RSS and Current Awareness: How Two Projects (ticTOCs and Gold Dust) Are Hoping to Improve the Academic information landscape

Roddy MacLeod

Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh EH14 4AS, United Kingdom
r.a.macleod@hw.ac.uk

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Abstract:

RSS is a protocol with immense potential which is increasingly enabling the delivery of current content direct to the desktop. A growing number of content providers are now producing RSS feeds for an increasing variety of resource types of interest to academics, e.g. journal tables of contents (TOCs), calls for papers, funding opportunities, new patents, new theses and dissertations, professional society news, forthcoming conferences, new teaching and learning resources, newly published book announcements, and new items in institutional and subject repositories. Issues such as awareness of the technology, the difficulty of identifying feeds of interest, filtering, personalisation, reusing feed content, and standardisation of feed formats need to be overcome before the full potential of RSS can be realised. Two large-scale consortium projects based around RSS and with implications for the international information community are currently underway in the UK. They are: ticTOCs, which is developing a freely available journal current awareness service; and Gold Dust, which is producing a prototype for the delivery of highly relevant, personalised current awareness content of a variety of kinds to academics. This presentation will look at the current situation with respect to RSS within academia, and explain how the two projects are aiming to improve the information landscape.

RSS

According to Wikipedia, RSS (Really Simple Syndication, Rich Site Summary or RDF Site Summary) is "…a family of Web feed formats used to publish frequently updated content such as blog entries, news headlines, and podcasts. An RSS document (which is called a "feed" or "web feed" or "channel") contains either a summary of content from an associated web site or the full text. RSS makes it possible for people to keep up with web sites in an automated manner that can be piped into special programs or filtered displays."(1). For more on the technicalities and other features of RSS, there are two informative sources, RSS Specifications (2) and RSS Compendium (3).

Use of RSS is growing rapidly, and although normally associated with the syndication of news headlines, blog entries and more recently podcasts, RSS can be used in conjunction with most kinds of regularly updated information. It therefore has immense potential as a current awareness tool within the academic sector, particularly with respect to research, where up-to-date information is often at a premium.

Categories of feeds which may be of interest to academics and researchers include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Scholarly Journal Tables of Contents (TOCs), e.g.
  Nature http://www.nature.com/nature/current_issue/rss/
  BMJ http://www.bmj.com/rss/
  Science http://www.sciencemag.org/rss/current.xml

- Calls for papers, e.g.
  WikiCFP http://www.wikicfp.com/cfp/rss
  Call for Papers: Computer Science: Elsevier
  http://www.elsevierscitech.com/rss/compsci_cfp.xml
  Inderscience http://www.inderscience.com/rss/calls.php

- Funding opportunity news, e.g.
  COS Funding News http://fundingopps.cos.com/news/rss.xml
  EPSRC Calls for Proposals http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/CallsForProposals/rss

- New patents, e.g.
  Popular US Patent RSS Feeds http://www.freepatentsonline.com/rssfeed.html
  FreshPatents.com: Notable Patent Applications
  http://rss.freshpatents.com/misc/rss_frontpage_picks.xml

- New theses & dissertations, e.g.
  ProQuest Dissertations & Theses RSS feeds
  http://www.proquest.com/syndication/rss/disstheses.shtml

- Professional society news, e.g.
  RSC News http://www.rsc.org/AboutUs/News/RSCnews/RSS.xml
  SPIE Newsroom http://www.spie.org/x1004.xml?ss=rss

- Forthcoming conferences & events, e.g.
  Eventseer.net – the academic event tracker http://eventseer.net/feeds/main/
  EPSRC Events News Feed http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/events/rss/

- New Teaching & Learning resources, e.g.
  NSDL Resource Recommendation Service http://crs.nsdl.org/rssfeed.php?svc=rrs&flt=c

- Newly published book announcements, e.g.
  Wildy & Sons Ltd http://www.wildy.com/browse-by-subject

- New items in Institutional and Subject Repositories, e.g.
  CS updates on arXiv http://arxiv.org/rss/cs

A wealth of information which is potentially useful to academics is included in feeds such as those listed above, and other similar feeds. To give a flavour, an example, taken from Eventeer.com (4), the academic event tracker, shows the type of information being published, in this instance about a forthcoming IEEE conference.

3rd international conference on digital information manage Final Call for Workshop Proposals Third IEEE International Conference on Digital Information Management (ICDIM 2008) (IEEE sponsored) November 13-16, 2008 University of East London, London. UK (http://www.icdim.org) ICDIM 2008 (IEEE Sponsored) will host a number of workshops addressing different areas related to digital information management that complement the main ICDIM 2008 conference. We invite workshop organizers to send proposals as instructed below. Workshops are intended to serve as an intensive collaborative forum for exchanging late breaking ideas and theories in an evolutionary stage. We encourage prospective workshop organizers to submit proposals for highly-interactive workshops focusing on either in-depth analysis or broad-ranging approaches to areas related to digital information management.

The response from downstream

Publishers are now taking increasing advantage of the possibilities of RSS to broadcast their content news, and a great deal of information is being published via RSS. What has been the response downstream, from the library and information community?

There are a few initiatives, such as TOCRoSS: Table of Contents by Really Simple Syndication (5) – a JISC supported project to use RSS standards to place journal tables of content data into a library catalogue without human intervention; and FeedNavigator (6) – from the National Library of Health Science, Terkko, which downloads medical feeds published by websites and aggregates their content into a single feed, with the latest news first. For the most part, however, although many libraries are now producing their own RSS feeds (for news, and for lists of new book arrivals, new databases, and so on), the response to the growth of RSS has often been in the area of information skills training and the production of RSS guides, explanations and tutorials.

A large number of libraries have produced guides to RSS, and some of these are of high quality. A few examples include UCD Library RSS Tutorial (7), RSS Basics

and Beyond, from the University of Michigan Libraries (8), and What is RSS? from the Royal College of Midwives (9). There are many more, yet most include the same, or similar, information. There has, it is suggested, been a lot of duplicated effort in the production of guides to RSS. The belief on the part of many within the LIS community appears to be that, in order to exploit the potential of RSS, academics must not only understand something of the processes involved, but also spend time managing those processes. An article in *fumsi* by Martin Belam, entitled RSS Feeds: Managing the Mechanism (10) emphasises how much time may be required of end users for the efficient management of feeds.

Even though recent advances with Internet browsers have meant that using RSS has become easier, the process is not always problem-free. There are millions of RSS feeds, and it is not always easy to identify those of interest. In addition, feeds can produce a torrent of items out of which only a small number may be of real value, and there is a danger that RSS may actually increase information overload. More finding tools, filtering tools, personalisation tools, and services aimed at niche areas of interest to scholars would be useful for academics.

ticTOCs and Gold Dust

Two projects, ticTOCs and Gold Dust, are hoping to exploit the potential of RSS and work towards making things easier for academics.

ticTOCS (11) is a project to develop a freely available service which will make it easy for academics and researchers to find, display, store, combine and reuse scholarly journal TOC RSS feeds from multiple publishers in a personalisable website. It will also facilitate the export of TOC RSS feeds to feedreaders of choice. ticTOCs is a two-year project which has been funded by JISC under the Users & Innovation programme: personalising technologies (12). The ticTOCs Consortium consists of the University of Liverpool Library (lead), Heriot-Watt University, CrossRef, ProQuest CSA, Emerald, RefWorks, MIMAS, Cranfield University, Institute of Physics, SAGE Publishers, Inderscience Publishers, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), Open J-Gate, and Intute.

The ticTOCs service will include a directory of journal TOC RSS feeds from multiple publishers, a facility to select and store TOCs of interest, the display of TOCs and items within TOCs with links to full text landing pages, and feed URLs for those who want to export feeds to other feedreaders. It will also facilitate the exportation of items in TOC feeds to RefWorks and Connotea bibliographic management software. In addition, the service will enable the reuse of aggregated journal TOC content on a subject basis by gateways, library services, research groups and blogs, where this content can act as a showcase of the latest research within a relevant context.

The ticTOCs prototype is currently harvesting over 6,500 scholarly journal TOC RSS feeds, with more to be added in the near future. The service has been named ticTOCs because part of the service involves the ticking of selected TOCs of interest.

The efficient exploitation of the latest issues of journals is vitally important for publishers, especially now that funding bodies are requiring the deposit of articles in repositories shortly after publication. It is also important for researchers, who need to

know the results of the latest research, and also authors of scholarly papers, who want their output to be available to as wide an audience as possible, as soon after publication as possible. ticTOCs has, therefore, great potential as a service of benefit to academia.

The ticTOCs project has found that there are many inconsistencies in the ways that publishers are currently producing journal TOC RSS feeds. Publishers often have different interpretations of what should be included in various RSS elements. The project, in conjunction with CrossRef (one of the ticTOCs partners), intends to produce recommendations for good practice covering the information to include in journal TOC RSS feeds, and the best way to structure that information. This will hopefully encourage more standardisation, from which everyone should benefit. These recommendations should be available later in 2008.

A News from ticTOCs blog (13) provides information about the progress of the project.

The second project, Gold Dust (14), which is also being funded by JISC under the Users & Innovation programme: personalising technologies, is a research project, and will not produce a service. Rather, it will investigate ways to personalise current awareness using RSS as one of several tools. More specifically, Gold Dust is investigating methods to deliver highly relevant, personalised current awareness content of a variety of kinds to academics, without the need for any input by those academics, in a flexible way from within selected JISC and non-JISC presentation services.

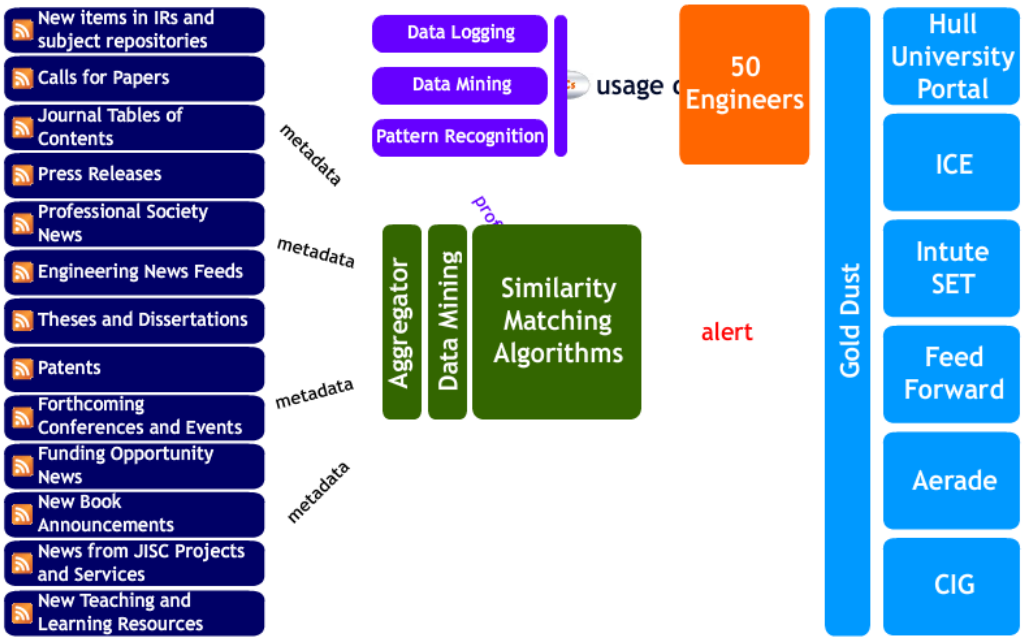

Figure 1: Gold Dust diagram

There are 12 partners in the Gold Dust consortium, which is being lead by the University of Hull.

Gold Dust will involve personalisation, RSS, current awareness, data mining techniques, flexible delivery, automated discovery and multiple content providers. It is really the combination of all of these, with the intention of developing solutions to deliver the right information, at the right time, to the right people, in the right way and in the right place, which makes Gold Dust potentially of great benefit to academics and researchers.

Conclusions

The ticTOCs project and the Gold Dust project are working towards helping academics exploit the potential of RSS by making it easier for them to find and use potentially useful information contained in RSS feeds. In both cases, the intention is to do this without the expectation that academics will need to spend time understanding RSS or managing the processes involved. In this way, both projects hope to work towards the improvement of the academic information landscape.

Further Reading

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About the author:

Roddy MacLeod, MA, DipLib, MCILIP is Senior Subject Librarian at Heriot-Watt University, UK. He edits the Internet Resources Newsletter, manages the TechXtra service (a free service for technology information) and is a past manager of the Pilot Engineering Repository (PerX) project. He provides management support for the ticTOCs project, and subject advice for the Gold Dust project. He was the Information World Review Information Professional of the Year in 2000, and has led initiatives which have won three marketing and publicity awards. He co-edited the 4th edition of 'Information sources in engineering', published by KG Saur, which was chosen by the Engineering Libraries Division of the ASEE as 2006 Best Reference Work. He has written and presented on topics such as engineering information resources, RSS, and branding. Home page:
http://www.hw.ac.uk/libwww/libram/roddy.html