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Volume 7, numéro 3, décembre 2006

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072114ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v7i3.390>

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Éditeur(s)

Athabasca University Press (AU Press)

ISSN

1492-3831 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cette note

Swettenham, S. (2006). 58. RSS Windows Editors: First impressions.  
*International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 7(3), 1–5.  
<https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v7i3.390>

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December – 2006

## Technical Evaluation Report

# 58. RSS Windows Editors: First impressions

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### Background

An RSS feed is a list of topics made available from a webpage via a standard XML file format known as RSS, an abbreviation of either Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary (Wikipedia, 2006). The end-user subscribes to their favorite Internet content site via RSS-aware software. Once subscribed, announcements with appropriate links are “pushed” from the publishing site whenever new material is added to that site (see Figure 1). This allows notification of new content of possible interest, fed with anonymity to subscribers, and reduces email clutter.

Figure 1 is an example of a simple organized subscription that was obtained by accessing a website only once, then each time afterwards the RSS feed automatically presents the updated information. The various subscribed RSS feeds can be organized to create personalized displays, much like a customized online newspaper, with stories, articles, podcasts, video, or graphics of interest tailored to each user. Given the plethora of daily Internet information, RSS is a real-time organizer that may save users time and frustration in covering the most with the least effort.

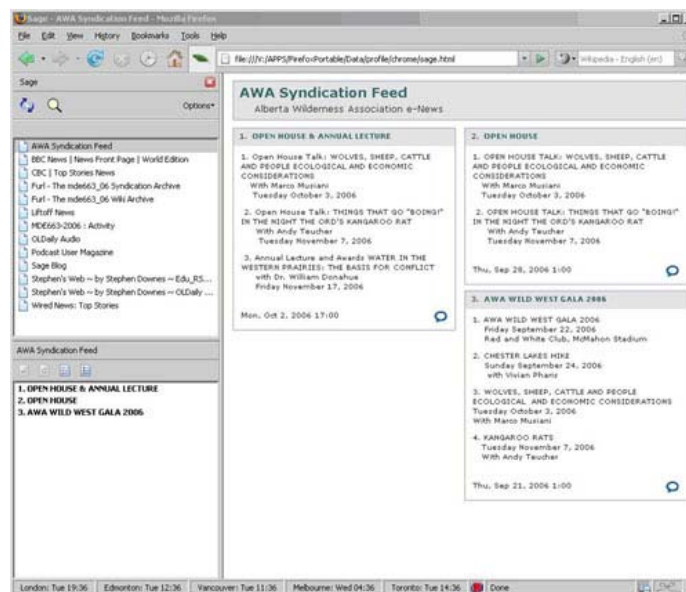


Figure 1. Web browser with a simple RSS reader add-on displaying a RSS feed with three items.

Given this potential communication connectivity, I was interested in exploring how one adds RSS feeds to their own web site so that items can easily be “pushed” to interested subscribers, much as is available by subscribing to the RSS feed for this journal ([www.irrodl.org](http://www.irrodl.org)). From a publishing perspective, an email server and listserv are no longer needed to disseminate information. Instead, a properly formatted RSS file linked to a webpage is the basis for web syndication.

A correctly formatted RSS record consists of information about the publication site (the channel fields) and further information about each of the items being released (item fields). Optional fields can be filled with attachments, images, and data about the items or channel, but required fields include a title, brief description, and link to obtain the full item. An RSS feed is a simple text file, written in strict XML; thus, it is possible to create the file using any simple word processor or text editor. However, I wanted an authoring tool to easily create the RSS file, to reduce mistakes in hand-coding, and to minimize expertise required in the markup language. Thus, I was in search of a free, Windows- and PC-based RSS feed editor that would provide a correctly formatted RSS file in XML format. Fraboschi (2006) has a concise guide on RSS feeds, and Sullivan (2003) a quick demonstration on creating an RSS feed.

The RSS Compendium ( <http://allrss.com/rsseditors.html> ) website (Scott, 2006) provides a collection of both commercial and open-source RSS editors. I selected and installed from this list the following programs as likely candidates to meet my requirements:

1. *FeedSpring* 0.93b (UsableLabs, 2005)
2. *ListGarden* 1.3 (Software Garden, 2005)
3. *RSS Builder* 2.1.7 (Bokkers, 2006)
4. *RSS Editor* 0.91 (Mozdev.org, 2006)
5. *RSS Writer* 1.1 (Phelios, 2005)

All of the programs reviewed were stable, with easy installation and clean uninstall on a Pentium 4 with Windows XP SP2.

The interface of *FeedSpring* used the outliner mode, while *ListGarden* used a stand-alone executable to run a Web browser with detailed field explanations. Both programs had the same problem in output: the programs automatically added generator and docs elements (code), with links to software developer and Harvard Law School (Winer, 2005), references that were not essential to the feed. It then becomes annoying to have to remove that code with a text editor after saving the XML file. The aforementioned elements were not modifiable within the applications, and there was no warning to the end-user that the program would insert preset fields. I submitted my concern to *FeedSpring*, and perhaps the next version will provide greater options. The *FeedSpring* program was very useful in producing XML and Web previews of the RSS feed, and had an attractive design utilizing multiple windows for data entry. *FeedSpring* provides the source code and hopefully the developers will continue to enhance this user-friendly application.

*RSS Editor* is a well designed *Firefox* browser extension, having an attractive interface and option to hide or display fields in the channel and items panels. It is possible to use this extension while *Firefox* is disconnected from the Internet, as may happen in a dial-up situation. Using a web browser as an offline reader and editor may not be convenient for everyone, however. The *RSS Editor* extension has many features similar to those found in other editors. Unfortunately, there were a few awkward functions, such as the inability of the end-user to customize the default button values for the generator and docs fields. This may be a useful program for the end-user





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**N.B.** Owing to the speed with which Web addresses are changed, the online references cited in this report may be outdated. They are available, together with updates to the current report, at the Athabasca University software evaluation site: <http://cde.athabasca.ca/softeval/>. Italicized product names in this report can be assumed to be registered industrial or trademarks. \

**Editors Note:** This paper reports on an edited version of a blog, which was part of a course at the Me2U site (<http://me2u.athabasca.ca>) of Athabasca University.

*Patrick J. Fahy, Interim Series Editor (Jon Baggaley is on sabbatical.)*

