

The Power of RSS Feeds**

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Ms. Murley explores the reasons why law librarians should be using RSS feeds, both for their own current awareness and to distribute information to library patrons. She highlights feeds that law librarians can use, compares two feed readers, and makes recommendations for subscribing to and organizing feeds.

Introduction

¶1 Would you like to get some of the e-mail out of your in-box? Would you like your news to come to you? Would you like to automate web searches you run on a regular basis? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, read on to learn how RSS feeds can help. If you already use RSS feeds for your own current awareness and would like to learn how feeds can help you distribute information to your patrons, skip to the section on “Using RSS Feeds to Serve Library Patrons” at ¶ 27.

¶2 I don’t know about you, but I receive more than enough e-mail. So, as much as possible, I try to keep my current awareness out of my e-mail in-box. I’m not talking about e-mail filters or rules that automatically move e-mail into specified folders, although I use those too. I am talking about using RSS feeds and a feed reader to collect my current awareness sources in a single location separate from my e-mail in-box.

¶3 Depending on your job duties and your patron base, you probably review dozens or hundreds of publications to keep current. If many of those publications are web-based, RSS feeds can help you stay current more efficiently. RSS feeds (sometimes called news feeds, web feeds, or simply feeds) are special web files that are used by news sites, blogs, and other frequently updated web pages to distribute new content to subscribers. Despite the techie-sounding name, you don’t have to understand the technology to take advantage of RSS feeds, any more than you have to understand HTML to surf the web.

* *Editor’s Note:* “Technology for Everyone” is a regular feature of *Law Library Journal*. In each article, author Diane Murley reviews a tool that can help law librarians do their jobs even better. To supplement her articles, Ms. Murley posts ideas for using technology to improve or expand law library services on her Technology for Law Libraries blog, <http://tech4lawlibs.blog.asu.edu>.

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¶4 I subscribe to the feeds of more than 150 news sites, blogs, and other electronic publications that cover law, librarianship, and technology, including feeds that focus on specific topics of interest to my faculty. By subscribing to the feeds, I eliminate the need to visit each site just to see if there is anything new. When there is something new, it is sent to my feed reader. Also, for very frequently updated sites, I don't have to worry about items disappearing off the front page when I don't have time to check them for a couple of days. New items are saved in my feed reader until I get to them. Without RSS, it would take me much longer to stay current, and I would probably not be able to review as many sources.

¶5 If you need to monitor a particular company or issue, you can set up and subscribe to feeds of automated searches. For example, I have set up several automated searches to monitor references to my law library, law school, and university. These work so well that I sometimes receive news through one of my search feeds before the announcement is e-mailed to employees.

¶6 To take advantage of RSS technology, you subscribe to feeds, which are provided by many news sites and blogs, in a feed reader. In the next part I will discuss some feeds to which you may want to subscribe. In the following part I will compare two feed readers that are good for novice RSS subscribers.

Using RSS Feeds to Receive Information

¶7 Let's start by looking at some of the feeds to which you might want to subscribe. Almost any major news site will have a variety of feeds to which you can subscribe.¹ Legal news sites also have feeds.² AALL has RSS feeds for news, events, job postings, and member news.³ Information about a site's feeds is usually indicated by an "RSS" button or link. Some sites do not promote their feeds, so you may have to search the homepage for a link.

¶8 Blogs usually have at least one feed, the link to which may be labeled as RSS, XML, feed, subscribe, syndicate, or sometimes just a small square orange icon. To find law library and librarian blogs, explore Bonnie Schucha's comprehensive list.⁴ For law-related blogs, check out the *ABA Journal's* Blawg Directory (abajournal.com/blawgs), Justia's Blawg Search (blawgsearch.justia.com), or Blawg (www.blawg.com).

1. See, e.g., The New York Times, NYTimes.com RSS Feeds, <http://www.nytimes.com/services/xml/rss/index.html> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008); CNN.com, CNN RSS, <http://www.cnn.com/services/rss/?iref=rssvcs> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008).

2. See, e.g., ABA Journal, Subscribe to the ABA Journal: RSS Feeds, <http://abajournal.com/subscribe/#rss> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008); Law.com, Law.com RSS Feeds, <http://www.law.com/service/rss.shtml> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008); JURIST, Feeds, <http://jurist.law.pitt.edu/paperchase/feeds.php> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008).

3. Am. Assoc. of Law Libraries, AALL RSS Feeds, <http://aallnet.org/rss> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008).

4. Bonnie Schucha, Law Library Blogs and Blogs by Law Librarians or Law Library Associations, <http://library.law.wisc.edu/wisblawg/bloglistpublic.htm> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008).

Special Feeds

¶9 Besides news and blog feeds, there are other types of feeds you may find helpful. The following list is just a sample of what is available.

- U.S. Government RSS Library provides access to hundreds of feeds of official government information and services.⁵ The Census Bureau and the Library of Congress have excellent collections of feeds.
- GovTrack.us (www.govtrack.us) is a nongovernmental site that tracks congressional activity. There are feeds for activity by Congress as a whole, such as newly introduced bills, upcoming committee meetings, all roll call votes, and activity on all legislation.⁶ There are also feeds about specific members of Congress, issue areas, individual bills, and committees.⁷ If you create an account, you can get a single RSS feed for all of your Tracked Events.⁸ Some states offer feeds for bill tracking,⁹ so check your state legislature's site.
- Washington & Lee Law School's Current Law Journal Content has feeds for its entire table of contents service, for individual journals, and for search results.¹⁰
- Justia (www.justia.com) offers feeds for U.S. district court opinions¹¹ and civil case filings¹² by state, court, type of lawsuit, and judge. You can also search by party name and then subscribe to the search feed.
- Justia's Regulation Tracker has feeds for all Federal Register documents and for documents from individual agencies.¹³
- The Legal Information Institute at Cornell University Law School (www.law.cornell.edu) offers feeds of new U.S. Supreme Court decisions¹⁴ and updates to individual titles of the U.S. Code.¹⁵ Some state and lower federal courts also offer RSS feeds,¹⁶ so check the web site of the individual court.

5. USA.gov, U.S. Government RSS Library, http://www.usa.gov/Topics/Reference_Shelf/Libraries/RSS_Library.shtml (last visited Oct. 17, 2008).

6. GovTrack.us, Trackers & Feeds, <http://www.govtrack.us/users/feeds.xpd> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008).

7. *Id.*

8. GovTrack.us, Using Trackers, <http://www.govtrack.us/users/trackers.xpd> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008).

9. *See, e.g.*, Minnesota State Legislature, MyBills Subscription Services Login, <http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/leg/billslogin.asp> (last visited Oct. 25, 2008).

10. Washington & Lee Law School, Current Law Journal Content, <http://lawlib.wlu.edu/CLJC/index.aspx> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008).

11. Justia, Federal District Court Opinions and Orders, <http://cases.justia.com/federal/district-courts> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008).

12. Justia, Federal District Court Filings and Dockets, <http://dockets.justia.com> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008).

13. Justia, Regulation Tracker, <http://regulations.justia.com> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008).

14. Cornell University Law School, LII, Subscribing to U.S. Supreme Court Decisions, <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/subscribe.html> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008).

15. Cornell University Law School, LII, U.S. Code Collection, <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008).

16. *See, e.g.*, North Dakota Supreme Court, RSS Feeds, <http://www.ndcourts.gov/xml/rss.htm> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008); United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, Seventh Circuit RSS, http://www.ca7.uscourts.gov/ca7_rss.htm (last visited Oct. 17, 2008).

Custom Feeds

¶10 Some sites allow you to customize your own search feed to automatically receive updated results for your search.

- Washington & Lee Law School's Current Law Journal Content generates feeds for author, title, abstract, and journal-name searches of its database.¹⁷
- JURIST's Paper Chase generates feeds for searches of its legal news database.¹⁸
- Justia's U.S. District Court Opinions & Orders and U.S. District Court Filings & Dockets both generate feeds for party-name searches of their databases.¹⁹
- Yahoo! News (news.yahoo.com) and Google News (news.google.com) generate feeds when you run news searches. An RSS link in the sidebar can be used to subscribe to the feed and get updated search results.
- The National Library of Medicine allows you to create a feed of updated results for your PubMed (www.pubmed.gov) search by choosing "RSS Feed" from the "Send to" pull-down menu.²⁰
- Feed My Search (feedmysearch.com) generates feeds from Google searches. You can subscribe to get updated search results in any feed reader. By the time you read this, Google will probably offer feeds for web searches.²¹
- Bloglines (www.bloglines.com), a feed reader I will discuss below, allows you to "Search for Posts" and subscribe to the search.

A Comparison of Two Feed Readers

¶11 To subscribe to RSS feeds, you need a feed reader. If you have ever clicked on an RSS link and seen a page full of angle brackets and code, you know the importance of a feed reader for reading a feed. The reader collects new information from the sites to which you subscribe and displays it in a human-readable format.

¶12 There are many readers available, some web-based and some that require you to download software to your computer. Many, but not all, are free. Personalized start pages like iGoogle (www.google.com/ig) and MyYahoo! (my.yahoo.com) can function as feed readers, and your web browser, e-mail application, or mobile device may also have the ability to subscribe to feeds.

¶13 Google Reader (www.google.com/reader) and Bloglines (www.bloglines.com) are both free web-based readers. I recommend that you start with one of the free web-based readers until you get a sense of which features are important to you. Then, if you like, experiment with some of the other readers covered in the resources listed at the end of this article.

17. Washington & Lee, *supra* note 10.

18. JURIST, *supra* note 2.

19. Justia, *supra* note 11; Justia, *supra* note 12.

20. See Kathi Canese, *RSS Feeds Available from PubMed*, NLM TECHNICAL BULLETIN, May 6, 2005, http://www.nlm.nih.gov/pubs/techbull/mj05/mj05_rss.html.

21. See Finally! Google to Offer RSS Feeds for Web Search Results, Posting of Marshall Kirkpatrick to ReadWriteWeb, http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/finally_google_to_offer_rss_fe.php (Oct. 8, 2008, 1:20 PM).

Bloglines

¶14 Getting started with Bloglines is easy. Create an account with your e-mail address and a password you choose. Once you have created an account, you subscribe to feeds in one of several ways. Some sites will have a Bloglines button for their feeds. When you click on that button, you will be taken to Bloglines and guided through the subscription steps.

¶15 If the feed to which you want to subscribe doesn't have a special button for Bloglines, copy the feed URL by going to the feed page and copying the address from the box on your browser, or right click on the link to the feed page and choose "Copy Shortcut" or "Copy Link Location." Then paste the feed URL into the box on the Bloglines page and choose "Subscribe to URL" from the pull-down menu. Or copy and paste the URL of a web site, and Bloglines will search for any feeds associated with the site. Bloglines has a "Search for Feeds" option, but it doesn't work very well.

¶16 To review items in your feed subscriptions, sign in to Bloglines and click on each subscription listed in the left frame. Subscriptions with new items are bolded. When you click on the subscription name, new and saved items from the selected subscription will be displayed in the right frame. Once items load in the right frame they are no longer "new," and they will disappear when you click on the next subscription or exit, unless you have marked them as new.

¶17 You can mark an individual item's "Keep New" checkbox and it will stay with your subscription items until you uncheck the box. However, unlike real new items, "Keep New" items do not cause the subscription name to be bolded in the left frame. Bloglines's distinction between new and "Keep New" items in the display is one of the reasons I have stuck with Bloglines. I can tell at a glance which feeds have new items and which just have items I haven't read yet. Each feed also has a "mark all new" button at the top of the right frame, which keeps all items in the feed new just until the next time you select the feed.

¶18 The most important feature of Bloglines to me has been its archiving. When I review new items in my feed subscriptions, I "Keep New" any item I want to use in the future, perhaps for a class that I will teach next semester, for a possible article topic, or for a project I hope to undertake when I have time. Once I mark a feed item "Keep New," it remains in the listed items for that feed until I uncheck it. Of course, I have to go in and uncheck the "Keep New" items from time to time, but it is worth the trouble.

¶19 Another feature I like about Bloglines is the "Search for Posts" function. Bloglines will search news and blog feeds, even feeds to which I have not subscribed, for my search terms. Once I run the search, I can subscribe to the search feed and receive updated search results as new feed items. These automated searches make it easy for me to keep track of any mention of my law library, law school, or university in the news or on blogs.

Google Reader

¶20 Subscribing to feeds with Google Reader is similar to the process for Bloglines. If you do not already have a Google account, you will need to create one.

Then, when you find a feed to which you want to subscribe, click on the “Google” button or copy and paste the URL of the feed into the “Add subscription” box on the Google Reader page. Using the URL of the web site does not work as well as it does on Bloglines, because Google Reader just subscribes you to the site’s main feed instead of allowing you to choose from a list of feeds available from the site. Google Reader has a search for feeds, but, as with Bloglines, it doesn’t work very well.

¶21 To avoid succumbing to information overload, you should organize your subscriptions into folders. Some people organize by priority,²² while others use purpose folders.²³ One of the features that I especially like about Google Reader is the ability to put a feed subscription into more than one folder. If you mark an item as read, star it as important, or add a tag to it, those indications will appear on the item in all folders. You can display an entire folder of feeds sorted by date or by number of items in the subscription. Google Reader also has many search options, so you can search all your items, saved items, or starred items, and individual folders, tags, or subscriptions.

¶22 To review new items in your feed subscriptions, sign in to Google Reader and click on the name of the subscription in the left column. The new items are displayed to the right in Expanded or List view. In List view, each individual item is marked as read when you open it, but you can uncheck the “Mark as read” box on each item to keep it in the new list. There is also a “Mark all as read” button at the top of the list of feed items.

¶23 In Expanded view, Google gives you three options for marking items as read. You can click on the “Mark all as read” button at the top or check the “Mark as read” boxes on the individual items. Alternatively, you can change your account settings so that all items are marked as read when you scroll past them. If you choose that setting, you will still have a “Mark all as read” button at the top, but the check boxes on the individual items now “Keep unread” the items you check.

¶24 Google Reader has a nice feature that is not yet available with Bloglines, the ability to read feeds offline.²⁴ Download Google Gears (gears.google.com), sign in to Google Reader, and click the tiny green down arrow to download unread feeds and go offline. You can now read your unread feeds even if you are not connected to the Internet. When you again have Internet access, go to Google Reader and click on the tiny blue up arrow to go online and sync with Google Reader.²⁵

¶25 There are many features I like about Google Reader, but the last time I evaluated it for my own use, I stayed with Bloglines because feed items disappeared from Google Reader after a very short time—about thirty days—even if I had not marked them as read. At certain periods during the academic year, thirty days was

22. Wired How To Wiki, *Get More From Google Reader*, http://howto.wired.com/wiki/Get_More_From_Google_Reader (as of Aug. 10, 2008, 19:59 GMT).

23. Susan Boland, *Connecting: Technology Tips for Getting Things Done*, July 8, 2008, <http://cssis.org/2008/07/08/connecting-technology-tips-for-getting-things-done-by-susan-boland>.

24. Library Web Chic, *Google Reader + Google Gears = Offline Feed Reading*, <http://www.librarywebchic.net/wordpress/2007/06/08/google-reader-google-gears-offline-feed-reading> (June 8, 2007).

25. *A Look at Google Gears Working with Google Reader*, Posting of Barry Schwartz to Search Engine Roundtable, <http://www.seroundtable.com/archives/013657.html> (May 31, 2007).

just not enough time, and I was losing feed items I had wanted to save. The time that feed items are available now seems to be longer, so I am giving Google Reader another try.

¶26 There is still one feature that I don't like in Google Reader's display of feed items. If I keep an item as unread, the subscription name remains bolded in the left frame. Since I keep a lot of items as unread, most of the subscription names are bolded, so I can't tell which feeds actually have new items. Maybe this will become less of a problem as I make more use of stars and tags.

Using RSS Feeds to Serve Library Patrons

¶27 RSS feeds are also a good way to distribute information. The following suggestions focus on ways libraries can use feeds to distribute their own information. You may also be allowed to display feeds from other web sites, provided the original site is credited and other conditions are met.²⁶ Be sure to get permission and read the terms carefully before including someone else's content on your site.

Blog Feeds and FeedBurner

¶28 If you have a library blog, you can use the feed to display its recent headlines on your library's homepage, Facebook page, or another blog. Setting up a blog is the easiest way to create a feed. If you just want a news feed, publicize the feed address rather than the blog address. Some people may click through to the blog from the feed, but most will probably read it as a news feed. Make sure you set up the feed to distribute the full text of your blog entries, so people don't have to go to the blog to get the complete story.

¶29 Before you publicize your feed, I recommend that you create an account at FeedBurner (www.feedburner.com) and convert your feed to a FeedBurner feed. Then publicize the FeedBurner feed address, rather than the address generated by your blog. FeedBurner has services you can add to your feed to make it more attractive and accessible. It even lets you give your readers the option to subscribe by e-mail. (Reading feeds by e-mail seems counterintuitive to me, but I still find that between a third and a half of readers of my feeds are subscribing by e-mail.)

¶30 FeedBurner has tools to let you incorporate your online photos and link collections into your feed, and tools to help you format and display your feed on other web pages. You can also view statistics on the number of subscribers and visitors, which feed readers they used, and which items they viewed and clicked. FeedBurner has free accounts that will meet most libraries' needs.

Other Sources of Feeds

¶31 Your online catalog may have a function that enables you to create feeds for new acquisitions. Similarly, your event-scheduling software may generate feeds you can use. If not, you can add new acquisitions or events to your blog feed or another

26. For example, "headlines from JURIST's Paper Chase are available for posting on legal, educational, and governmental websites and intranets . . ." JURIST, *supra* note 2.

feed you create.²⁷ Changes to library hours, new services, and any other important news and announcements should also be included in your news feed. Then display the feeds on your web site or intranet and let your patrons know how to subscribe to the feed.

¶32 The large legal publishers have started adding services that enable subscribers to set up RSS feeds based on searches of the publishers' proprietary databases. Westlaw Watch (watch.westlaw.com) allows subscribers to create a search in a Westlaw database to which they subscribe and get updated results in RSS.²⁸ LexisNexis Publisher (www.lexisnexis.com/publisher) is a similar service for law firm and government subscribers. BNA Convergence (www.bna.com/convergence) allows subscribers to search across BNA and selected other publications and set up alerts via RSS feeds.²⁹ BNA Convergence is not included in academic subscriptions at this time.

Conclusion

¶33 RSS feeds are powerful tools for receiving or distributing information. Law librarians can use them to manage their own current awareness sources more efficiently and to distribute information to their library's users. Feeds are available for news sites, blogs, legal and government information, and other sources. You can even create feeds for updated search results.

¶34 Start taking advantage of RSS feeds by creating an account for a web-based feed reader and subscribing to some feeds that interest you. Then sit back and let the information come to you. Once you use feeds for current awareness, you will wonder how you ever got along without them.

More Resources on RSS

¶35 RSS has been around for awhile, so some of these tutorials are a few years old. But the information is still good.

- Common Craft's short videos, "RSS in Plain English"³⁰ and "Google Reader in Plain English."³¹
- Jason Eiseman's "RSS Tutorials for Law Librarians"³² is divided into three parts: Introduction, Using an Aggregator, and Advanced RSS.

27. If you want to learn how to create your own feed, Kevin Lanahan, *Basic Guide to Creating an RSS News Feed*, <http://www.oa.mo.gov/dmd/tutorials/BasicGuide-RSSNewsFeed.shtml> (last visited Oct. 17, 2008), is a good place to start.

28. Jason Eiseman, *Using RSS to Create and Enhance Current Awareness Services* (Nov. 22, 2006), <http://www.llrx.com/features/currentawarenessrss.htm>.

29. Electronic Resource Review, *BNA Convergence Powered by Llesiant* (Sept. 27, 2008), <http://electronicresourcereview.wordpress.com/2008/09/27/bna-convergence-powered-by-llesiant>.

30. Video: *RSS in Plain English*, Posting of Lee Lefever to Common Craft (Apr. 23, 2007), http://www.commoncraft.com/rss_plain_english.

31. Custom Video: *Google Reader in Plain English*, Posting of Lee Lefever to Common Craft (Aug. 26, 2008), <http://www.commoncraft.com/reader>.

32. Jason Eiseman, *RSS Tutorials for Law Librarians*, http://www.schwabe.com/library/rss_tutorials.htm (last visited Oct. 17, 2008).

- Cindy Chick's RSS Tutorial begins with "What IS RSS?"³³ followed by "Getting Started with RSS Aggregators,"³⁴ and "Using Bloglines."³⁵
- "RSS Resources You Can Use: Automated Web Surfing for Lawyers" by Tom Mighell and Dennis Kennedy.³⁶
- "The Ultimate RSS Toolbox—120+ RSS Resources" is an attempt to compile a comprehensive list of all the RSS readers, tools, browser plugins, tips, hacks, and directories available on the web.³⁷
- "The Ultimate RSS Toolset: 100+ Online Apps and Resources" is intended to be a "collection of tools will give you everything you need to get started or improve how you're working with RSS."³⁸
- RSS4Lib (www.rss4lib.com) is a blog on innovative ways libraries use RSS.

33. LawLibTech, RSS Tutorial: What IS RSS?, <http://lawlibtech.com/archives/000314.html> (Mar. 21, 2004, 11:02 AM).

34. LawLibTech, RSS Tutorial Part II: Getting Started with RSS Aggregators, <http://lawlibtech.com/archives/000319.html> (Apr. 5, 2004, 12:04 PM).

35. LawLibTech, RSS Tutorial Part III: Using Bloglines, <http://lawlibtech.com/archives/000324.html> (Apr. 14, 2004, 6:44 PM).

36. Tom Mighell & Dennis Kennedy, *RSS Resources You Can Use: Automated Web Surfing for Lawyers*, LAW PRACTICE TODAY, Nov. 2006, <http://www.abanet.org/lpm/lpt/articles/slc11061.shtml>.

37. The Ultimate RSS Toolbox—120+ RSS Resources, Posting of Stan Schroeder to Mashable, <http://mashable.com/2007/06/11/rss-toolbox> (June 11, 2007, 11:35 PM).

38. The Ultimate RSS Toolset: 100+ Online Apps and Resources, Posting of Christina Laun to OEDb: Online Education Database, http://oedb.org/library/features/the_ultimate_rss_toolset (July 24, 2008).