RSS: it's only **XML** but I like it [1]

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In the Summer, 2003 *Techwatch* column[2], I wrote about blogs and their usefulness to librarians for collection development, dissemination of news, and communication between and among community members. I'd like to continue that thread by describing a companion technology behind the blog curtain: RSS.

RSS is metadata

Depending on whom you ask, what time of day it is and how many cups of coffee the retorter has had, the answer may be that RSS stands for "Really Simple Syndication", "Rich Site Summary", "RDF Site Summary" – or "Reliably Spiteful Squabbling" if you read about the rift between the standards of the RSS crowd and the Pie/Echo/Atom project[3]. Either way, RSS is just an XML file written to a simple but powerful standard[4] and used primarily by news sites and blogs – but with exciting possibilities for libraries. In library terms, RSS is like a bibliographic record written in XML that includes a description of a resource like a web page, a link to the resource, and some other useful information. Often, RSS is generated and archived automatically by blogging software (i.e., Movable Type) and stored as a plain text file. This file is called a channel or feed.

How does it work?

No doubt, since last summer, everyone has gone out, created their own blogs, found blogs of interest and now spend all their time in the blogosphere. You've seen and clicked on the **XML** icon on your favorite blogs[5] to see if your browser would spontaneously combust. It was most likely anticlimactic when nothing happened other than getting some ASCII text looking vaguely similar to HTML code.

That bit of ASCII text is actually quite powerful. There's no need to visit 50 blogs if those sites have RSS feeds. A tool called an aggregator can help. Simply click on the **XML** symbol, copy the url from your browser, and paste it into your favorite aggregator[6]. The aggregator will automatically check and let you know when a site has been updated. There are many excellent – and free! – tools that can be downloaded, including Feedreader (MS), NetNewsWire (Mac), or web services like Newsisfree.com[7].

What's in it for librarians?

Imagine, if you will, that every federal government agency had an RSS feed. Now imagine that some cataloger(s) at the Government Printing Office (GPO) has their Feedreader client set up to receive those myriad feeds. Suddenly, all those fugitive documents that everyone is losing sleep over are finding their way into the GPO cataloging queue and being distributed to depository libraries across the country[8]. Or how about needs and offers? If a central RSS feed were set up for N&Os, libraries could more easily monitor them to better manage their

collections. But wait, there's more. RSS does not have to come from a blog. How about having RSS feeds in our library OPACs? Patrons – not to mention bibliographers from other libraries – could be automatically informed about interesting new books in their subject areas.

The important thing is that, since RSS is an XML format, it can be used, reused and repurposed. As the "semantic web" grows, libraries will find themselves in an enviable position as creators and maintainers of metadata – which is after all one of the things that libraries do best.

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[http://www.libraryjournal.com/index.asp?layout=article&articleId=CA296443&publication =libraryjournal&]

Notes:

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[1] Thanks to Sir Mick Jagger and Keith Richards circa 1974.

[2] Blogosphere: exploring the new killer app for librarians. *DTTP* 31(2) Summer, 2003. p. 6-7.

[3] Bray, Tim. I like Pie blog June 23, 2003
[http://tbray.org/ongoing/When/200x/2003/06/23/SamsPie]

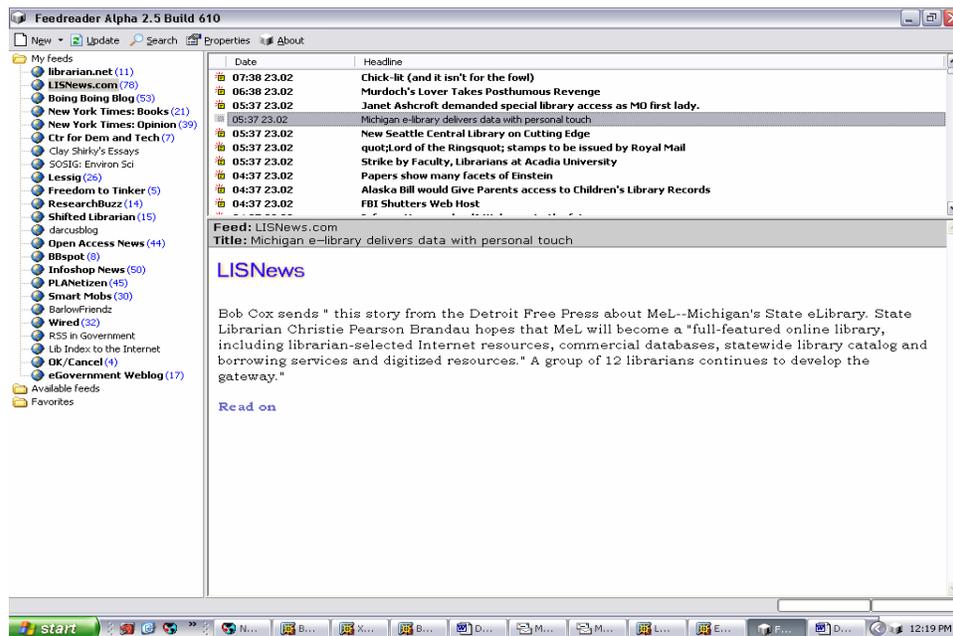[4] Here's an example record in RSS 1.0 format. Title, link, description, subject, creator, date.

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<item rdf:about="http://gort.ucsd.edu/mtdocs/archives/laz/001324.html">
<title>World Social Forum and libraries</title>
<link>http://gort.ucsd.edu/mtdocs/archives/laz/001324.html</link>
<description><![CDATA[<p>From last month's World Social Forum: <a
title="On Democratisation of Information with a Focus on Libraries"
href="http://www.nigd.org/libraries/mumbai">On Democratisation of
Information with a Focus on Libraries</a>. This workshop was
interesting on several levels: Information literacy as democratic
activism; the necessity of open source software to libraries and
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democratization...The proceedings and links to relevant materials are
available at the end of the summary. </p>]]></description>
<dc:subject>Technology &amp; Society</dc:subject>
<dc:creator>jrjacobs</dc:creator>
<dc:date>2004-02-19T10:24:09-08:00</dc:date>
</item>
```

[5] My favorite is "Library Autonomous Zone": http://gort.ucsd.edu/mtdocs/laz/

[6] Here's an image of my Feedreader aggregator. Aggregators are generally laid out in three sections: the left hand section is the list of feeds, the top right section lists the new headlines from the site. Click on a headline and read the post in the lower right section.

[7] Check out http://ourpla.net/cgi/pikie?RssReaders#section8 for a list of available clients.

[8] Fugitive documents remain a huge quandary. According to Jan Oberla, "An estimated half of all government information … lacks the bibliographic control and distribution mechanism provided by the FDLP". See Jan Oberla, Fugitive Government Documents, *Law Library Lights*, Fall 2001, at 14, 15. Retrieved February 16, 2004. [http://www.llsdc.org/lights/pdf/45_1.pdf]. In addition, the Electronic Documents Working Group tracks and collects fugitive documents. [http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/fdlp/tools/ewgroup/index.html]