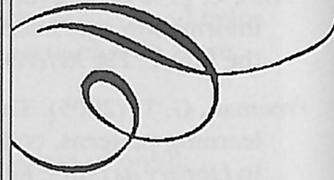


RSS FEEDS

by Bill Helling



RSS is a term you may have heard but never really understood. RSS is actually the driving force behind blogs, podcasts, and vodcasts for broadcasting text, audio, or video on the Web. You can subscribe to RSS feeds in order to get automatic updates using a browser, an e-mail program, or some other special software. Why should you be familiar with RSS? Just about anyone who has anything to say seems to be starting a blog, a podcast, or a vodcast – and this group includes many Indiana libraries.

THE NEED FOR RSS

In order to appreciate the need for RSS, just look back at the Web during the late 1990s when many Web authors attempted to keep a sort of online journal by frequently updating their Web pages. These authors were creating a Web log, a term that eventually became *weblog*. You may already have guessed that the term *weblog* was itself later shortened to *blog*, and the author of a *blog* became known as a *blogger*.

What skills were required to create a weblog? First, you had to know how to add to an existing Web page. Next, you had to know how to upload the modified Web page to a Web server where it would be available for everyone to view with a browser. Then you had to sit back and hope visitors continued to remember to come to your weblog. Now imagine that you, as a user, wanted to follow several weblogs. You could take turns visiting each one of them with your browser, trying not to forget the ones you really liked. You probably would miss something, however. You could also try not to be disappointed if you took the time and trouble to visit a site where no changes had been made – which would often happen.

With this preceding model, the author *and* the reader both needed to be technically proficient and seriously motivated. The ideal for the authors would be to have a way to make updates easily without wondering if the readers would find the updates. The ideal for the readers would be to have a way to find the updates without needing to constantly monitor numerous Web sites.

This is where RSS thankfully stepped in.

RSS DEFINED

RSS can actually stand for different things, depending on the version, but the current version, RSS 2.0, is Really Simple Syndication. *Syndication* is a way to provide updated content via a Web *feed* – the RSS file. An RSS file is itself nothing more than a special text-based XML format. You don't really need to know much about the versions of RSS as long as you understand that RSS in any form makes syndication possible. Another syndication method is Atom, and some feed creators use Atom in place of RSS. Atom is actually a proposed Web standard developed by the IETF (Internet Engineering Task Force), whereas RSS is merely a specification – but with a large and dedicated user base. An Atom file, like an RSS file, is also nothing more than an XML format.

RSS feeds allow you to use a special tool (called a *feed reader* or an *aggregator*) that can check for updated content. RSS 2.0 and Atom 1.0 have actually become the two most popular methods for syndication, and people will often use the term “RSS” when talking about either RSS or Atom formats.

BLOGS, PODCASTS, AND VODCASTS

If you understand that RSS is an XML format that makes a syndicated feed work, you are better able to understand what a blog, podcast, or vodcast actually does:

- A **blog** is a means of distributing content on the Internet using a syndicated feed. The term *blog* is also a verb; to *blog* means to *add content to a blog*.
- A **podcast** is a means of distributing multimedia files (primarily audio) on the Internet using a syndicated feed. It is itself a blog – but an additional file (audio) is delivered, usually in .mp3 format. The term *podcast* can also be a verb.
- A **vodcast** is a means of distributing video on the Internet using a syndicated feed. It is itself a blog – but an additional file (video) is delivered, usually in .mp4 format. The term *video podcast* is sometimes shortened to *vidcast* or *vlog*.

A typical blog, podcast, or vodcast usually appears as a Web page – yet something is going on behind the scenes. Although a syndicated feed is an XML format, you will usually see the results of the XML converted into HTML, or, in some cases, you actually see a “companion” HTML file for Web display (see Figure 1). However, behind every feed is an XML file perhaps named something like rss.xml, atom.xml, index.xml, and so on (see Figure 2). A podcast or vodcast is like a blog but with at least one other special tag: an *enclosure* tag. Enclosures are hyperlinks to multimedia files (see Figure 3). If you can make an audio or video file and put it on a Web server, you can make a podcast or vodcast.

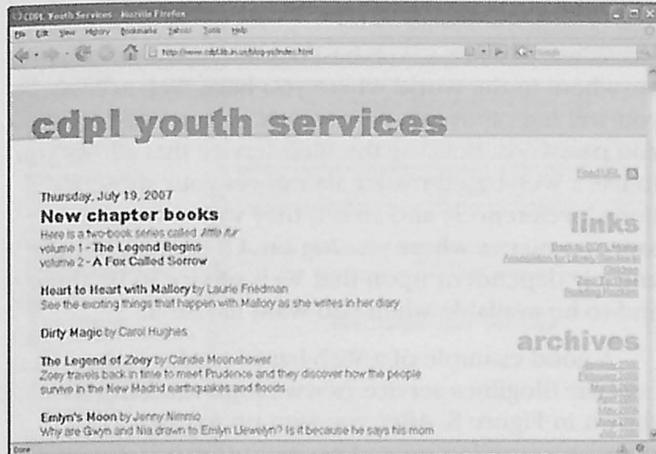


Figure 1 – This file is named index.html and is viewable as a Web page.



Figure 2 – This file is named rss.xml even though it is a feed in Atom format.

FINDING AND SUBSCRIBING TO AN RSS FEED

Using your Web browser, you can usually go to a blog, podcast, or vodcast as if they were regular Web pages (some have a Web-page equivalent; however, they do not need to). These pages will have the text to

```
<enclosure url="http://mysite.com/bob.mp3" length="1161718" type="audio/mpeg" />
```

Figure 3 – An enclosure tag is a link to an audio or video file.

read as well as links to the audio or video files that you can click and access. But you don't really need to visit these blog, podcast, or vodcast pages individually. You should use an appropriate feed reader and subscribe to the feed, letting the content (text, audio, or video) come to you whenever it is added or updated. The reader will check for updates so that you don't have to and will display them (or prompt you to download audio or video files, depending on how you have your reader set up). Fortunately, you don't need to spend any money to get one of the many available readers; the best are free. However, you may be overwhelmed with the choice of possible readers – along with the need to learn how to recognize an RSS feed and the different ways you can tell your feed reader to subscribe (depending on the reader).

RECOGNIZING AN RSS FEED

A feed will announce itself in some manner. While this announcement can be a simple link, it is more likely to be a special graphic or an icon that says RSS, XML, or Atom. Although many organizations and individuals are proposing to use an orange (or other color) square with white radio waves as the default RSS feed icon, no firm standard yet exists to indicate a feed, so be prepared to see an assortment. The proposed default icon and several variations of feed icons are shown in Figure 4.

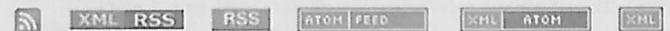


Figure 4 – Different ways of indicating a feed icon certainly led to confusion for users.

Imagine that you are on a Web site such as you see in Figure 5, the Crawfordsville District Public Library. You see an RSS feed icon for “what's new @ cdpl?” and you click it.

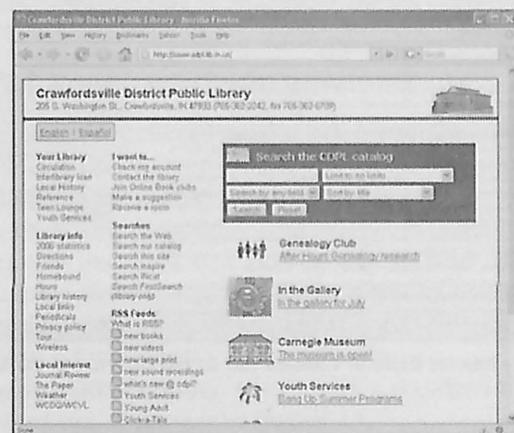


Figure 5 – The CDPL web site has a list of several feed icons.

Clicking a feed icon will often send you straight to the XML file. In this case, clicking the feed icon sends you to www.cdpl.lib.in.us/blog/rss.xml.

If you are using an older browser, you will see the actual XML tags. For example, if you are using Internet Explorer 6, you will see something like what is shown in Figure 6. The XML file is not the page that is meant to be read by humans. The feed URL (the address you see in the browser address bar), however, is the information that your feed reader wants in order to subscribe. If you know the feed URL (for example, www.cdpl.lib.in.us/blog/rss.xml), you are ready to subscribe to a feed with a feed reader.

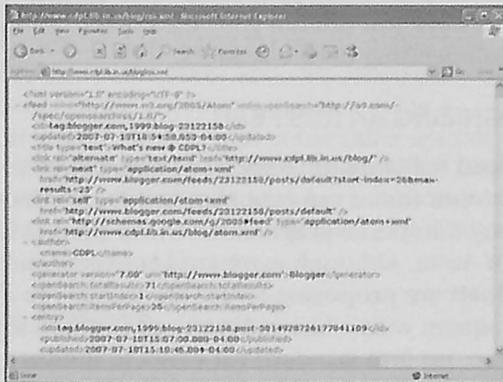


Figure 6 – Internet Explorer 6 will show you the XML.

If you are using newer browsers (such as Firefox 2 or Internet Explorer 7), you will not see the XML that you get in older browsers. Instead you get a sort of “Web page” display that helps you subscribe to the feed (depending on how you have your browser set up and what feed readers you may have installed), as shown in Figure 7.

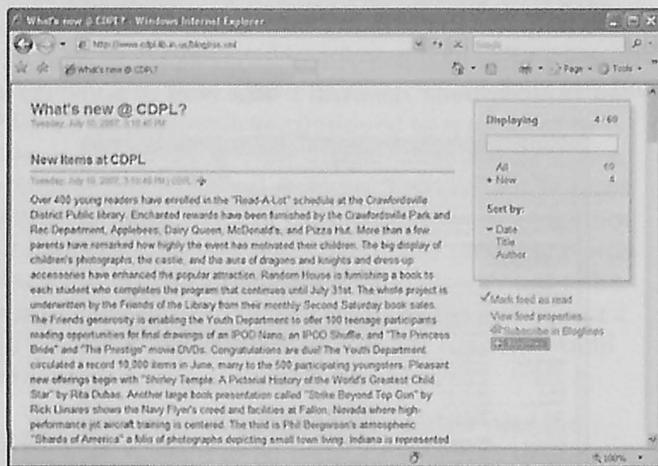


Figure 7 – Internet Explorer 7 knows you do not want to see the actual XML.

CHOOSING AN RSS FEED READER

Once you are aware of a feed to which you wish to subscribe, you need to consider which feed reader to use. RSS feed readers exist in basically two categories:

- Web-based feed readers
- client-based feed readers

You access a Web-based reader on the Web, of course; client-based simply means you install the reader on your computer. Both have advantages and disadvantages, but they do basically the same thing. Because there is no shortage of RSS feed readers, it is impossible here to give a full overview of all your choices. It is equally impossible to explain here how they all work, but we can look at a representative example for each type. You may want to experiment with several feed readers before deciding on a final choice because their features vary.

WEB-BASED FEED READERS

When you use a Web-based reader, you can reach it anywhere in the world where you have Web access; you will log on to this Web service with a username and password. Because the Web service that allows you to use a Web-based reader also stores your subscriptions, preferences, and so on, they will always be the same no matter where you log on. Of course, you are entirely dependent upon that Web service to be there and to be available when you want to use it.

A good example of a Web-based reader is the popular Bloglines service (www.bloglines.com), as shown in Figure 8. After you sign up for an account (free), you can log on and get right to work, setting your preferences and subscribing to feeds.

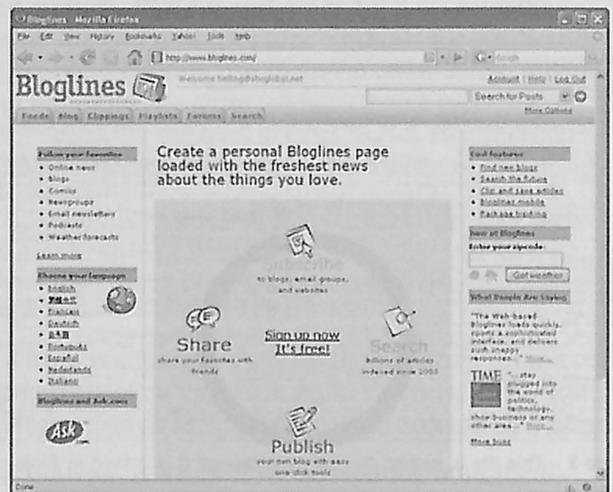


Figure 8 - The Bloglines home page.

You can subscribe to a blog with Bloglines in several ways. For example, if you are logged onto your Bloglines page, select the Feeds tab, and then click the Add link. This action opens a subscription page in the main frame (see Figure 9), with a field where you can type or paste the feed URL of a blog you want to read. If you simply use the Web page URL itself and not the

RSS feed URL, Bloglines uses its RSS auto-discovery capability to figure out where the feed is and presents you with the option to subscribe to any feed it finds on that page (sometimes a page will have links to several feeds). After you click Subscribe, you get another page before the subscription is final (Figure 10). Here you need to choose among some options before you click a Subscribe button one more time.

Some RSS feeds have buttons that let you automatically subscribe to them with a single click. The button for Bloglines may look like what you see in Figure 11

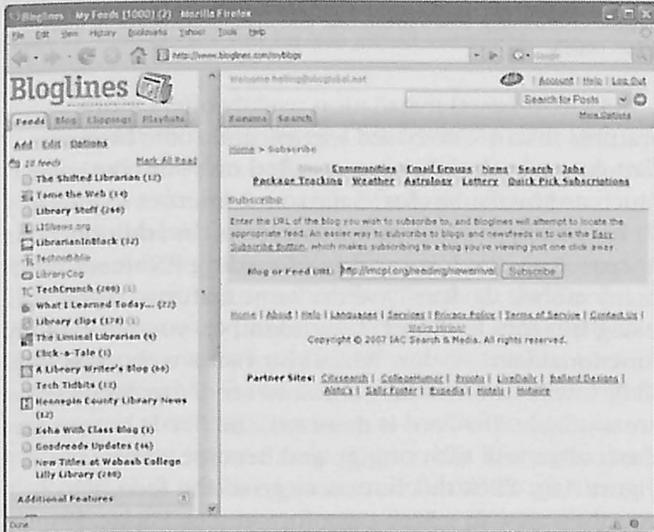


Figure 9 - The Bloglines subscription page.

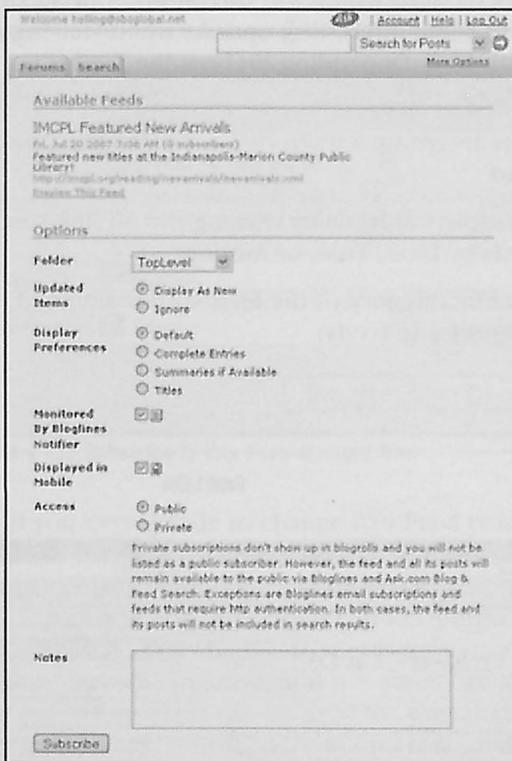


Figure 10 - Choose your options before subscribing.

(or something similar). You simply need to find the button that corresponds to the service for which you have registered, because feeds will often advertise the buttons for several services. If you click a “subscribe with bloglines” button but are not currently logged onto Bloglines, you will be asked to do so. In any case, you are sent to the Bloglines subscription page (as shown in Figure 9) where you finish the process.



Figure 11 - Some sites make it easy to subscribe with Bloglines.

As soon as you subscribe to a feed, Bloglines will download the latest content, and will continue to check hourly for updates. You can read a blog you have subscribed to by selecting it from your Feeds tab. The feed contents appear in the main frame (see Figure 12).

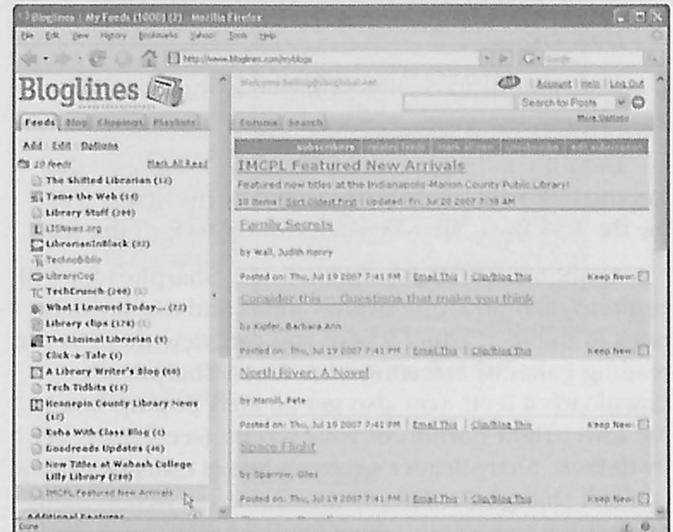


Figure 12 - Now I can keep up with IMCPL's featured new arrivals.

CLIENT-BASED RSS FEED READERS

If you use a client-based reader, you can use it only on the computer(s) on which you install it. Unless your installed reader is able to synchronize what you do on more than one computer, your set up on different computers may very well end up being different, which is the main disadvantage for these types of readers. A typical free RSS feed reader that you can download and install in a few minutes is SharpReader (www.sharpreader.net), which uses a standard three-panel set up, as shown in Figure 13.

As you may suspect, you can subscribe to an RSS feed with SharpReader in several ways.

- Type or paste the URL for the RSS feed in SharpReader's address bar and press Enter. Then

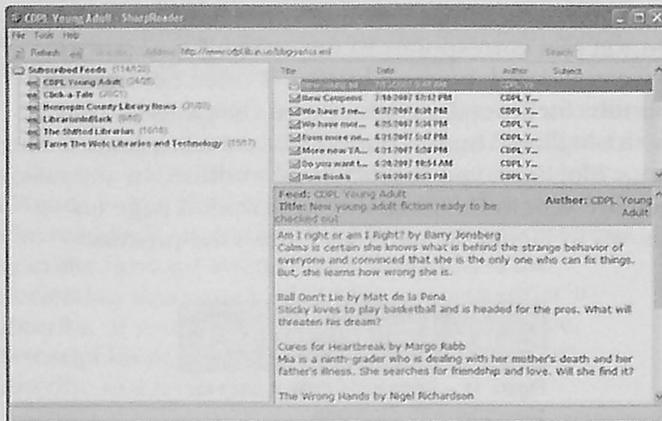


Figure 13 – SharpReader.

click the Subscribe button when the blog has loaded.

- Choose Open RSS Feed from the File menu, type or paste the URL of the RSS feed in the empty field, check the “Subscribe to feed” checkbox, and click OK.
- Drag and drop an RSS link (the icon) onto the subscription pane.

Even if you just use the URL of the Web page that has the link to the RSS feed instead of the actual URL for the RSS feed, SharpReader will try to find the feed.

As soon as you subscribe to a site, SharpReader will begin to download the newest items and display their titles in the feed panel where you can view them in the reading panel by selecting one. When SharpReader downloads a feed, you also get an alert pop-up box in the lower-right portion of your screen (see Figure 14). By default, SharpReader’s refresh rate is every hour, but you can change this for any timeframe (as well as many other ways you want to get a feed) by selecting a feed in the subscription panel and then choosing Feed Properties from the Tools menu, as shown in Figure 15.

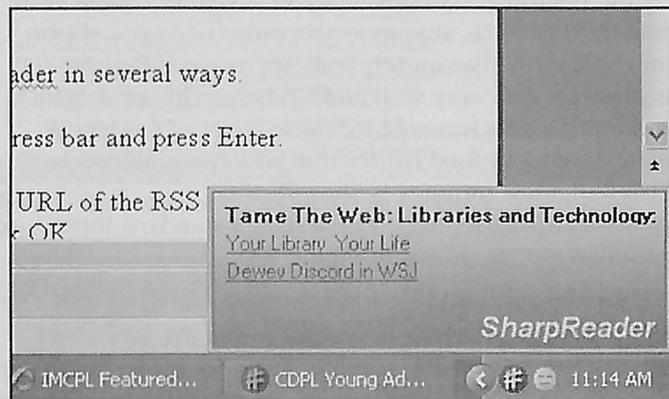


Figure 14 – SharpReader alerts you visually when a feed downloads.

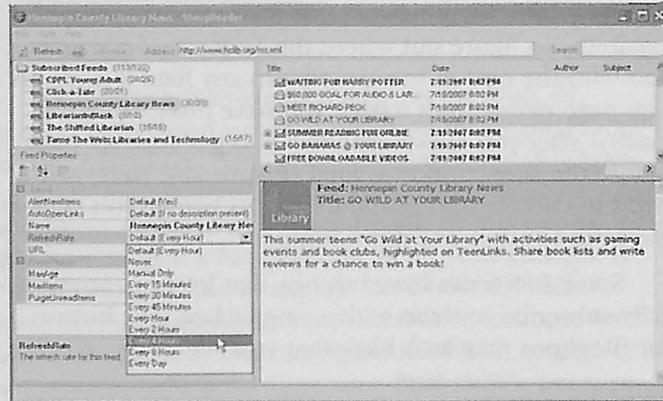


Figure 15 – Change your refresh rate and other preferences to meet your needs.

A client-based installation usually offers more features than a Web-based service, and some browsers that you may already have installed on your computer (such as Mozilla Firefox, Safari, and Internet Explorer 7) have built-in support for RSS feeds. In addition, Microsoft Outlook is capable of reading RSS feeds, and many mobile devices have the same features. If you are using Internet Explorer 7, for example, you have a fully functional feed reader. When you visit a web page with IE 7, it will automatically check to see if any RSS feeds are available. If a feed is detected, the Feeds button on the toolbar will turn orange and become active (see Figure 16). Click this button to go to the feed, which you then view in a Web-page format (see Figure 17). If IE 7 detects more than one feed on a Web page, you can click the arrow next to the Feeds button to see a list of feeds from which you can choose one to view. You have some interesting options when viewing a feed with IE 7. Depending on how the feed is set up, you can:

- filter by typing a word or words into the Displaying field
- re-display all feeds by clicking the All link sort feeds by Date, Title, or Author
- filter by category (if the feed author assigned categories to feeds)

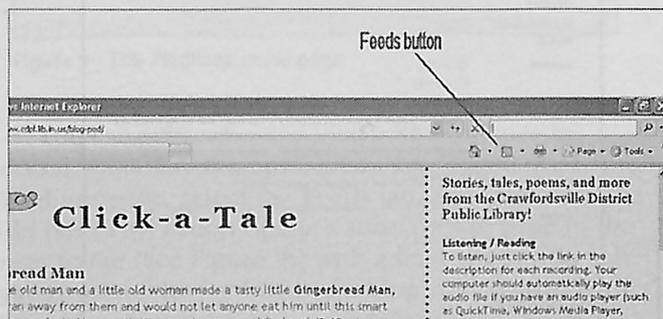


Figure 16 – IE 7 recognizes RSS feeds.

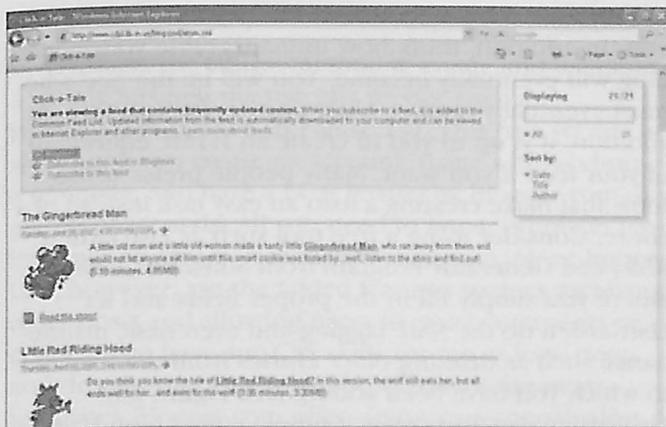


Figure 17 – You can still view the feed without subscribing.

In order to subscribe to a feed, simply click *Subscribe to this feed* in order to get a dialogue box where you can give the feed a name (if you don't want to accept the default name) and put it into the Feeds folder or another sub-folder of your choice (see Figure 18). To go back to any subscribed feed, go the Feeds list in the Favorites Center and click on a subscription. If you mouse over a feed link in your Feeds list, you will also see when it was last updated, and to the right will appear a refresh icon for you to click in case you wish to update immediately (Figure 19). Here you can also right-click a subscription and choose Properties from the pop-up menu in order to see that feed's properties page. In the Feed Properties dialogue box, you can change the settings, such as how often IE 7 automatically checks a feed for updates, with "daily" being the default (see Figure 20).

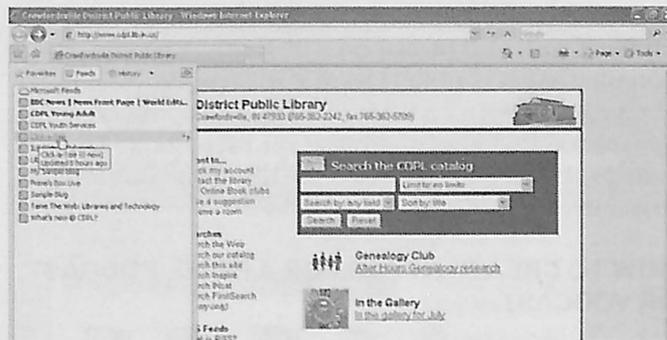


Figure 19 - The Feeds list is in the Favorites Center.

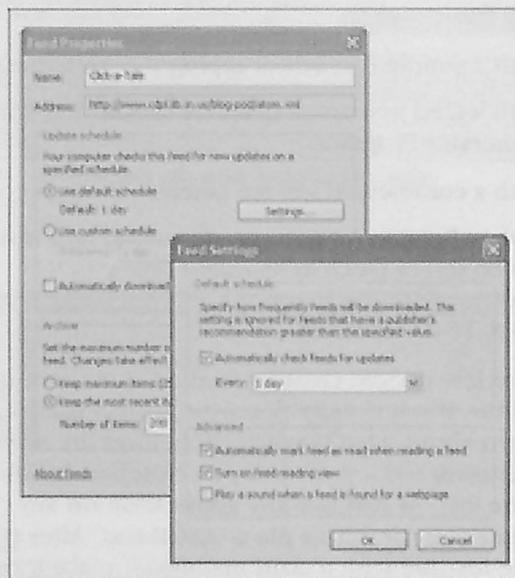


Figure 20 - The Feed Properties and Feed Settings dialogue boxes.

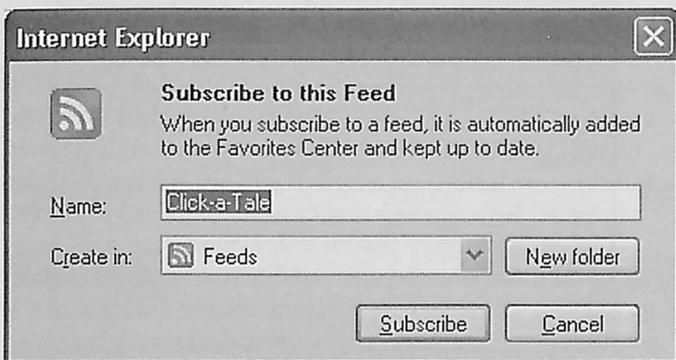


Figure 18 – The Subscribe to this Feed dialogue box.

Note: If you ever decide to change RSS Feed readers, don't think that you must re-subscribe to every feed once again. Many readers (both Web-based and client-based) can export and import your subscriptions using a format known as OPML. OPML stands for Outline Processor Markup Language, and it is simply an XML format for outlines that can be used for exchange. You can thus also share your feeds with others so that they can instantly subscribe to that which you have subscribed.

ANATOMY OF AN RSS FEED

So what does a basic RSS feed look like? If you look at Figure 21, you can see some easy RSS 2.0 markup. (This RSS version has required and optional elements; see the RSS Advisory Board Web site for RSS 2.0 details.)

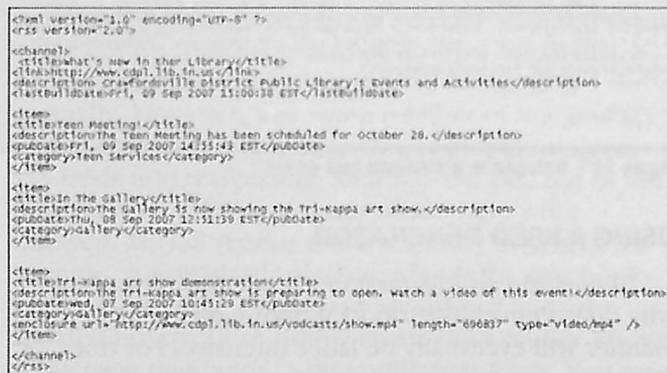


Figure 21 – This simple XML RSS feed also has an enclosure for a video.

This file would be saved as an XML file (such as **myfeed.xml**) and placed on a Web server where potential users could get to it. For example, if your library is at **www.yourlibrary.com**, you could create a directory called **blog** and place your feed in it. Thus your feed would be at **www.yourlibrary.com/blog/myfeed.xml**.

HOW TO CREATE A FEED FOR A BLOG, PODCAST, OR VODCAST

You may be surprised at how easily you can create an RSS feed. There are almost as many ways to create a feed as there are ways to subscribe to one. You can create a feed...

- with a simple text editor typing the XML directly
- with a feed generator (such as ListGarden RSS Feed Generator Program)
- with a commercial service (such as Blogger.com)
- with software that you can download and install on a Web server (such as Movable Type)

USING A TEXT EDITOR

Very few people create a feed on their own using a text editor, but it is a quick way to make a basic feed and learn about what is going on behind the scenes. If you are using a PC, you can open Notepad (as shown in Figure 22), or just use any application on any computer that can save a file as ASCII text. After you save the text file with a **.xml** extension, place it on a Web server where your readers can get to it. If you include an enclosure tag pointing to an audio or video file, you would be podcasting or vodcasting!

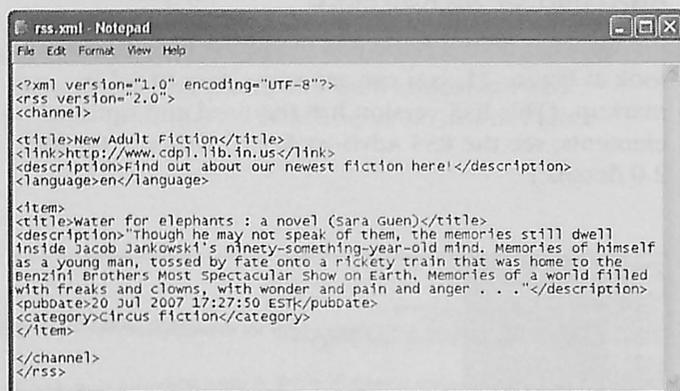


Figure 22 – Notepad is a standard text editor.

USING A FEED GENERATOR

If creating an RSS feed in a text editor is so easy, why doesn't everyone do it? Working manually in this manner will eventually be labor intensive. For one thing, you have to type in the tags exactly right or else your feed will not work. And simple text editors do not

usually have a lot of features to help you write and edit. In addition, think how unmanageable your entire blog will eventually become. You will be the one who must eventually remove older entries, for example. In addition, it is up to you to create an HTML equivalent of your feed if you want. Many people prefer using tools that make creating a feed an easy task instead of a chore. Consider using a free tool such as ListGarden RSS Feed Generator Program from Software Garden where you simply fill in the proper fields and let ListGarden do the XML tagging and even basic maintenance such as deleting older entries from the feed file to which you have been adding (see Figure 23). ListGarden can also create a simple companion HTML page for your feed. All you need to do is to post the XML file (which is the RSS feed) and the HTML file (if you generated it) to a Web server. You can even let ListGarden FTP the files to your Web server.

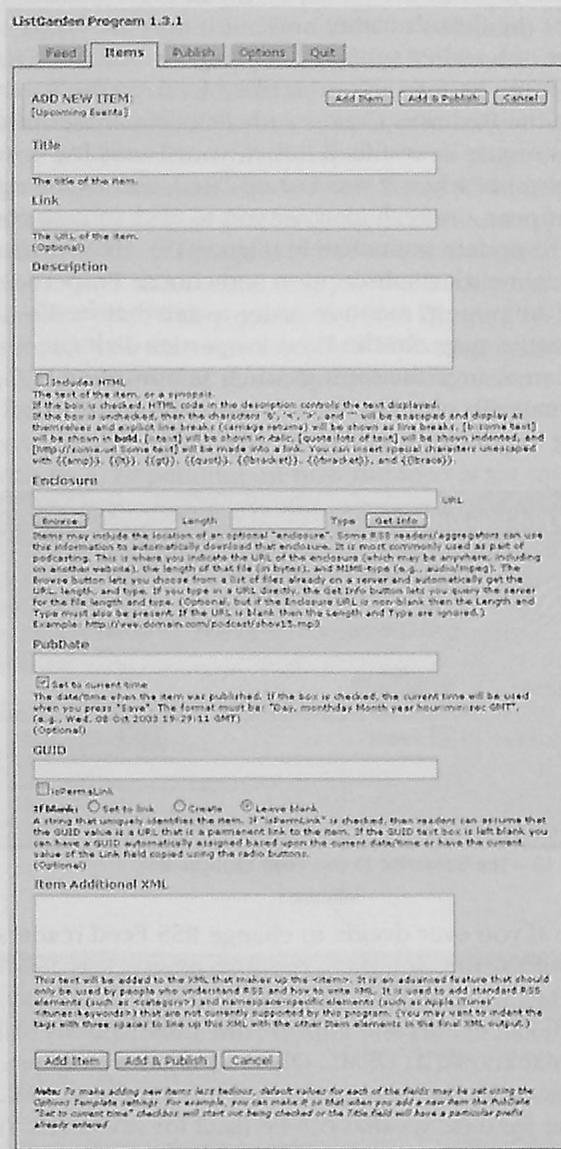


Figure 23 – ListGarden saves you from typing the XML directly.

USING A COMMERCIAL SERVICE

Perhaps the easiest method to create and maintain a feed is through the use of a service such as Blogger.com (shown in Figure 24). This free service is where you can create an account, name a blog, choose a template, and have a blog hosted by Blogger.com in a matter of seconds. All you need to know is how to type information into a user-friendly interface. More important, however, are the added features such as archiving older posts and allowing users to make comments on posts. If you have any CSS skills (or can at least drag and drop), you can easily modify one of the many templates Blogger.com offers in order to personalize your feed and make it unique. In addition, you do not need to have Blogger.com host your blog, podcast, or vodcast; you can configure this service to send your feeds via FTP to a server of your choice. This service creates a feed in Atom format as well as an equivalent HTML Web page. Blogger.com is a popular choice for many because of its ease of use.

USING SERVER-BASED SOFTWARE

If you want total creative control over everything possible with a feed and you have the time and technical skills (not to mention the hardware), you can download free software such as WordPress, which needs to be installed on a Web server (see Figure 25). You'll need some experience in areas such as PHP and MySQL (not to mention Web server configuration), so this is not the route for the casual blogger.

WHAT DO LIBRARIES HAVE TO GAIN?

The use of RSS feeds is not a passing fad: it is an efficient way of delivering content to users who wish to take advantage of feed readers to keep up with their interests in a rapidly changing and ever more confusing technical environment. Why would you want to have a blog, podcast, or vodcast for your library? You should especially consider this delivery method if your library wishes to reach its patrons in a new manner. Just ask yourself what content you would like to update frequently and “deliver” to your patrons automatically. If you spend a few moments thinking about it, you can easily come up with a wish list of delivery items: library events, announcements, children’s stories, recorded speakers, demonstrations, virtual tours, tutorials, book reviews, community focus topics, interviews, and so on. At the Crawfordsville District Public Library, we have a blog for library news, a blog for Youth Services, and a blog for our Young Adult patrons. We also maintain a podcast called Click-a-Tale that allows staff members to read (public domain) stories for young listeners. Even if our blogs and podcast are not the most professionally slick productions possible, we know that we are using a fresh avenue to try to serve our patrons. In addition, one of the basic desires of

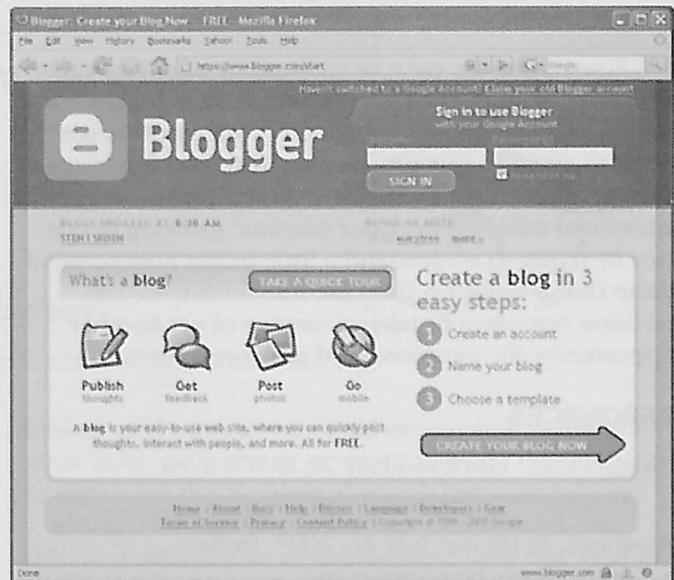


Figure 24 – Blogger.com can make blogging very easy.



Figure 25 – Download and run WordPress if you wish to do it all yourself.

many patrons is to have a list of recently acquired items in the library. This list would be an easy beginner’s blog to maintain, even if you had to compose it manually. However, a growing number of Integrated Library System (ILS) vendors have begun to integrate RSS feeds into the catalog; Sirsi was the first out of the chute in early 2005, and many others have since followed. My ILS vendor (Polaris Library Systems), for example, automatically generates feeds for new books, videos, large print, and sound recordings that are updated hourly; I can simply create links on our library home page that point to these different feeds. You may want to see if your vendor has the same capabilities or plans to have them in the near future.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes the pace of technology seems so rapid that our common reaction is to resist change. Embracing change too quickly is certainly a danger that we learn to avoid in our profession. However, librarians have come to realize that the Web has provided us with additional tools to meet our patrons' growing needs. Just by trying to understand a little better how some of these things work (in this case RSS feeds), we can position ourselves to take advantage of yet another opportunity for increased and improved service.

RESOURCES

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