Feeds & Start Pages: keeping Yourself & Your users Up-to-date

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Overview

Feeds, also known as 'news feeds' or 'RSS feeds', used in conjunction with a feed reader or 'start page' provide an excellent way for both librarians and their users to keep up-to-date with the latest additions to websites, journals, blogs and other web2.0 services. This article outlines how feeds work and how there are being used or might be used by libraries.

How feeds work

Feeds provide updates of new content that has been added to websites. By collecting feeds in a feed reader a user can keep up-to date on the latest additions to a variety of websites without needing to check each site individually (See Figure 1).
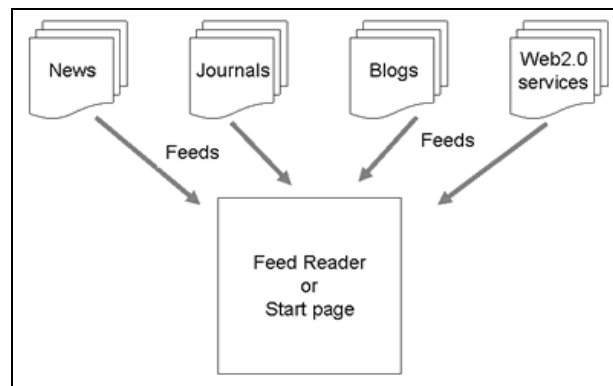

Figure 1: Feeds & feed readers

Feeds are found on most mainstream news websites (e.g. the BBC or the Guardian) but there are also feeds for many journals and lots of web2.0 tools. For example, all blogs produce feeds. It's one of the features that makes a blog a blog!

A feed is actually just a URL (webpage) that is designed to be read by a computer. There are different types of feeds, RSS being the most common format. The first hurdle when using feeds is to find them! Feeds are labelled differently from site to site, look out for 'feed', 'RSS', Atom', special icons for specific news readers and the almost-standard feed icon (see Figure 2 for examples, the standard feed icon is the first one).

Figure 2: Feed icons[1]

Once you have found a feed it's a simple copy-and-paste of the feed URL into your feed reader or start page.

Personal Feed Readers & Start Pages

Many feed readers and some start pages are essentially personal tools only visible to an individual user. Some feed readers are web-based such as Google Reader (see Figure 3) and Bloglines, others are software that you need to install on your computer.
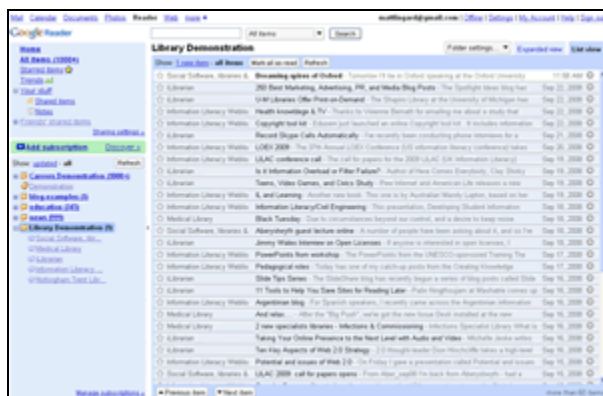

Figure 3: Screenshot of Google Reader

Feed readers tend to look similar to email software. There is usually a list of folders, created by the user on the left containing the different feeds. The main portion of the screen is a list of the latest items from the feed, rather like the messages in your inbox. Some feeds such as those from blogs, include the 'article' in it's entirety and it can be read in the reader. Other feeds provide just the headline or a summary and it is necessary to click through to the source website. The feed provider controls how much of the content is included in the feed.

A personal start page differs from a feed reader in two key ways. Firstly, they are visually different, each feed appears as an individual 'block' and both the layout and look-and-feel can be customised by the user (see Figure 4). Secondly in addition to feeds, start pages can also contain 'widgets'. Widget allow you to add different types of

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[1] Image source: http://flickr.com/photos/lizclairborne/317652624/ (Creative Commons Licence)

content to your start page. There are a wide variety of widgets, typical examples include audio players, calendars, bookmarks and integrations with web2.0 services such as Flickr & YouTube, as well as games and more light-hearted applications.

Figure 4: Screenshot of a Start page

Public Start Pages

While some start pages such as iGoogle are essentially private, like feed readers; others can be public and therefore viewable by anyone. There are several start page tools with a public or sharing option, currently Netvibes & Pageflakes seem to be the most popular. The next section outlines some possible uses for Libraries of public start pages.

Public Start Pages for Librarians & Libraries

Broadly there are three possible uses for public start pages

1. Start pages aimed at Librarians – and usually created by librarians! For example:
   - Top 20 Library Blogs: http://www.pageflakes.com/cb123/4851787/
   - Social networking tools and their applications for libraries: http://www.netvibes.com/sheilawebber

2. Start pages as a team or departmental homepage – a start page could make a great homepage for library staff PCs, particularly if used in conjunction with other web2.0 tools (blogs, social bookmarking etc) which could all feed into the one page. Key links to other sites such as the catalogue could be included too, as well as any relevant widgets, for example, search tools.

3. Start pages for Library Users – there are a number of these already although many seem to be inactive experiments or prototypes not yet launched! But definitely an area to explore. For example:
   - LSE Library subject Librarian pageflakes page for Media department http://www.pageflakes.com/heatherdawson
   - Dublin Public Libraries: http://www.pageflakes.com/dublincitypubliclibraries/18431638
   - Muskingham College Library: http://www.pageflakes.com/MuskingumCollege/19622426

Before setting up a public start page consider:

- Why? Do you have a clear purpose? Start pages should compliment not duplicate your current web presence by adding something you're not doing elsewhere – collecting feeds in one place being the obvious example.
- You need to at least consider a backup strategy. Start pages are third-party hosted services and you have no control over their future! So you need to be prepared for the worst-case scenario – that the service is withdrawn. Some start pages include an export option that makes it easy to export the feeds (but not the widgets). However, as setting up a start page is relatively easy and quick a backup strategy may not be considered crucial.
- Start pages are inherently dynamic as feeds are constantly changing. However it is not always clear to the visitor whether the start page owner is still monitoring and updating the page. Adding an "About" text box that explains the purpose of the page and the last updated date would be good practice. For example see http://www.netvibes.com/sheilawebber