or something else. A reference to this audio file is enclosed in an RSS 2.0 news feed. A specialized news reader, such as **iPodder** will download these embedded files, add them to your iTunes collection, then automagically update them onto your iPod.

Yeah, not everyone has all the pieces and parts yet—but this movement has seemingly popped up out of nowhere, and is growing strong in buzz online. The idea of taking your iPod to work each day, filled fresh with new content, is an appealing way to digest a lof of the information we may have interest in online. And all thanks to **RSS**.

Educational Applications

We will no doubt see RSS enter into the way we search, consume, and manage information traded on the Web. With the advent of new web browsers that support RSS newsfeeds (Mozilla's Firefox, Apple's Safari), we already see a second-generation of newsfeed aggregator emerging that makes it simple to subscribe, and add personalized feeds of news to the desktop.

RSS may someday replace the "way" people surf online, and this in itself is a worthy enough reason to introduce it to students. Moreover, however, I feel the real benefit of using RSS newsfeeds in education will be through student publication of information. Since this is a relatively new technology, these are uses I foresee in the near future:

- Teachers subscribe to student assignments that are posted on a school intranet, instead of "handing work in"
- Parents subscribe to feeds of their son or daughter's progress through a feed published by the school's SIS
- Students using feeds to research current events
- Teachers subscribing to content available as multimedia (movies, audio files) that are used as resources in classroom instruction

Outside of education, here are some more possible uses for RSS:

- RSS feed of refrigerator assets
- RSS feed of to-do lists, assignments, etc.
- RSS feed of birthdays, delivered on demand

The benefit of the feed over other applications (such as these) that exist already is the portable format of the XML that marks-up the feed. If I have a global to-do list that is served over a network, I can pull this feed-list up on a kitchen-based computer, a smart phone, a laptop—perhaps even a watch or in the car. Changes to the feed (for instance, deleting components as I complete tasks) will then be available to all devices.

One of the first implementations of this sort is the **Delicious social bookmarks system** (http://del.icio.us/). Not only can I keep track of my own

links of interest, but I can also subscribe to other links of interest by way of tagged URLs. Of course, all this content is subscriber-ready via RSS!