

## Choose your news with RSS

Contributed by Debbie Smit  
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New web things have a way of simply appearing. With little fanfare, tiny rectangular buttons have been popping up on an increasing number of web sites since sometime in 2004.

Anyone who was taught as a child not to play with switches or plugs is fairly unlikely to click on something that explains itself only by way of three letters &ndash; usually RSS or XML &ndash; or an orange icon bearing the image of white radio waves. Feedburner.com describes these as "chicklets", possibly because their shape is reminiscent of a piece of chewing gum which, like RSS, is habit-forming but harmless.

RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication (to make things more complicated, RSS could also stand for Rich Site Summary or Rockdale, Sandow and Southern) and is a tool for sharing information in the simplest possible way on the virtual superhighway. When you click on an RSS button you get "fed" information from other sites &ndash; good for the site where you found the button because it pushes up content ratings, and also for the site that the RSS feed links to.

In theory, this should also be good for surfers, who will be able to consume more information in less time than ever before.

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One would think that the all-consuming first world has enough access to information as it is (and enough trouble making sense of it too) without having to be fed with snippets that come from an even more diverse range of sources. There was a time when a daily newspaper was more than enough for any one person to digest in one sitting. Now the internet allows us access to online versions of most major print journals, TV channels (they will be there if they know what's good for them), links to other sites from these sites and most recently news feeds which provide summarised content from other sources and links to that specific content.

The idea behind these feeds is to make the web smarter; to reinvent it so that it is able to filter information and post signs to guide surfers to it. The web is no longer the untamed wilderness that it was when we first embraced the vastness of cyberspace. Today's surfer demands a succession of evenly spaced waves, rather than the time wasting whirlpools and eddies of the 'old' web. An RSS reader (which one can download online) allows you to download content in any format, classify it, organise it and store it for later use.

A more bohemian take on this rather dictatorial new technology is a move away from the professionally developed controlled vocabularies which determine importance on the web. Folksonomy (as opposed to taxonomy) is a user-controlled system of tagging content that is unsystematic, but helps the web retain some of its chaotic innocence. Users of Flickr (a photo sharing site) and Del.icio.us (a social bookmarking, social software web service for storing and sharing web bookmarks) use labels or "tags" that are supplied by users themselves.

Others have attempted to inject a bit of artistic flair into the bland lines of text offered up by RSS feeds.

Average Shoveler, which downloads as a game, allows one to dig up news out of piles of snow while passersby spout chunks of news in cartoon bubbles. Phylotaxis claims to unite science and culture in the gently dancing arrangement of dots based on the Fibonacci sequence, recognising the innate sense of order present in nature. Flickrflying composes a collage of based on Flickr image tags to words in RSS feeds while Poeme Dada allows you to turn feeds into poetry by randomly selecting them from the RSS text.

It might be that turning news, which is essentially disposable, into art, which is meant to be eternal, is an over-reaching ideal but it is clear that the technology revolution has allowed us to choose our news.

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