Fine-Tuning Your Filter for Online Information

Bob Scott

On the World Wide Web, people can track political polemics, movie star malapropisms and financial fiascos. The trouble is, hopping from site to site in search of the latest Mel Gibson bon mot can waste hours. Now there's a tool that promises to automatically capture just the information you want, when you want, from the Web.

Called R.S.S. (the initials are variously said to stand for Rich Site Summary, Really Simple Syndication and more obscure formulations), this increasingly popular online tool turns a morass of disparate information sources into an automatically generated and neatly organized index of the latest articles and postings.

Based on a programming language (XML, or eXtensible Markup Language) already used to create many Web sites, R.S.S. enables Internet developers to post short site summaries describing recently added or updated items and links. Those postings are then scanned automatically by programs called R.S.S. readers to deliver specialized news-wire-style "feeds" to interested readers. These feeds, or news channels, are like personally tailored executive summaries containing dozens or even hundreds of headlines on a specific topic.

R.S.S. may sound suspiciously like the derided Pointcast service of the mid-1990's. Pointcast was a "push" application that broadcast a programmed and seemingly endless stream of headlines and advertising over the Internet. It tied up corporate networks and slowed personal computers. So it wasn't long before users got tired of being pushed around and dropped the service.

R.S.S. avoids Pointcast's pitfalls because it lets individuals request the information when they want it. The R.S.S. readers can be set to check for news every few minutes or every few days - or turned off completely. If a topic or R.S.S. news feed about Donald Rumsfeld begins to bore you, all you have to do is delete the channel. And with today's

high-speed broadband connections, R.S.S. programs can scan for new items without hampering your work. They even work well over slower dial-up connections.

Feeders and Readers

Not every Web site offers an R.S.S. feed yet, but large news organizations like The [New York Times](#) (www.nytimes.com) and CNN (www.cnn.com) offer specific R.S.S. channels catering to interests ranging from movies to technology. There are foreign-language R.S.S. news feeds, too, and countless personal Web log updates that turn individuals into Internet syndicators.

R.S.S. can be used to track any information that changes frequently, from stock quotes to best-seller lists. [Amazon](#) has a welter of R.S.S. feeds featuring everything from top-selling folk music to popular dolls.

R.S.S. feeds also have the potential to serve more serious interests. There is an R.S.S. channel for information on missing children (www.teamamberalert.net) and several channels devoted to breast cancer news. Narrowly focused channels are also cropping up for medical specialties, like one for somnoplasty (a treatment for upper airway obstructions and severe cases of snoring).

To tap into this new font of information, all that is needed is an R.S.S. reader program to open the spigot. Dozens of reader programs are currently available. Some can be downloaded at no charge, while more elaborate readers with extensive customization settings charge for the software.

One of the simplest R.S.S. readers is the Dogpile Search Tool, available free from www.dogpile.com. The downloadable toolbar can be installed directly in Windows Internet Explorer and, as the name suggests, includes a search tool as well as an R.S.S. reader.

Dogpile's program creates a small ticker window in the browser to display a running list of the latest headlines from the R.S.S. site of your choosing. Click on a title as it scrolls by and the full article pops open in a separate browser window. The ticker can only show one R.S.S. feed at a time, however. To see all of your selected news channel updates, you have to go to a personalized contents page listing all of your channel subscriptions.

For inveterate news followers who want to manage an extensive range of R.S.S. sources, a better choice is NewsDesk (www.wildgrape.net). This free stand-alone Windows program uses a format that closely parallels those of popular e-mail programs. Channels are organized as a list of folders down the left side with headlines presented in an opposite facing pane. A third panel is used to display entire articles when desired. NewsDesk also tells readers when an article was posted and lets users specify how often each R.S.S. source should be checked, from once a month to every five minutes. Particularly helpful are more than 60 preinstalled news channels ranging from The

Christian Science Monitor's Living section to articles from The Hindu, one of India's national newspapers.

If you want to integrate R.S.S. news into your e-mail program, there is NewsGator ($29; www.newsgator.com). It works in conjunction with [Microsoft's] popular Outlook program and is ideal for business users. NewsGator treats news feeds as e-mail, sorting, searching, organizing and forwarding items as the need arises. There is also a monthly $5.95 subscription service that can coordinate your news feeds across several devices - say, a cellphone, a home PC and an office computer - so that you never inadvertently read the same headline twice. It can even be directed to send traffic information only to your cellphone and movie news to your home computer.

The most promising NewsGator subscription feature, however, is its ability to create special channels or "watches" based on keywords. Create a watch for a name or topic and NewsGator will scour every available R.S.S. source to find your quarry. While this may be fun for the obsessive, it has a more practical application: in seconds, businesses can find the latest information on competitors, a task that could take hours to accomplish when using a conventional search site.

Growing Pains

R.S.S. may become an invaluable Web tool, but at the moment there are still a few kinks to work out. To add R.S.S. channels, for example, you have to look at Web sites for orange buttons labeled R.S.S. or XML. After you click on the button, you usually have to cut and paste the address of the feed into the reader software. Some reader programs can grab some feeds automatically, but it's hit or miss. Furthermore, finding new R.S.S. sources takes time.

The best approach is to visit special sites that list R.S.S. syndicators. The largest ones include Synidic8.com (www.syndic8.com), which has an extensive listing of R.S.S. blogs; Newsisfree (www.newsisfree.com), which also creates its own R.S.S. feeds from various sites; and Moreover (www .moreover.com), an R.S.S. company that has created scores of business-oriented channels.

As more sites adopt R.S.S., there is the potential for a new kind of information overload. Subscribe to enough R.S.S. feeds and you'll quickly find yourself consuming hours reading all the headlines and summaries. On the other hand, a tool is only as good as its owner's judgment. So if you can control yourself, you may find that R.S.S. is the best tool yet for taming the Web.