This Just In: Web Feeds for Enhanced Library Services

Gerry McKiernan
Iowa State University, gerrymck@iastate.edu

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Originally published in Knowledge Quest, 33, no. 3 (January/February 2005).

This article is available at Iowa State University Digital Repository: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/refinst_pubs/4
Here a blog, there a blog, everywhere a blog.

It seems that every journal, newspaper, magazine, and news Web site is highlighting weblogs. In the first half of 2004 alone, dozens of stories have appeared about blogs: Time invited readers to “Meet Joe Blog,” Library Journal profiled the free UThink blog service recently initiated by the University of Minnesota Library, and PC Magazine Online reviewed the audio blog service from AudioBlog. The New York Times reported on the proliferation of blog use by teenagers and blog addiction. Perhaps most telling was the extensive coverage on the use of blogs by presidential candidates in, for example, National Journal. Equally striking is the extensive use of blogs by the media themselves as an “emerging alternative” to reporting and a “new source of news.”

As defined by the Wikipedia, a weblog (or simply a blog) is “a website which contains periodic, reverse chronologically ordered posts on a common Web page. The format of weblogs varies, from simple bullet lists of hyperlinks, to article summaries with user-provided comments and ratings. Individual weblog entries are almost always date and time-stamped, with the newest post at the top of the page.”

School Blogs

While politicians, reporters, and teenagers have recognized blogs as an effective mechanism for disseminating personal, institutional, or organizational news, an increasing number of elementary, middle, and high schools have created blogs to promote local events and classroom activities. Students at the Randolph Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia, publish their poetry on a classroom blog. The Meriwether Lewis Elementary School in Portland, Oregon, uses a blog format for its homepage to provide school news and links to related information, and at the Hangleton Community Junior School in Hove, East Sussex, England, teachers and students have developed a variety of blogs. Will Richardson, supervisor of instructional technology and communications at Hunterdon Central Regional High School (HCRHS) in Flemington, New Jersey, and self-described “blogvangelist,” provides a blog that offers not only regular news for Journalism 1 at HCRHS but also links to class information and notes, journalism sites and resources, and major media Web sites.

Library Blogs

The use of blogs is not limited, however, to school news and class assignments. An increasing number of libraries at educational institutions have created blogs to promote a wide range of services and collections. The HCRHS blog, for example, includes brief news items for recent and future library events as well as links to research guides, recommended Web sites, and profiles of new books. In Illinois, the Suburban Library System uses a blog format to provide news to its membership of several dozen academic, public, school, and special libraries.

Gerry McKiernan is a Science and Technology Librarian and Bibliographer at Iowa State University, Ames, with specialization in selected fields of engineering. He has also served as the Museum Librarian of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh, Pa., and as an Assistant Librarian with the Library of the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, New York.
Blogging Software
To create blogs, individuals, organizations, and libraries use specialized software or blog services, or they may design Web pages that have features and functionalities similar to those of a blog. Among the more common blogging tools or services are LiveJournal, Manila, MoveableType, and TypePad. One of the most common blogging tools is Blogger, a free or fee-based blogging service now owned by Google.

Web Feeds
Many blogs offer “[t]he latest headlines, with hyperlinks and summaries . . . in the RSS XML-format, to be read with a RSS feedreader.” Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication (RSS), is an XML format for the sharing of content among different Web sites. Through an RSS web feed or other feed type, such as Atom, new and updated Web site content is sent automatically to subscribed users, thus significantly reducing the need to individually revisit sites of interest for changes or additions. In addition to their availability within blogs, web feeds are offered as well by major state, regional, national, and international broadcast, print, and Web-based publications and services. Current news sites that syndicate all or part of their content include ABCNews.com, BBCNews.com, and MSNBCNews.com, as well as online versions of The New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post. In addition, search engines such as Yahoo!, e-commerce sites such as Amazon.com, auction sites such as eBay, and presidential candidate blogs such as

Blog Resources
Aggregators <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/tech/directory/5/aggregators>
AmphetaDesk <www.disobey.com/amphetadesk>
Atom <www.atomened.com>
AudioBlog <www.audioblog.com>
Blogger <www.blogger.com>
Blogging software <http://radio.weblogs.com/0107846/stories/2002/10/03/blogSoftware.html>
Bloglines <www.bloglines.com>
Chicago Multitype Library System <www.chicilibsys.org>
Edmonton (Canada) Public Library web feed <www.winterstorm.ca/download/epl_video.rss>
FeedDemon <www.bradsoft.com/feeddemon>
FeedReader <www.feedreader.com>
Hangleton Community Junior School <www.hangletonweblogs.org>
Hunterdon Central Library blog, <http://central.hcrhs.k12.nj.us/imc>
LiveJournal <www.livejournal.com>
Lunar and Planetary Institute library <www.lpi.usra.edu/library/new.xml>
Manila <http://manila.userland.com>
Meriweather Lewis Elementary School <http://ewiselementary.org>
Metropolitan Library System <www.mls.lib.iu.us>
Minneapolis Public Library ‘The List’ web feed <www.mplib.org/listnew.rss>
Moraine Valley (Illinois) Community College Library web feed <www2.sls.lib.il.us/ MVCC/searchhttp/index.xml>
Moveable Type <www.movabletype.org>
National University of Ireland, Galway, Library web feed <http://rss.library.nuigalway.ie/rdf/all-new-books.rdf>
NetNewsWire <http://ranchero.com/netnewswire>
News aggregator definition <http://davenet.scripting.com/2002/10/08/what%20is%20a%20newsaggregator>
NewsDesk <www.wildgrape.net>
NewsIsFree <www.newsisfree.com>
NewsIsFree Top News <www.newsisfree.com/sources/bycat/1>
Ohio University, Athens, library web feeds <www.library.ohiou.edu/subjects/businessblog/wp-rss2.php>, <www.library.ohiou.edu/refblog/wp-rss2.php>
OhioLINK Electronic Journal Center <http://journals.ohiolink.edu/rsshelp.html>
Pluck <www.pluck.com>
Radio UserLand <http://radio.userland.com>
Randolph Elementary School <www.arlington.k12.va.us/schools/randolph/weblogs>
Royal Holloway, University of London web feed <http://library.rub.unimelb.edu.au/rss-feeds/recentlibraryserailissues.xml>
RSS definition <www.webopedia.com/Term/0/R/RSS.html>
SharpReader <www.sharpreader.net>
Suburban Library System <www.sls.lib.il.us>
TypePad <www.typepad.com>
University of Alberta (Canada) library <www.library.ualberta.ca/studenttraining>
University of Louisville Libraries web feeds <www.library.louisville.edu/users/mopurc01/rss/index.asp>
University of Tennessee Libraries, Alpha Channel web feed <www.lib.utk.edu/mt/weblogs/studio/index.xml>
University of Winnipeg Library and Information Services web feed, <http://blog.uwinnipeg.ca/InfoResources/index.rdf>
UTThink <http://blog.lib.umn.edu>
Weblog definition <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weblog>
Wikipedia <www.wikipedia.org>
Will Richardson <www.weblogg-ed.com/about>
John Kerry for President <www.johnkerry.com> also offer web feeds. The availability of a web feed for a site is indicated by one of more button icons, which are usually found near the top, bottom, or side of a page. A web feed also may be noted with a hotlinked word or phrase, such as “Syndicate” or “Syndicate This Page.”

News Aggregators and Feed Readers
One of the more common methods by which news feeds are read is through use of a news aggregator, or reader. As defined by David Winer, a developer of original and current web feed formats (scriptingNews, RSS 0.92, and RSS 2.0), a “news aggregator” is “software that periodically reads a set of news sources, in one of several XML-based formats, finds the new bits, and displays them in reverse-chronological order on a single page.” AmphetaDesk, Bloglines, FeedDemon, FeedReader, NetNewsWire, NewsDesk, NewsIsFree, Radio UserLand, and SharpReader are among the popular free or fee-based aggregators for news feeds. With the incorporation of a newsreader in Apple’s forthcoming Safari RSS web browser, one can anticipate similar enhancements in other Web browsers, and an associated increase in the use and application of feeds.

Feeds need not be limited to news or accessible from news aggregators. Using many of these readers, as well as others (such as Pluck) individuals can subscribe to web feeds of interest to create a customized, personal portal. Depending on the particular reader, users can subscribe to select web feeds in a couple of ways: by double clicking the RSS feed option; or by clicking and copying the URL from the displayed page and pasting the associated address into the reader. Some readers also allow users to subscribe to a web feed by simply dragging and dropping the associated web feed icon into the reader.

School and Library Web Feeds
The current major use of web feeds by schools and libraries is to alert subscribers to current activities. For example, the Suburban Library System features a web feed on its site, as do many libraries with blogs. The HCRHS central library not only offers a web feed for announcements and news, but students enrolled in Journalism 1 at the school can also subscribe to an associated feed for course updates.

Enhanced Services
Some libraries have also recognized the potential of feeds for enhancing conventional library functions or services. For example, in addition to providing Internet resource guides in HTML (or other formats), some libraries provide feeds for their Internet resource guides, such as that made by the Minneapolis Public Library for The List, its compendium of Web resources. A number of libraries provide web feeds that notify subscribers of new acquisitions, including books, CDs, and videos. Libraries that offer such services include the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, the National University of Ireland library in Galway, and the University of Louisville Libraries. Feeds for newly added videos have also been created from records available from the online catalog of the Edmonton Public Library in Canada. The State of Hawaii, Legislative Reference Bureau, selects feeds for agency reports and recent acquisitions, while the library of the Lunar and Planetary Institute in Houston, Texas, offers a feed that includes recent additions to the collection as well as new and noteworthy items.

E-Journals and Table of Contents Services
Feeds for new acquisitions are not limited to books, other monograph works, or media. For example, Hawaii’s Legislative Reference Bureau supplies a feed of citations for select professional journal articles in addition to feeds for institutional publications, while the library of the Royal Holloway, University of London, offers feeds for all recently received journal issues and feeds for individual titles. OhioLINK, the statewide consortium, provides feeds for all journals available from its Electronic Journal Center.

Instruction and Reference
Several libraries have begun to use web feeds to promote instructional and reference services. The University of Alberta library added a feed for its library and instruction program page, while the University of Tennessee (UT) libraries offer a feed for Alpha Channel, a “guide to library multimedia services for the UT teaching & learning community.” In the arena of reference services, Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, includes a feed for its business blog as well as one for its general reference service. The Moraine Valley (III.) Community College library provides a feed for resources and search tips that profiles key print, electronic, and Internet resources, and the University of Winnipeg Library and Information Services department offers a feed with descriptions of major reference sources.

Potential Possibilities
Other library functions and services could also be enhanced through a broader application and implementation of web feeds. The review of newly published and forthcoming titles by selectors and bibliographers could be significantly expedited if publishers and book vendors provided feeds for individual titles and disciplines. If electronic journals syndicated their content, users could choose to receive desktop notification for all potentially relevant articles by journal title or discipline. Ideally, such services would also allow subscribers to receive personalized feeds based on a saved search strategy. Likewise, the assessment, use, and integration of search results could be significantly improved if database and OPAC vendors offered a web feed option.

As observed by Roddy MacLeod, senior subject librarian at Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, Scotland, “there are several practical ways in which the LIS community can both exploit the content of RSS, and improve their services through the presentation and re-presentation of RSS feeds. These do not amount to a revolution, but rather represent a step on the path to better information services, and one which takes advantage of advances in technology.”

References and Notes


4. As of July 1, 2004, the Suburban Library System merged with the Chicago Multitype Library System to become the Metropolitan Library System.


