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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.
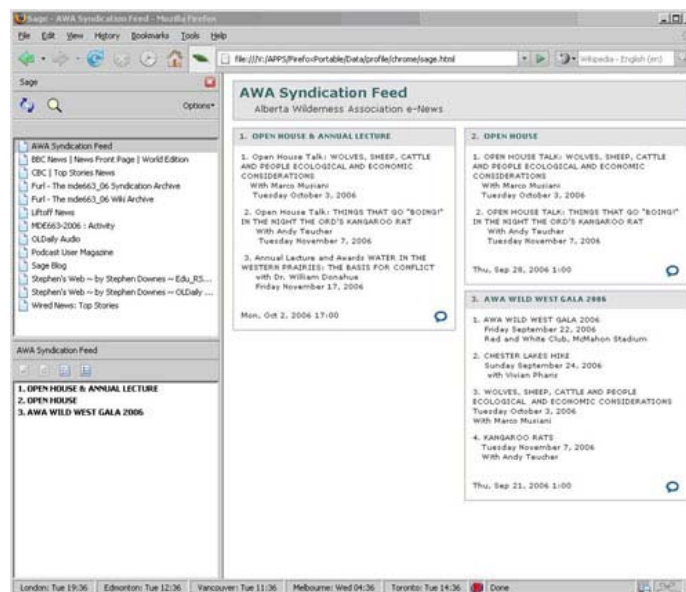

Figure 1. Web browser with a simple RSS reader add-on displaying a RSS feed with three items.

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). 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

who prefers everything compacted within one web browser. It is a program that may be worth watching for in the future; however, the last release was in 2004.

RSS Writer had a problem in not allowing reordering of items. However, it is a standalone program and simple to use. It would be nice to have field enhancements found in *RSS Builder*, such as date and enclosure settings. Similar to all the other RSS editors reviewed, *RSS Writer* can be used at no cost, and thus updates depend on time and good will of the developer(s), who offer spyware-free software to the world.
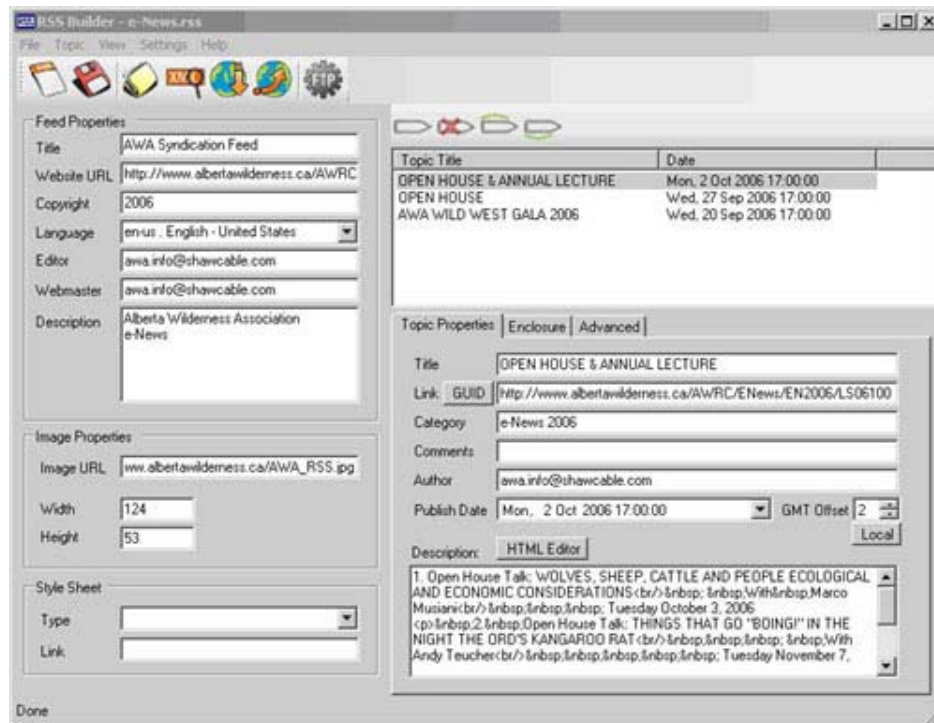

Figure 2. *RSS Builder* main work area with sample data. The left area depicts channel information (labeled as Feed Properties), while the right area is focused on item elements (designated as Topic Properties).

The final product, *RSS Builder*, edged out *Feedspring* and the *FireFox* extension with a well designed interface within one window (see Figure 2) and RSS output that did not include unexpected URLs or other code in the document field (see Figure 3). In addition, the program had a nice feature of automatically identifying parameters of enclosure objects, and the advanced tab provides a GUID (globally unique identifier) tag with a perma link option to create unique content and URL (RSS Advisory Board, 2006). *RSS Builder* also warned the end-user of fields that needed to be filled in, and had a nice drop-down calendar field and mini HTML editor for the Item description. The program has an FTP site manager, multi-language settings, and an XML preview. Some wish-list items for future versions would include an HTML preview (as found in *FeedSpring*), more HTML editor WYSIWYG functions, a help section, and automatic sizing identification in the image properties, similar to the function in the enclosure section. Hopefully that is not too much to ask for free [;-)].

Figure 3. The XML preview window in *RSS Builder* displays machine readable format created from field entries in Figure 2. The XML highlighted in yellow represents then channel fields from the left area displayed in Figure 2. The XML highlighted in blue represents the first item fields from the right area displayed in Figure 2. Figure 1 is the resultant presentation for the end-user.

My recommendation is to choose the RSS editor that suites your taste. If you prefer an ASCII editor to produce the output in Figure 3, for eventual display in an RSS feed (as in Figure 1), then bon courage. For myself, however, I will stay with *RSS Builder* as long as it continues to be updated. The author seems to be very conscientious in responding to my inquiries in a timely manner (always a good sign). There appear to be a few other possibilities on the horizon for RSS editors, but I leave that for another discussion.

Overall for this review of RSS editors, what I found strangely familiar was the similarity of entering information in RSS fields as I used to do when creating metadata describing and indexing audio and graphic files. In the past, when you had to use a text editor to hand code the RSS file, it seemed more like writing JavaScript or HTML; now, these user friendly tools move this functionality from the geek to the everyday publisher. The 'intelligent bookmark' morphs as a metadata file.

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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.athabascau.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.athabascau.ca) of Athabasca University.

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

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