

infotech by annette lamb and larry johnson

## web feeds delivered to your digital doorstep

Walk into most school libraries and you will see magazines and newspapers on a rack in cozy reading areas. Whether it is *Scientific American* in the high school or *Cobblestone* in the elementary school, periodicals are a mainstay of library collections. Although electronic databases have dramatically increased access to timely information and resources, budgets for both periodicals and subscription databases are often limited. A growing number of teacher-librarians are wondering about the value of web-based sources for timely information.

### THE BASICS OF WEB FEEDS AND INFORMATION AGGREGATORS

From webmasters and podcasters to bloggers and e-journalists, the Internet is overflowing with text, graphic, animation, audio, and video content that can be delivered to your desktop through web feeds and aggregators.

#### HOW DOES THIS WORK?

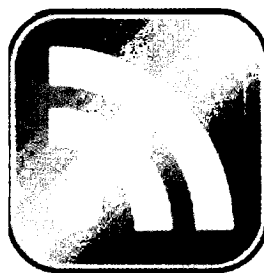
Many Internet information providers including news organizations, bloggers, and podcasters frequently update their content. Rather than asking readers to remember to visit their web site regularly, many webmasters are syndicating their content through a subscription system. The webmaster publishes a simple computer program known as a "feed" on their web site. The end user links to this feed through an aggregator program also known as a feed reader. This software checks for new content and helps the end user organize this flood of information. Unlike a traditional periodical that must be printed and mailed to each subscriber, a web-based feed reaches the end user almost instantly. Think of your aggregator as a virtual periodical collection.

You might create a news folder containing the latest news feeds from Reuters, USA Today, CNN, and BBC for older students and CBBC Newsround and PBS Newshour Extra for younger students.

#### HOW DO I KNOW IF A FEED IS AVAILABLE?

When you find a web site that is updated regularly, look for the web feed logo. The icon

FIGURE 1



Web Feed Logo

is generally an orange square containing a dot and 2 curved lines.

You might also see a rectangle with the letters RSS which stands for Real Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary file format. In most cases you can simply drag the RSS link from your web browser into your aggregator. Or, you can copy and paste the RSS link. If you want more information, many web sites provide directions for using their RSS feeds. NASA RSS feeds <<http://www.nasa.gov/rss/>> page contains information about linking to feeds for breaking news, image of the day, and many other information sources.

#### WHAT DO THE WEB FEEDS CONTAIN?

The information presented in a web feed varies depending on the content of the web site. For example, a news-oriented web site might provide a feed for short, breaking-news feeds, while a podcasting site would link to MP3 audio files.

With young people, consider starting with simple, regular feeds such local news or weather feeds. Also try Weekly Reader Publishing Updates <<http://feeds.feedburner.com/WRP/>> or Yahoo! Education: Word of the Day <<http://education.yahoo.com/college/wotd/>>.

#### HOW DO I CHOOSE AN AGGREGATOR?

You will need an aggregator to download, organize, and read your web feeds.

**Web Browser.** The easiest approach is to simply use your web browser. For instance, Firefox and Internet Explorer 7 have a built-in feed reader. When you go to a web site containing a feed, the web feed logo will appear in the menu bar known as a "live bookmark". You can set up your feeds much like bookmarks. The problem with this approach is that it's

FIGURE 2

## Bloglines

computer specific, so you'd end up with different feeds marked on each computer in your library unless you have a system for mirroring your hard drives.

**Web-based Tools.** Personalized web home pages contain feed readers, so if you use iGoogle <<http://www.google.com/ig>> or MyYahoo <<http://my.yahoo.com/>>, you've already got what you need. However if you want a tool designed specifically as an aggregator, consider Bloglines <<http://www.bloglines.com/>> or Google Reader <<https://www.google.com/reader/>>. This approach works well if you plan to share your feed reader with other teachers or students. Consider establishing a Bloglines account and linking it directly from your school library web site.

**Desktop Readers.** Many stand-alone feed readers such as FeedDemon <<http://www.newsgator.com>> can be downloaded to your desktop. Different desktop readers are sometimes required or preferred for different operating systems, such as Newsfire <<http://www.newsfirerss.com/>> for Macs. The main drawback of desktop readers for the school library is that the

software must be installed on any computer using the reader.

Keep in mind that feeds can also be downloaded to multimedia programs such as iTunes for use on portable devices like an iPod. For example, a series of foreign language lessons downloaded as podcasts could be saved on an iPod and checked out by your library. Many blogs also provide audio feeds including news stories at Earth and Sky <<http://www.earthsky.org/>> and children's stories at StoryNory <<http://storynory.com/>>. National Public Radio <<http://www.npr.org/rss/podcast/>

Keep in mind that feeds can also be downloaded to multimedia programs such as iTunes for use on portable devices like an iPod. For example, a series of foreign language lessons downloaded as podcasts could be saved on an iPod and checked out by your library. Many blogs also provide audio feeds including news stories . . .

[podcast\\_directory.php](#)> also contains lots of audio that can be accessed with an RSS feed.

Once you've chosen your reader, simply subscribe to the content that you want to receive. In a July 2006 article in *School Library Journal*, Will Richardson suggests that teacher-librarians proceed slowly. He states: "it's pretty easy to load up on RSS feeds, only to find that you can't keep up with the resulting flood of content." He suggests limiting subscriptions to 20 feeds or less until you get a feel for the volume of content you can handle.

Consider starting with subscriptions to public library or school media center blogs. This is a great way to track what is happening in other libraries. For instance, the Seattle Public Library maintains a blog called Shelf Talk <<http://shelftalk.spl.org/>>.

## HOW DO I SELECT GOOD QUALITY FEEDS?

The selection policy you use to select print periodicals also applies to virtual materials. In other words, you need to consider the timeliness, accuracy, authority, bias, and the other criteria used in evaluating other types of subscriptions. Remember that most web sites are designed for adults rather than young people. Think about reading level and age appropriateness. Also consider how the feeds align with curriculum standards.

## WHY NOT JUST GO TO THE WEB SITE DIRECTLY?

Many people maintain bookmarks and pathfinders that contain links to content-rich web sites or use email for breaking



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Audiobooks can serve to enhance literacy skills and classroom discussion. The playing field is leveled between readers with differing abilities and assists teachers looking for ways to expand student horizons on a multiplicity of topics. The following list features excellence in narration as well as an outstanding array of cross-curricular subject matter.

Key: C=cd, c=cassette, h=hardcover, p=paperback

**Once upon a time in the north.** Philip Pullman. Read by the author and a full cast. Listening Library, 2008. C: 978-0-7393-6700-1. \$30.00. Grades 9-12. Pullman's sturdy narration fully complements brilliant character casting in this prequel to *The Golden Compass*, where listeners learn how Texas aeronaut Lee Scoresby meets up with the armored bear, Iorek Byrnison. The author's impeccable skills as a wordsmith expand a story that, although placed in the past of a mythical Novy Odense, could be ripped from today's headlines. Corporate greed and government culpability are the villains in a sure-fire discussion starter for high school classrooms.

**The sea of trolls.** Nancy Farmer. Read by Gerard Doyle. Recorded Books, 2007. C: 978-1-4281-7103-9. \$108.75. Grades 5-8. When Jack and his little sister Lucy are snatched from their coastal Saxon village by a ferocious band of Norsemen, Jack discovers that only he can get them safely home again. The resulting quest is the stuff of legend and provides not only a jumping off point for historical discussion, but also for finding one's place in society.

**The whale rider.** Witi Ihimaera. Read by Jay Laga'aia. Bolinda Audiobooks, 2005. C: 978-1-74093-558-6. \$32.00. Grades 9-12. The book that inspired the award-winning film opens with the Maori legend of the original whale rider, introducing American teens to culture they may not know. Jay Laga'aia effortlessly navigates the Maori names and New Zealand slang, acting as a guide while the story's characters move from traditional beliefs to new awareness.

Many school districts are concerned about student surfing and have filtered many of the blogs and other dynamic websites. In most cases, the content of blocked websites can still be accessed through RSS feeds allowing the school media specialist to select quality resources that might otherwise be unavailable to students.

news. Why bother with news aggregators? First, you don't need to wade through a web site to find the latest information, it's sent to you directly. Second, files such as podcasts can be downloaded in the background to save time. Third, aggregators can notify you immediately of new content such as breaking news. Fourth, you don't have to worry about giving out your email address. Fifth, if you no longer wish to receive the feed, you simply remove it from your list. Sixth, you can create a news aggregator for your class rather than messing with individual access to bookmarks and email accounts.

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#### HOW DO I PUBLISH MY OWN FEED?

If you already maintain a web site, a blog, or other web-based content such as podcasts, then consider making your content available through an RSS feed. If you are using one of the many blogging hosts such as Blogger <<http://www.blogger.com/>> or eduBlogs.org <<http://edublogs.org/>>, then an RSS feed is automatically generated. If you maintain your own web site, you need to add a simple XML file to your web site and let people know an RSS feed is available.

For example, the Cold Spring School Library blog <<http://csslibraryblog.blogspot.com/>> and Kellogg Middle School Library <<http://learn.shorelineschools.org/kellogg/lhebgen/>>

web site are two school libraries that generate an RSS feed.

#### WEB FEEDS IN THE SCHOOL LIBRARY MEDIA CENTER

According to Will Richardson (2006), RSS is "one of the powerful new technologies that is allowing users to manage, create, and share online content as never before." Keep in mind that young people of all ages can engage in learning experiences using RSS feeds. Cindy Newton of Eastview Elementary in Connersville, IN, set up an Indiana Mysteries blog <<http://authorvisitsindiana.blogspot.com/>> for her elementary class to interact with children's book authors and scientists. Students everywhere can trace their progress using the blog's web feed.

#### READING AND WRITING IN THE INFORMATION AGE

Students need experiences and tactical skills for optimal reading on the Internet (Parry, 2006). These include ways to find material worth reading and strategies to analyze the content. RSS feeds facilitate receiving chunks of information that are easy to scan and quickly select what they want to read.

Think about interdisciplinary approaches that might work with web content. For example, students in a language arts class reading and writing science fiction stories might look for parallels in today's science news by subscribing to the *Science News for Kids* <<http://www.sciencenewsforkids.org/rss/SNK.asp>> web feed.

Use current topics and articles in magazines such as *Popular Mechanics*



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<<http://www.popularmechanics.com/rss/>> to promote non-fiction reading in areas such as robotics, science, industry, transportation, gardening, and woodworking.

As students use online resources in their written work, be sure they are properly citing sources. Consider a focused activity that asks students to apply information from a specific feed such as Science Daily <<http://www.sciencedaily.com/rss/newsfeed.xml>> and properly cite the source.

Provide children with virtual experiences that can be used in writing. For example, many bloggers track animal migrations or “journal” their work with endangered animals. Some classroom blogs like Duck Diaries <<http://duckdiaries.edublogs.org/>> and Trout Blog <<http://mcdsblogs.org/trout/>> focus on local wildlife. Get students involved with reading and writing about these outdoor experiences.

## WEB FEEDS IN THE CONTENT AREAS

Look for ways to connect specific standards to online content. For example, many history outcomes ask students to connect historical events to present situations. Math standards require students to apply mathematical formulas to authentic data sources.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration <<http://www.noaa.gov>>

provides web feeds for a wide range of climate and weather news and information. For instance, young people can track tsunami warnings, air quality, and coral bleaching from that site.

Consider some of the following ideas for using content-area web feeds in teaching and learning:

**Catalyst.** Use current issues to generate interest in a new topic. For example, use a news item on a recently identified deep ocean creature to engage students in a discussion of the possibility of life in extreme environments such as the polar-regions, deep sea, or outer space. Numerous science blogs, journals, and web sites such as the journals *Nature* <<http://www.nature.com/webfeeds/>> and *National Geographic News* <<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/index.rss>> provide web feeds on the latest research.

**Collaboration.** Many web-based projects are using web feeds as a way to update participants on the progress of their project. Participants blog about their virtual field trip, science investigation, or other activity, then use the feed for quick access to the data.

The United States Geological Survey <<http://www.usgs.gov/rss/>> provides podcasts and RSS feeds of its data including earthquakes and biological information.

**Comparison.** Students need experiences in comparing information sources.

## EXPLORERS FOR KIDS

### BBC—History—Vikings

[www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings)  
Play Viking Quest to journey back to 793 AD and join the world of Viking explorers. Can you build a ship, navigate the waters, rob a monastery, and return home to glory and riches? Or will the chief banish you from the tribe in disgrace?

### NASA—NASA Kids' Club

[www.nasa.gov/audience/for\\_kids/kidsclub/flash](http://www.nasa.gov/audience/for_kids/kidsclub/flash)

Monitor the work of the International Space Station, view pictures from recent and past space expeditions, or play games that test your knowledge of space and math skills.

### National Geographic Explorer—Games

[magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngexplorer/pioneer/games](http://magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngexplorer/pioneer/games)

Lead an expedition into the Amazon rainforest or a coral reef to learn more about these exotic parts of the world and sea.

### Westward Trail

[www.globalgamenetwork.com/westward\\_trail.html](http://www.globalgamenetwork.com/westward_trail.html)

Try to successfully get your wagon from Missouri to the Willamette Valley. Choose your profession, purchase supplies, then try to make it across the country with everyone alive and safe. This game, offered free from Global Game Network, is similar to the game Oregon Trail.

### You Would not Want to be a Polar Explorer!

[www.saliya.com/web\\_books/explorer](http://www.saliya.com/web_books/explorer)  
Based on the book *You Wouldn't Want to be a Polar Explorer!* this site walks elementary school students through Sir Ernest Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition, with cartoon drawings and pop-up dialog balloons.

FIGURE 3

The screenshot shows a Google Reader interface with a feed from the USGS Newsroom. The main article is titled "Unexplored Arctic Region to be Mapped" and includes a map of the Arctic region. The interface shows various navigation and subscription options.

The United States Geological Survey



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## EXPLORERS FOR EDUCATORS

### The conquistadors—start the adventure

[www.pbs.org/opb/conquistadors](http://www.pbs.org/opb/conquistadors)

Designed for middle and high school classes, this PBS site examines the history of Spanish Conquistadors in America and the legacy of their contact with Native Americans.

### Distinguished women of past and present: Exploration and adventure

[www.distinguishedwomen.com/subject/explore.html](http://www.distinguishedwomen.com/subject/explore.html)

This site lists women explorers and adventurers from the sixteenth century to now, including Sylvia Earle, deep-sea explorer, and Mary Henrietta Kingsley, who traveled through West Africa in the 1890s.

### The mariners' museum: Age of exploration

[www.mariner.org/educationalad/ageofex](http://www.mariner.org/educationalad/ageofex)

"Sores, scabs and scurvy" and "Starving sailors" are two of the lesson plans provided by the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, VA. Create an astrolabe and a compass or debate what to bring to sea.

### NOVA online—Sultan's lost treasure—Ancient Chinese explorers

[www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/sultan/explorers.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/sultan/explorers.html)

While Zheng He may not have discovered America, he did venture to Arabia and East Africa, bringing back giraffes and zebras for the emperor. A century after China dominated the oceans, overseas travel was banned.

### On this Day with Lewis and Clark

[edsitement.neh.gov/view\\_lesson\\_plan.asp?ID=297](http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?ID=297)

Extensive lesson plan for grades 6-8 on the Lewis and Clark Expedition examining the question, "How were the day-to-day experiences of the expedition members affected by their lack of knowledge about what they would find?"

For example, you might ask students to compare articles on the same topic from Why Files <<http://whyfiles.org/>>, National Wildlife <<http://www.nwf.org/about/blogs.cfm>>, and other online magazines. Ask young people to compare the editorial cartoons in two different newspapers. The Daily New Yorker cartoon <[http://interglacial.com/rss/new\\_yorker\\_cartoon.rss](http://interglacial.com/rss/new_yorker_cartoon.rss)> is available as an RSS feed. Check other feeds at the Daryl Cagle web site <<http://www.cagle.com/politicalcartoons/RSS.asp>>.

**Connection.** Identify web feeds generated by professionals in specific disciplines to provide a real-world context for subject-matter content. Show students the enthusiasm of a mathematician or the hard work of an author. Many authors such as Laura Halse Anderson <<http://halseanderson.livejournal.com/>> and Neil Gaiman <<http://www.neilgaiman.com/>> maintain blogs that can be accessed through an RSS feed.

**Critique.** Critically evaluate an article, piece of literature, or work of art. Ask students to read a poem and discuss its message or judge the quality of a podcast. Try Arts and Letters Daily <<http://www.aldaily.com/>> for ideas in literature and the humanities.

## WEB FEEDS AND INFORMATION FLUENCY

To become information fluent, today's students must be able to apply their information skills to real-world situations. Web feeds provide authentic, timely information that students can analyze, critique, and discuss. Focus on assignments that involve students in web content evaluation. Ask students to compare the information found on different feeds. How is the same topic treated by different news sources? Why is their coverage alike or different from each other?

Also engage students in activities that involve analyzing content for facts, opinions, and arguments. Use web feeds from newspaper opinion sections and blogs for these types of activities.

Web feeds offer a variety of perspectives on timely topics. Use web feeds to compare points of view on topics in the news.

## WEB FEEDS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The best way to learn about web feeds is to use it for your own professional development. Activities such as browsing the latest book reviews or keeping up-to-date on the activities of professional organizations can be time consuming. Using an aggregator, you can quickly skim the latest news and information without having your email box clogged with messages.

Start with a few feeds in each category. Try adding a couple feeds for libraries with book reviews such as Menasha Library's (WI), Kids Lit blog <<http://kidslit.menashalibrary.org/>>. Also, add links to professional association news such as the AASL blog <<http://www.aasl.org/aaslblog/>> and journals such as *School Library Journal* <<http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com/learnRss?q=rss+feeds>>.

Spend some time searching your favorite web sites for their RSS feeds. For instance, EBSCO allows users to set up RSS feeds for their favorite database searches.

To see the web feeds discussed in this article and many more examples of RSS feeds across the curriculum, go to our example at Bloglines <<http://www.bloglines.com/public/eduscapes>>.

## REFERENCES

Parry, D. (2006). The Technology of Reading and Writing in the Digital Space: Why RSS is crucial for a Blogging Classroom at Blogs for Learning. Available at <<http://blogsforlearning.msu.edu/articles/view.php?id=6>>

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