Theme Feature

Moving Day: Making the Most of Your Message with RSS and Syndicated Content

Paul R. Pival

We all want to make the most of our message. In the online world, RSS can provide at least one way to help make that happen. Sometimes we librarians focus only on attracting our primary clientele to our webpages, rather than on matching users' workflows by embedding our information into the websites and places they already traffic. Is there an easy way to be where our clientele is? Yes – you can easily resyndicate and publish your RSS feed to another website – even multiple websites!

Here are some examples. If you work in an academic library, wouldn't it be nice to publish library news or subject-specific information inside a course management system like WebCT or BlackBoard? If you're in a public library, what if you could publish library news on another organization's site – maybe in a corner of the city's main webpage? Perhaps you're in a corporate library wanting to publish and have a presence on the intranet. Well, good news! All this can be done using a single RSS from any location, and once you've got the code in place on the receiving end, absolutely no additional work needs to be done to keep your content flowing into another site.

There's more to feeds than meets the eye

RSS articles often focus on the reading of feeds, paying less attention to the many benefits and details related to how feeds are published and syndicated. If you take a moment to consider the definition of *syndicate*, which is to provide materials for publication in a number of newspapers or periodicals simultaneously,[1] you'll realize that syndication is at least as much about the *publishing* of these feeds as it is about the reading of them. RSS isn't just about being able to follow a large number of websites in an aggregator; it's really about being able to offer the content in a format that any number of people can then receive in the manner they find most convenient, be it by visiting a webpage, via email or via an RSS aggregator.

According to the results of an August 2005 survey, only one in 10 visitors to blog sites actually knowingly made use of the RSS feed.[2] An October 2005 survey by Yahoo had a similar finding. Only 4% of blog readers *know* they're using an RSS feed, but as many as 31% are accessing RSS feeds without being aware of the fact when they view information on another website.[3]

What does this mean? You've taken the time to publish information in a way that can be utilized by RSS aggregators, but your visitors just aren't using them yet. So let's take a look at the different ways you can put this same easily posted content in front of the eyes of your users where and how *they* want to read it.

Tools of the trade

I know of two free services that facilitate publishing an RSS feed on another site. The first is Alan Levine's *Feed to JavaScript* (*Feed2JS*) at Maricopa College in Arizona.[4] The second, *RSS to JavaScript*,[5] appears to be more commercial in nature.

Feed2JS is billed as "a free service that can do all the hard work for you – in 3 easy steps:

1. Find the RSS source, the web address for the feed.
2. Use our simple tool to build the JavaScript command that will display it.
3. Optionally style it up to look pretty."

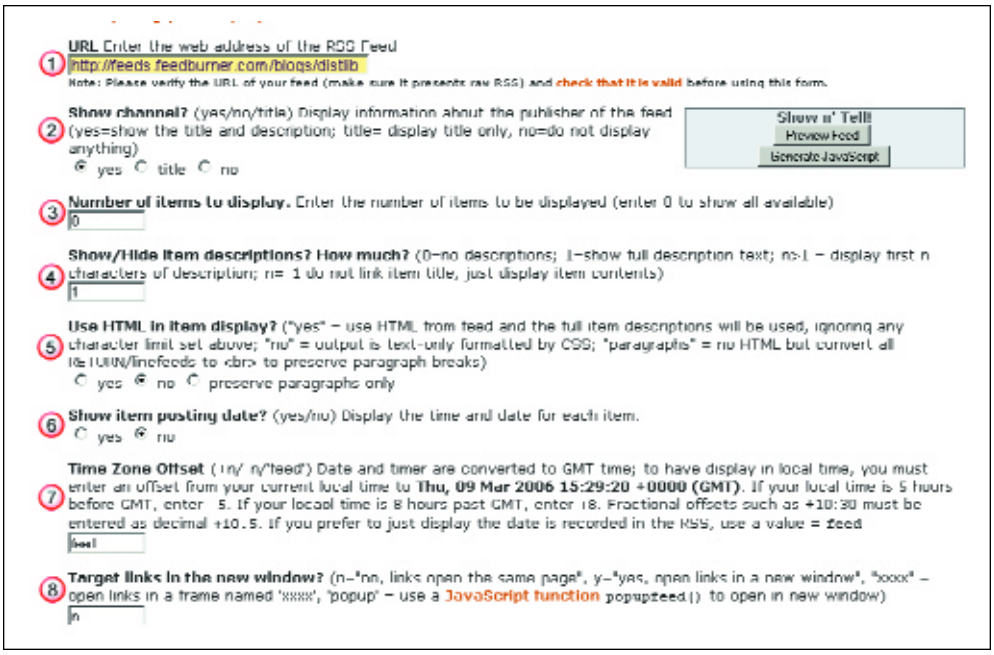
Alan provides some tips for searching out RSS feeds, but in all likelihood you'll know the address of the feed you wish to republish.

We'll use mine as an example[6] and walk through the simple steps to get it ready to display on another site. Most of the steps are fully explained on the page, but we'll quickly address them one by one. It may make more sense if you go to the website and follow along.

Figure 1 shows the interface you'll see when you hit the "build" page. The first box is where you enter the RSS feed. Option 2 allows you to specify whether information about the source of the feed is presented, or if you'll only be showing the posts themselves. Option 3 allows you to specify how many separate blog posts to display, from one at a time to all of them. Option 4 allows you to specify how much of the text of each post is displayed. If you have a limited amount of space, you'll definitely want to set this to a certain number of characters (100-200 perhaps), though this may truncate your posts. Option 5 allows you to do without the cascading style sheets that will come with the "style feed" option if you so desire. Option 6 is where you specify whether or not the date of the posting will be displayed. Option 7 is where you set your time zone, and Option 8 indicates what should happen with the links that appear in your posts (open in this window or a new window).

While that may seem like a lot of variables, it's actually an indication of how much control you have over the way the republished feed looks, and in reality you can usually leave most of them at the default.

Figure 1: *Feed2JS* Interface



Once you've entered all your variables, you can quickly check to see what the feed will look like before you apply any formatting variables to it. Simply click the Preview Feed button (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Feed2JS* Preview

This preview shows that I have chosen to include the channel information (title of the original blog and brief description), to show only four posts and to show the original posting date, and I have indicated that the postings should be truncated at 100 characters. I can now either modify some of my settings until the preview shows just what I want, or if I'm happy with this I can insert a small snippet of JavaScript on a webpage and have the above display anywhere I like:

```
<script language="JavaScript"
src="http://jade.mcli.dist.maricopa.
edu/feed/feed2js.php?src=http://
feeds.feedburner.com/blogs/distlib&
chan=y&num=4&desc=100&date=y"
type="text/javascript"></script>
```

But the fun part is tweaking this feed to look more like the rest of your site, so it appears to be fully integrated. This is done using the Cascading Style Sheet (CSS) style tool.

The *Feed2JS* site allows you to choose from a list of over 90 different preconfigured style sheets, each of which can be modified in width, colour or font size, to name a few of the variables. A handy cheat sheet shows you which CSS variables to modify to reach the desired effect. After a minimal amount of tweaking, the default code above can be changed so your feed looks like Figure 3.

Or like Figure 4.

Figure 3: Stylized Preview 1

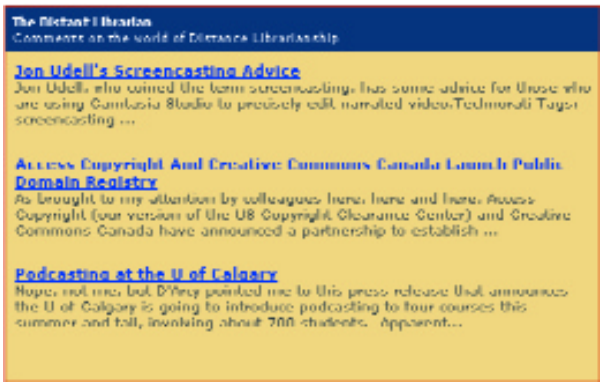
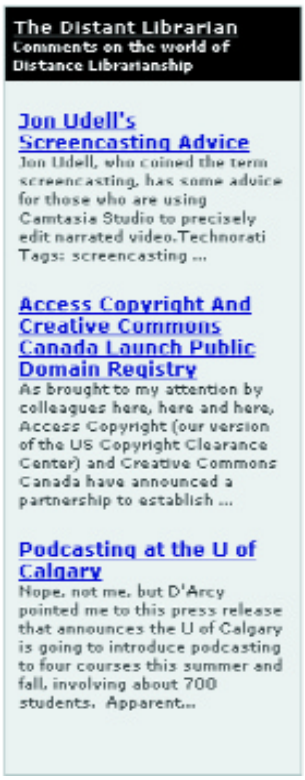


Figure 4: Stylized Preview 2



Do you like the format, but not the colours? Want the headline to be one font size larger? Change a single variable and you're all set. The last step to apply this stylized feed to your own page is to simply insert the CSS generated by the tool into your page just above where the JavaScript generated by the previous step resides. (For you sharp-eyed readers, the reason my CSS examples don't display the variables I set in the first, JavaScript-generating step, is that the preview on the *Feed2JS* site doesn't integrate the two; that's done on the page you will build.)

RSS to JavaScript

If for some reason *Feed2JS* doesn't do the trick for you, *RSS to JavaScript* does almost the identical thing. If you can follow the steps for the first tool, you'll be all set for this one too. Also in beta testing on this site are options to present the feed as a scrolling block of text, and some nice tutorials on how to modify the output with CSS. I haven't used this site myself except to verify that it works, and it hasn't been around for long, while Alan Levine's *Feed2JS* has been running for several years.

Final thoughts

Really Simple Syndication is here to stay whether your users are currently subscribing to RSS feeds in a newsreader or viewing them unwittingly on a webpage. RSS provides a powerful and easy tool to provide your current information to the people who matter most. Special libraries can distribute competitive intelligence in-house. Public libraries can promote their latest DVD acquisitions, and academic libraries can tell their faculties about the recent enhancements to that big full-text database. And best of all,

you don't have to change people's browsing habits because you can put this information on the websites they're already used to visiting.

Many predict that 2006 is the year RSS breaks into the mainstream.[7] Libraries of all kinds should consider leveraging this blossoming technology in ways that will benefit their users. Make receiving information about the library and its services as easy as possible for as many people as possible. Resyndicate!

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Screenshots are of an application developed by Alan Levine and taken by the author with permission.

Notes

1. www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?syndicate
2. www.vnunet.com/vnunet/news/2141161/ten-bloggers-rss
3. http://publisher.yahoo.com/rss/RSS_whitePaper1004.pdf
4. http://jade.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/feed/
5. www.rss-to-javascript.com/
6. http://feeds.feedburner.com/ blogs/distlib
7. http://blog.rssapplied.com/public/item/111604

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The Grande Bibliothèque building in Montréal

Tuesday, June 13, 2004
1:30 – 2:30 p.m.

Photo credit : BAnQ, BERNARD FOUGÈRES

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