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Blogging as a tool: innovative approaches to information access

Abstract

Blogs and RSS (Real Simple Syndication/Rich Site Summary) feeds and their applications in libraries are increasing exponentially. These applications range from current awareness type of settings in keeping up-to-date with new information, table of contents alerts of journal articles, feeds based on a research query in electronic databases, and news alerts from different subject areas. Other library related use of blogs and RSS feeds may include availability of new books based on selected keywords, feeds based on new subject guides, creating simple blog entries for course related information, and announcing library related events. This paper provides information on these applications and recommendations on how they can be implemented in any library setting. A particular emphasis on the Engineering Resources blog created for the College of Engineering and the School of Biomedical Engineering, Science and Health Systems is to highlight a variety of resources and new publications in the field. Future directions and visions of how blogs and RSS can be used in academic library settings are discussed.

What is a blog? What does RSS mean? What are feedreaders?

Blog

According to Jill Walker in her jill/txt blog, “A weblog, or blog, is a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first (see temporal ordering).” This definition of "weblog" is written for the Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory to be published sometime later this year. Anyone can post information on the web even without having the knowledge of HTML language or any other web authoring tools. Virginia Montecino in Introduction to Internet Terminology writes, “With a blog, any information entered is immediately published on the web site it represents.”

A blog, therefore, can be a very useful tool for communicating new ideas and thoughts to a large number of people quickly. From the academic library perspective, a blog can be used to broadcast useful information to faculty and students in any specific subject areas or it can be geared toward a general audience within the university community.

RSS

RSS stands for Rich Site Summary. It also stands for Really Simple Syndication. Virginia Montecino in Introduction to Internet Terminology states that, “RSS - (Rich Site
Summary or RDF [Resource Description Framework] Site Summary). An XML format for sharing content among different Web sites such as news items. How does it work? A Web site can allow other sites to publish some of its content by creating an RSS document and registers the document with an RSS publisher. A web publisher can post a link to the RSS feed so users can read the distributed content on his/her site. Syndicated content can include news feeds, listings of events, stories, headlines, etc.”

Jay Bhatt, Peggy Dominy and Andy Wheeler point out in their poster Keep Up-To-Date Using Subject Specific Blogs, RSS Feeds, and Listservs that Blogs (a combination of the words "web" and "logs") and RSS feeds are informal but valuable means of communication to keep track of the ever-increasing flow of new information. With the laptop and the internet connection provided, one can access variety of blogs and RSS feeds from different disciplines.

Feedreaders and Bloglines

A Feedreader is a lightweight open-source aggregator that supports RSS and ATOM formats. To be able to access RSS feeds from different blogs that provide them, one needs to download a feed reader on their computers. There are several RSS readers available.

RSS Compendium is a list with links to a variety of RSS readers categorized by different platforms http://allrss.com/rssreaders.html

A web based free service called Bloglines, can also be used to subscribe to different RSS feeds from variety of blogs when available. Feeds when available, are indicated by either an RSS or XML icon. Once the URL associated with these icons is copied and pasted into the Bloglines account or in any feedereaders, feeds for that site become available. When using Bloglines, downloading of a feed reader is not required and therefore feeds from blogs can be accessed from anywhere anytime.

According to the Frequently Asked Questions section in Bloglines, Bloglines is a "news aggregator" of many online information sources, such as web sites, weblogs and news services, now broadcast their content to the web in so-called "syndicated feeds" or "news feeds" with new technologies like Really Simple Syndication (RSS) and ATOM. News aggregator software and services collect those syndicated feeds and present them to end users in a variety of ways.

More information on how to set up bloglines is available on several web sites and presentations. Randy Reichardt’s Blogging & RSS: Applications and Technology - Examples from an Academic Library - presentation at CLA 2005 provides an excellent guide on using Bloglines to receive feeds from different blogs.

Applications in Libraries:
There are many ways in which blogs and RSS feeds can be used in the academic library environment to promote and market library services and resources to faculty and students. In this paper, their applications for the engineering faculty and students at Drexel University are described.

Engineering Resources Blog:

The main objectives of the Engineering Resources blog is to broadcast availability of new print and electronic resources available from the Drexel University Libraries for the College of Engineering, and the School of Biomedical Engineering, Biomedical science and Health Systems. It also aims to include new and useful web resources on engineering information retrieval.

Announcing new books by selected top research keywords:

New research programs are very rapidly evolving at Drexel University. Research areas such as Nanotechnology, Biotechnology, Bionanotechnology and Tissue Engineering are some examples of the important research areas.

New Books in 2005 for some subject areas entry provides information on new books available in subject areas such as Tissue Engineering, Wireless Communication, Nanotechnology and Robotics., etc. It links to both new print and electronic books catalogued in the library’s online catalog and therefore, it aims to motivate library users to check out those new books or try accessing new electronic books directly by using this entry in the blog. One added advantage perceived is the increase in circulation of books and increase in the usage of electronic books in these subject areas.

Announcing the availability of RSS feeds of electronic databases

Engineering Village2 RSS feed availability was announced on the blog with instructions and tips on how to access feeds from searches conducted in Ei Compendex and INSPEC databases available on the Engineering Village2 platform for Drexel faculty and students. Both Ei Compendex and INSPEC databases are crucial for all engineering and biomedical engineering students and having an ability to received feeds based on research queries conducted no longer requires students to receive email alerts to keep up-to-date with new research.

Using Bloglines, an individual account needs to be created so that the RSS feeds based on the search query in Ei Compendex/INSPEC databases can be added. After searching in the Ei Compendex or INSPEC or in both databases, by clicking on the RSS icon, the corresponding URL can be copied and pasted into the Bloglines account. While using Bloglines, a separate feed reader is not required. Each week when the database is updated any new results matching the search query are delivered to the bloglines account. Up to 400 titles are normally delivered with each update.
Ei Compendex is the most comprehensive bibliographic database of engineering research available today, containing over eight million references and abstracts taken from over 5,000 engineering journals, conferences and technical reports. Covering subjects including nuclear technology, bioengineering, transportation, chemical and process engineering, light and optical technology, agricultural engineering and food technology, computers and data processing, applied physics, electronics and communications, control, civil, mechanical, materials, petroleum, aerospace and automotive engineering as well as narrower subtopics within all these and other major engineering fields. Inspec is the leading bibliographic database providing access to the world's scientific literature in electrical engineering, electronics, physics, control engineering, information technology, communications, computers, computing, and manufacturing and production engineering. The database contains over eight million bibliographic records taken from 3,500 scientific and technical journals and 1,500 conference proceedings. Approximately 330,000 new records are added to the database annually.

**RSS Feeds including HubMed (pubmed rewired)** announced the availability of RSS feeds of literature searches in PubMed databases using the search tool called HubMed. HubMed is an alternative interface to the PubMed medical literature database. Having RSS feeds of searches conducted on PubMed is crucial for researchers to keep informed about new information on their research areas that do not require them to receive email alerts.

**RSS feeds from Proquest databases**


"ProQuest is one of the first aggregators to utilize RSS feeds. It is an easy way for customers to create valuable, in-context links to their ProQuest subscription content. This enables customers to enhance services to their users by integrating the latest articles in a particular field into the corresponding e-resources page on their library website."

At present, RSS feeds are available based on Proquest's predetermined search queries based on certain categories listed in the web site 'Curriculum Match Factor: RSS Feeds'.

These categories are: **Marketing, Management, Finance, International Business, Entrepreneurship & Innovation, Economics, Leadership & Organizational Behavior**

Within each categories are included search queries with URLs for receiving RSS feeds for that search string.

Once the URL corresponding to a particular search, for example, ‘Accounting’ within ‘Finance’ category, is added to the feedreader or bloglines account, anytime an article is added to ProQuest that matches that particular subject term, a feed with the new article information will be received in the feedreader or the bloglines account.
RSS feeds from Proquest's Dissertations & Theses database

RSS feeds are available based on Proquest's predetermined search queries based on certain categories listed in the web site ‘Dissertations &Theses’. Some of the categories are: **Education**, **Engineering**, **Physics**, and **Sociology**. Once the URL corresponding to a particular search, for example, ‘Electronics & Electrical’ within ‘Engineering’ category, is added to the feedreader or bloglines account, anytime a dissertation or thesis is added to the ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database that matches that particular subject term, a feed with the new dissertation information will be received in the feedreader or the bloglines account.

**U.S. Government RSS Library** provides feeds from several areas such as **Data and Statistics RSS Feeds** that include updates on Census and agricultural data and statistics, **Education RSS Feeds** include news from the U.S. Department of Education and **Science RSS Feeds** include news about current weather, earthquakes, energy and the latest research.

**Integrating feeds from journals and journal articles**

Tables of contents from variety of journals such as **Nature**, **Nature Biotechnology**, **Nature Materials** and those from the **Institute of Physics** can be tracked using this new technology. A complete listing of all RSS feeds from Nature titles is available at **Nature Newsfeed**. **Science Online RSS feeds** provides Table of Contents of the current issue, News Summary, This week in Science, ScienceNOW, and NetWatch the Best of the Web in Science. The use of RSS feeds alleviates the need for researchers to subscribe to email alerts since they can be able to view new information from their choice of RSS feeds as one portal. **Springer RSS feeds** provides links to the complete Springer collection of available RSS feeds by various subject areas. **IngentaConnect** which specializes in online journals in a wide variety of subject areas, provides RSS feeds from several journal titles. Users can sign up for feeds of new journal issues of their choice which on receiving shows the latest issue numbers and dates with a link to the full table of contents. **BMJ Journals** provides RSS feed icons on their journal home pages. **IEEE Xplore** now provides RSS feeds of of all new journal issues as they become available. Each feed will contain the publication’s title, brief description, and link to the table of contents in IEEE Xplore. **IEEE Computer Society** offers the availability of the latest magazines and transactions content through RSS feeds to automatically deliver new abstracts. **Journal of applied Physics** provides RSS feeds by different topics covered in the journal. University of Wisconsin –Madison’s Ebling library has compiled a list of **biomedical and health sciences electronic journals with available RSS Feeds**. University of Saskatchewan Library also has created a list of electronic **journals with RSS feeds**. **University of Chicago Press Journals** provides RSS feeds of several journals covering different subject areas such as business, philosophy, religion, art, science and several others. **Royal Society of Chemistry** now provides advance article feeds of 22 journals such as **Lab on a Chip**, **Annual Reports A: Inorganic Chemistry** and **Annual Reports B: Organic Chemistry**.

**Instructional Tips for Faculty members linking journal articles in webCT courses**
The Engineering Resources blog published tips on linking journal articles for faculty members using webCT in their courses. It is envisioned that by providing links to journal articles from vendors such as ScienceDirect in webCT courses, student awareness of library subscribed electronic journals will improve, usage of resources will be increased, and the use of scholarly and scientific literature in student assignments and research papers will be further improved. Updates on these tips will be provided on the blog.

Course based tips to find research information

Two experimental blog entries on two Biomedical engineering courses, Bionanotechnology BMES460/BMES480 and Body Synthetic BMES212, provided useful information tools for students in these two courses. Not only it provided quick access to appropriate electronic databases to search and access scientific scholarly journal articles required for their projects, but it also provided access to handouts on Refworks, a Web-based bibliography and database manager that allows one to create a personal database by importing references from text files or online databases. One can then use these references in writing papers and automatically format the paper and the bibliography. In addition, students were encouraged to use RSS feeds from the scholarly journals when available and feeds from the search queries used in electronic databases such as Ei Compendex and HubMed (see above for more information). Tips and handouts on RSS feeds/blogging were linked from these blog entries for the two courses. A library instructional session was provided to students in both the courses where the new Engineering resources blog was introduced and instructions on how to use bloglines to access feeds from various resources were provided in an interactive nature. A student in each of the two classes volunteered to create a bloglines account and run searches in Ei Compendex to access feeds in the newly created bloglines account allowing the rest of the students to develop better understanding of how blogs can be used to help in their research process.

Important web resources

The Engineering Resources blog is searchable by keywords. Since there are so many resources linked and archived, it is very important to exploit this feature so that those resources can be retrieved when needed. For example, if an engineering design student is looking for any web resources archived in the blog, by searching using the keyword ‘Patents’, those sites can easily be found. Using ‘Patents’ as a keyword, sites found include:

FreePatentsOnline.com provides fast, easy-to-use access to millions of patents. It allows you to retrieve a PDF for any patent. To access, from the full-text page of any patent, click "View Patent Images".

pat2pdf - free patent search tool Download U.S. patents (in PDF). One can download a copy of a patent from the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. At this site, historical patents with images may also be available.
Another patent resource, *FreshPatents.com: the latest published US patent applications* provides the latest published US patent applications each week BEFORE the USPTO makes a decision to grant or deny the patent.

Many other useful web resources, such as *EEVL Extra* (an engineering resource portal to find articles, books, web sites, design data and more), *Knovel K-News* (tips on using scientific and technical books), *Digital Dissertations* (tips on finding digital dissertations) or *Encyclopedia of Separation Science* (announcing access to the new electronic encyclopedia) are integrated within this blog. It is envisioned that this process of integrating useful instructional tips, web resources and announcing new resources will become a critical task in keeping this blog as a key resource for our faculty and students.

**Announcing library events on the blog**

Drexel University libraries conducted ‘Scholarly Communications Speaker Series’ sponsored by the Office of Research and Graduate Studies to highlight scholarly perspectives on the impact and future trends of publishing in an electronic environment this year. The Engineering Resources blog timely announced the speaker events at Scholarly Communication Speaker Series: "Scholarly Publishing and Open Access: Players and Payers" and at Scholarly Communications Speaker Series: Is There a Need for Resource Sharing in an Age of Open Access?. The University Libraries also conducted several workshops on teaching *Refworks* (a citation management tool) for faculty and students. The workshops were also promoted on the blog through a special announcement *RefWorks Introduction and Training*. In summary, variety of information related events can be easily promoted through a library’s weblog.

**Integrating RSS feeds into webCT**

The need for our faculty and students to keep up-to-date with new information and latest developments in their area of research has always been crucial. Integrating tools that provide up-to-date information on new journal articles into courses using webCT is envisioned as an efficient way of informing students enrolled in such courses. Steven Bell also recommend using RSS feeds into courseware such as webCT or Blackboard in the 2005 American Library Association poster presentation *If You’re Going To Blog, Blog It To Courseware*.

Since faculty involved are primarily responsible for selecting and linking new journal articles and citations based on search queries, it is imperative that they will need to get familiar with this concept and how to implement it in their courses. This approach illustrates how a variety of RSS feeds and informative blogs can be integrated into webCT courses using bloglines. The online course EGMT581, Problems in Human Relations from the Engineering Management Department at Drexel is used as an experiment in conjunction with bloglines and webCT. New journal articles related to the subjects covered in class, table of contents of sample journals, and search queries from the Ei Compendex database are linked in the webCT course through the Bloglines account created for the course. Another advantage of this method is that the faculty
members can also assign readings based on new journal articles received as feeds. It is our belief that efficient use of these tools can help our faculty and students in keeping informed with new research and in the process learn how it is relevant to what they are learning in the course. The presentation Integrating RSS feeds and information blogs in courses using WebCT at the Third Annual Northeast US WebCT conference in Philadelphia provides details of how RSS feeds are integrated in this experimental webCT course. Bloglines feeds for the EGMT581 are available at Problems in Human Relations – webCT course.

Collaborating with Faculty created blogs

Some faculty members may have developed blogs for students in their courses. Librarian collaboration with those faculty members can play a vital role in disseminating useful information to students in those courses. Drexel CoAS E-Learning blog is a blog about E-Learning in the College of Arts and Sciences at Drexel University. A Google Scholar Seminar by a librarian for the College’s E-Learning Seminar Series is available as a screencast and a podcast in this podcast blog.

Feeds based on subject resource guides

RSS4Lib, a blog that highlights some innovative ways in which libraries use RSS, reported a few examples of Integrating Blogs and Subject Guides. The Edmonton Public Library’s subject guides are an excellent example of how RSS feeds can be integrated into library subject guide pages. A complete compilation of the RSS feeds of the subject guides available from the library can be found at EPL RSS feeds. Although not many academic libraries are providing RSS feeds of new additions in their subject guides at present, this situation may change over a period of time.

RSS feeds compilations:

This section provides information on resources, electronic books, encyclopedias, and other services that have begun to provide RSS feeds. Just copy and paste the URL into Bloglines account or in a feedreader to start receiving feeds from these blogs.

American Chemical Society’s Organic Chemistry Division
http://www.organicdivision.org/organicdivision.xml

Bioinformatics Feeds
http://barf.jcowboy.org/index.cgi/

Biomedical engineering online and RSS feeds of the other Biomedcentral journals
http://www.biomedical-engineering-online.com/rss/
http://www.biomedcentral.com/browse/journals/
http://www.biomedcentral.com/info/about/rss/
http://www.biomedcentral.com/rss/

EEVL Feeds
http://www.eevl.ac.uk/rss/latest-news.rss

Encyclopedia Britannica Online Daily Content
http://www.britannica.com/eb/dailycontent/rss

Knovel K-News
http://knovel.blogs.com/knews/index.rdf

http://www.lexisnexis.com/presscenter/rss/

Nanotechnology News for the Chemical world – RSS feeds from American Chemical Society’s Nanofocus covering Chemical and Engineering News and Nano Letters
http://pubs.acs.org/cen/nanofocus/xml/topstories.xml

New Books
http://www.public.iastate.edu/~CYBERSTACKS/RSS.htm#NewBooks

New Journal issues
http://www.public.iastate.edu/~CYBERSTACKS/RSS.htm#NewJournalIssues

PSIgate Physical Science gateway
http://www.psigate.ac.uk/rssnews/psigate.xml

Reference Services
http://www.public.iastate.edu/~CYBERSTACKS/RSS.htm#Reference

ResarchBUZZ
http://www.researchbuzz.com/researchbuzz.rss

ResourceShelf Gateway
http://www.resourceshelf.com/resourceshelf.xml

Subject Guide Feeds
http://www.hclib.org/pub/search/RSS.cfm

Various RSS sites
http://www.public.iastate.edu/~CYBERSTACKS/RSS.htm
Web feeds from electronic journals
http://www.public.iastate.edu/~CYBERSTACKS/eFeeds.htm

Vision:

There are many other electronic resources such as ScienceDirect, Web of Science, ACM Digital Library, and Google Scholar that do not provide RSS feeds of search queries at present. It is crucial that when they begin to provide RSS feeds, our faculty and students are informed, so that they begin to use them effectively in their research or in courses they are associated with. Our Engineering Resource blog will be a key resource to promote these newer services in addition to regular channels such as Library News articles, emails, and instruction during library seminars. It is expected that many electronic subscription based databases and electronic journals will soon start providing RSS feeds. Students working in a group project can set up a group account in Bloglines and subscribe to feeds based upon the group’s area of interest. Refworks, a bibliographic management tool, can also be used as a group account for students working in a group project. It needs to provide RSS feeds of the citations added in the group account so that other members of the group can keep up-to-date with newer citations added by their group members. Innovative ways, in which blogs can be promoted on campus, need to be envisioned so that their utility is recognized by our faculty and students.

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