

Feed me now.

A day in the life of an RSS feed reader.

I don't think it is going overboard to say that I believe blogs and RSS feed readers to be the single most important development while I've been involved in libraries. Admittedly, I only have four years experience of hanging around the world of information, but I can think of no other sets of tools that offer such immediacy and flexibility and which are so easy to use. I ain't no techie- I believe that what the end user sees shouldn't require any specialist knowledge, and yet every day, with limited input from me, I get information from over 60 sources, from the National Library for Health to Wired Magazine. This article is to demonstrate the plethora of information I receive from my feed reader in the course of a day, how you can get hold of that information and the uses it can be put to. Get one immediately. You'll wonder how you ever managed without it.

So let's begin by saying, for the uninitiated, what a feed reader is. In a nutshell, your feed reader (aka (feed) aggregator) collects together content from many different sources and puts it all together in one single view. It means that new posts on blogs and changes to web pages come straight to you feed reader rather than you having to go off and check individual sites one by one.

There are many feed readers available, loads for free. Many people use Bloglines (part of the Yahoo! Group), Newsgator (which links in to Outlook), Amphetadesk, which downloads to your desktop and many more. Phil Bradley gives a good overview of what's available on his webpage. I use Bloglines purely because it was the first on I came across and I've always found it pretty reliable and east to use.

So what can you get hold of? Well, for starters the range of blogs available is ever expanding. You may think of blogs as somewhere for teenage girls to express their unrequited love and lonely dears to tell you about their cats, and there is certainly no shortage of such material. But there are also some real gems out there with direct relevance to our professional lives. I get feeds from the likes of Sheila Webber, expert in Information literacy, Phil Bradley, who keeps me up to date with the latest happenings on the internet (and who is the reason I got into blogs in the first place- thanks Phil!), the King's Fund, who tell me all about their publications in health management, or the people at Talking Knowledge Management, which is all about sharing knowledge in the NHS. I also love Informatocopia "news and views on health informatics and e-learning", and Info NeoGnostic, "new thoughts about information science". There's a blog somewhere to suit every specialism (and if there isn't, create one!) Within my own organisation several groups are catching on to blogs, so I am able to keep in touch with the goings on in the rest of Information and Learning Services or the E-learning team.

Moreover, many websites have the facility to be read by RSS. I link to the BBC health section, to learn about general goings on, and Wired Magazine to indulge the geek in me. My Bloglines account also serves as the focus for updates on additions to resources than my users need. SOSIG, OMNI, NMAP, the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination and NLH Hitting the Headlines all provide feeds. This means updates come to me, I don't have to waste time checking each site. It have also cleared out my email in-box as I've been able to stop subscribing to a number of monthly update bulletins by email and use the RSS feed option instead.

So where to find blogs and RSS feeds? The NLH provides a handy catalogue of useful blogs divided up by clinical specialty, region, profession etc. I got some good links from here to a big bundle of feeds run by Trent Primary Care Awareness Service covering subjects such as cancer, children's services, health promotion and older people which frequently mention resources of use to nursing. There are many blog search engines around, including those attached to regular search engines like Google or Yahoo!. Additionally there are several specialist blog search engines which purely search the output from the world of blog. The most popular of these is Technorati.