

# RSS

## The CI Professional's Best Friend

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You are a busy competitive intelligence (CI) professional consulting for wonderful but demanding clients, or are plugged into the diverse intelligence needs of your employer. You've built competitor and market profiles and developed your lists of early warning signposts. You have a great standing knowledge base, but your clients and customers are also looking for regular updates and even — GASP! — a newsletter on your competitive marketplace.

Your customers are wondering aloud how you're going to incorporate broader sets of sources such as blogs into your knowledge base. You're faced with an enormous set of demands and a potential information overload. Lucky for you, a wonderful technology and excellent set of software tools can help you overcome these obstacles and excel — at very low cost and with a very shallow learning curve. The technology that is quickly going to become your best friend is called RSS, and this article is going to show you how to make RSS work for you.

### **CHANGE YOUR INTERNET SOURCING FROM REACTIVE TO PROACTIVE**

RSS, like so many things in the technology world, is an acronym. It stands for "Rich Site Summary" or "Really Simple Syndication." Whatever you call it, RSS is a file format that enables the syndication of web content. Web syndication is the process of making some part of the content from one web page available for incorporation into other web pages or applications.

RSS allows web publishers to create syndication feeds of their web pages that describe the key elements of those pages, such as the date, title, author, and body text. Internet applications known as RSS aggregators allow users to capture, manage, and manipulate RSS feeds. Subscribers to a particular RSS feed see new and updated information in their RSS aggregator software as soon as it is published. This happens automatically, without visiting individual web sites to look for new articles or updates.

Automatic delivery of the latest information moves your interaction with your favorite sources from a reactive model, where you choose a bookmark and look for new articles (and do this for each source on which you rely) to a model in which you see all the latest and greatest from your sources, delivered to your computer automatically. Because you no longer have to take the time or effort to look at individual sources to check for updates, you have more time to synthesize and analyze information instead of simply collecting content.

### **YOUR BEST INTERNET SOURCES ARE PUBLISHING RSS FEEDS**

More and more web publishers of all types are publishing RSS feeds that contain their latest and greatest content. The odds are extremely high that your best news sources are among those offering RSS feeds. Determining whether a web site offers RSS feeds is a simple matter if you know what to look for.

The most significant or straightforward clue that your web sources offer an RSS feed is a link to those feeds in their navigation bar. These are usually found on the left-hand side or at the very bottom of a web page. This link is often designated with a small orange or blue block text icon that says "RSS" or "XML." (RSS is actually a flavor of XML,



**Figure 1: A screenshot of FeedDemon for the Windows, complete with RSS feed subscriptions in the left pane, a list of news article titles in the top right pane and the content of the selected article in the bottom right pane.**

Extensible Markup Language, a language similar to that which is the basis of the World Wide Web.) Sometimes you will see a text link that says “RSS feeds” or some mention of “syndication.” If all else fails, you can use the search function of your web browser to search for “RSS,” “XML,” or “syndicate” on a source’s home page (see Figure 1).

Most major information sources have more than one RSS feed from which to choose. Major newspapers usually have RSS feeds for each news section. Clicking on the RSS icon or link from the navigation bar takes you to an RSS directory page from which you can choose some or all of the RSS feeds this source publishes.

If you don’t have an RSS reader and click on the link for an actual RSS feed, you see a plain-text version of the RSS feed. This is a very hard-to-read web page covered in text tags. If you install RSS aggregator software, you are taken to its aggregator application, where a dialog box asks you, “Would you like to subscribe to this syndication feed?” or some variation thereof. (See the section below on RSS aggregator software for more information.) If you click “OK,” the feed is added to your subscriptions and the latest published information from that source will be sent to your aggregator software. Aggregator users can also cut and paste the URLs for individual RSS feeds into their aggregator software.

## INNOVATIVE USE OF RSS BEYOND NEWS UPDATES

Thus far, we have focused on the RSS functionality for updates to information sources. Innovations based on RSS have moved the format from web page updates to utility on the Internet. RSS delivers a wide set of capabilities that are of tremendous value to competitive intelligence professionals.

Tagging and social book-marking sites allow you to bookmark a given web page as you go about your Internet surfing. You can also “tag” a site with a key term or topic to help you remember the web site or aggregate web sites of similar topics from across diverse sources. Two of the more popular social book-marking sites are del.icio.us and Furl.

Many social book-marking sites offer RSS feeds of the web sites that you have tagged. Technorati, a Blog search engine, allows blog authors to tag their published works, and RSS users can subscribe to the RSS feeds generated by blog authors’ tags to capture all the blog entries written on a given topic.

For example, subscribing to the del.icio.us RSS feed for the tag “Telecommunications” creates a feed of all the articles that del.icio.us users have tagged as being related to the subject of telecommunications. This innovative use of RSS enables competitive intelligence professionals to unlock the information-finding power of other web surfers.

### SIDEBAR 1: KEY SEARCH TERMS

Choosing your search terms is important when you create RSS feeds from news search sites such as Google News and watch lists in your RSS aggregator. Here are some suggestions on key words to include:

- Your competitors’ names
- Your own company or client’s name
- Any major or important customers in your industry
- Names of top executives at any of these firms
- Technical terms which are unique to your industry
- Product names prevalent in your industry or in the supply chain for your industry

**SIDEBAR 2: CREDIBILITY ASSESSMENT**

The credibility of individual news items and statements can be evaluated on a six-point spectrum. Analysts make these assessments based on the availability of independent confirmation of the statement and how well the statement confirms the analyst's understanding of the subject domain. The categories of credibility are the following:

- Confirmed by other sources
- Probably true
- Possibly true
- Doubtfully true
- Improbable
- Not possible to judge

Search engines such as Google News, Yahoo! News, and MSN's news search have made valuable use of RSS. Users at these sites can enter search terms of interest on these news search sites and create their own RSS feeds of all the best news articles returned as a result of the search (see Sidebar 1).

As an example, an RSS feed of the search for "China" and "telecommunications" in Google News will add new results from the thousands of news sources Google News accesses (currently more than 4,500 sources) every time a new article that contains those key words is published. You can use this advanced search functionality to create your own RSS feeds from publications that do not offer them. These news search tools are an excellent way to cast a much wider net and diversify the sources from which you collect.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF SOURCE QUALIFICATION**

With the access to rapid updates from a very broad set of sources that comes with RSS, it's worthwhile to evaluate a source's reliability and credibility.

Source reliability can be measured at the level of a publication or an individual author. The credentials of a source speak to an ability to provide authoritative information on a given subject. Each source's past performance can be taken into consideration when evaluating reliability. Formal assessments of reliability are placed on a six-point spectrum from completely reliable through not reliable or unable to judge.

The issue of credibility relates to the specific topic or statement being considered and is generally based on analytical judgments on the probability that the statement is true based on all known information. A major element of your analytical assessment will be your own understanding of a given subject domain and whether the statement in question agrees with your understanding. Assessment of

credibility is placed on a six-point spectrum spanning confirmed by other sources through improbable and not possible to judge (see Sidebar 2). Because the reporting from multiple sources influences an assessment of credibility, RSS feeds offer analysts a quick means to evaluate the credibility of a given statement.

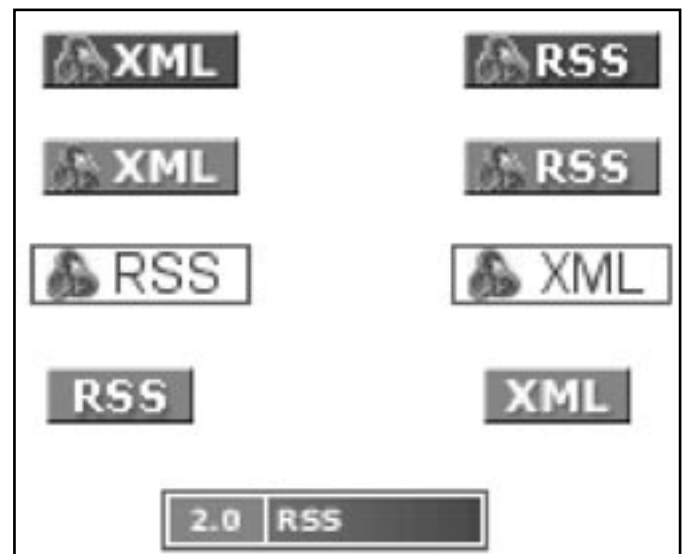
A major source of information that RSS feeds open up to competitive analysts is weblogs, or "blogs" for short. Blogs began largely as online diaries and are intended to be somewhat less formal than traditional publishing. Most blogs offer readers an opportunity to post their own comments to published works. Industry enthusiasts and detractors, trade journalists, industry analysts, and even corporate executives publish blogs.

Three qualifying elements will contribute to your assessment of the reliability of a blog or blog author:

- The level of expertise of the author or authors contributing to the site should be noted.
- The motive for the authors to contribute to and publish the blog should be understood.
- Traditional standards may be relaxed to accommodate the informal and conversational nature of the medium, even for blogs published by analysts and journalists.

**AVOID INFORMATION OVERLOAD WITH AGGREGATOR SOFTWARE**

The adoption of RSS has been a motivator for software developers to create a new class of Internet software tools called RSS readers or RSS aggregators. While RSS gives



**Figure 2: Icons such as these are clues that a web site offers one or more syndication feed.**

### SIDEBAR 3: CREATING YOUR RSS INFORMATION FEEDS

1. An important first step is to choose the RSS aggregator software or service that is best for you. Look to major software sites such as about.com and cnet.com for reviews of the aggregators and RSS web services mentioned in this article, as well as other software tools. Remember the issues of support for watch lists, multiple technical standards for syndication feeds, and other important capabilities of a quality RSS aggregator.
2. The odds are high that you already have a list of favorite news sources on the Internet, such as industry trade publications and business journals. Most of these sources probably publish RSS feeds.
3. You want to add the RSS feed from PR Newswire for all the latest in press releases published via this source.
4. Many industry analysis firms have begun publishing RSS feeds announcing their latest research products. Even free "teaser" content of these announcements can be of value to CI analysts, and a CI analyst with research money to spend will have an idea of the spectrum of research reports available.
5. Industry analysts, journalists, pundits, product evangelists, and gadflies alike have begun writing blogs about their industries and companies of interest. These pages provide opinion and insight above and beyond the standard news sources. Almost all of these blogs will include RSS feeds.
6. A growing number of companies offer their own RSS feeds of press releases and product updates. You should look to your competitors' web pages for feeds. A quick way to collect these feeds is to use a search engine to look for "RSS" on your competitors' web pages.
7. Major national newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* offer RSS feeds, as do the Associated Press, Reuters and other news agencies. Business sections are usually broken out into their own RSS feeds from major news publications and agencies, and business publications will often offer industry-specific RSS subscriptions.
8. The newspapers in your competitors' major locations and markets may also offer RSS feeds of their content. These feeds provide insight into competitor business activities on the local level.
9. Social book-marking sites such as Furl and del.icio.us should be reviewed for tags with relevance to your particular industry. Perform searches for your competitors' names and see how those pages have been tagged by social book-marking users.
10. Go to Google News, Yahoo! News, and MSN to use key search terms to create RSS feeds from their multitude of news sources.
11. Pay information sources such as Factiva, Thomson and LexisNexis have begun to offer delivery of articles and subscriber watch lists via RSS. If you subscribe to these or other news tracking and information services, you should be sure to add the appropriate RSS feeds to your aggregator software.
12. Watch lists inside your aggregator software can be created using your key search terms. Your aggregator software will scour the content of your RSS subscriptions to pull out the news items of interest.

you, our intrepid competitive professional, access to up-to-the-minute information from a wide array of sources, it has the potential to become a firehose of information without a powerful management tool to control the information flow. This is the role of a good RSS aggregator.

An aggregator collects your RSS subscriptions in an interface not unlike Microsoft Outlook or other email clients. Subscriptions appear in one pane of the window, and the latest articles from a selected source appear in the other. Clicking on an individual article title displays the content in

a third pane. Aggregators allow a user to open the actual web page that generated that RSS file in their web browser.

There is a wide array of RSS software from which a CI analyst can choose. According to the web site About.com, there are 53 aggregators for the Windows platform, 28 for the Macintosh, and 13 for the Linux. Many of these tools are shareware and have a minimal cost, usually less than \$100 per license. Among the market leaders are FeedDemon and NewsGator for the Windows platform, and NetNewsWire for the Macintosh. Each of these tools is low cost and

includes the functions that will enable you to maximize your information-gathering activity with RSS.

A good RSS aggregator should have the ability to set up "watch lists." Watch lists are sets of key terms that instruct the aggregator to search across the content of all the RSS subscriptions and pull the most important entries into a sorted listing. These dynamic, user-driven smart lists allow you to filter the content of all your RSS subscriptions. Well-developed watch lists allow you to avoid information overload while casting your source nets wider than you could in the reactive Internet paradigm.

Another important bit of functionality is support for multiple syndication formats. While RSS is the most widely used syndication format on the web, the format itself has not escaped criticism by technical groups concerned with the development of Internet file standards. Multiple versions of RSS are currently used on the Internet, the most widely used being the RSS 2.0 standard. Atom is a completely separate syndication format. A good aggregator can accommodate multiple versions of RSS and handle Atom feeds behind the scenes. This functionality will spare the end user the more technical elements of web syndication.

Also available are several web-based services that function almost as well as software installed on your computer. These web services are offered at little or no cost. NewsGator, Bloglines, and PubSub are examples of online RSS aggregators. The primary benefit of a web-based approach to RSS reading is that you can access your information from any web browser. The tradeoffs are generally in the form of speed of performance, frequency of updates, and the ability to capture or save the contents of individual articles in workspaces on your PC.

### MAKE RSS WORK FOR YOU

Now that you know what RSS is and are armed with a powerful aggregator, you are ready to start making RSS work for you. Setting up your aggregator, gathering the RSS feeds from the most obvious sources, and setting up your watch lists generally will not take more than a few hours. You will greatly expand your base of information sources, vastly improve your ability to provide rapid updates to your customers, and free yourself from the tedium of the reactive approaches to knowledge maintenance to spend more time analyzing the information you have captured (see Sidebar 3). The real value of RSS to your competitive intelligence practice is unleashed once all the pieces of the information infrastructure are in place. Using the articles that show up in your watch list, you can quickly put together newsletters for your customers that reflect the multiple perspectives of the sources writing about your industry. Watch lists based on your early warning signposts will help you anticipate the

### SIDEBAR 4: REFERENCED WEB SITES

about.com	<a href="http://www.about.com">www.about.com</a>
Bloglines	<a href="http://www.bloglines.com">www.bloglines.com</a>
Cnet	<a href="http://www.cnet.com">www.cnet.com</a>
del.icio.us	<a href="http://del.icio.us">http://del.icio.us</a>
FeedDemon	<a href="http://www.bradsoft.com/feeddemon/">http://www.bradsoft.com/feeddemon/</a>
Furl	<a href="http://www.furl.net">www.furl.net</a>
Google News	<a href="http://news.google.com">http://news.google.com</a>
MSNs news	<a href="http://search.msn.com/news">http://search.msn.com/news</a>
NetNewsWire	<a href="http://ranchero.com/netnewswire/">http://ranchero.com/netnewswire/</a>
NewsGator	<a href="http://www.newsgator.com">www.newsgator.com</a>
PR Newswire	<a href="http://www.prnewswire.com">www.prnewswire.com</a>
PubSub	<a href="http://www.pubsub.com">www.pubsub.com</a>
Technorati	<a href="http://www.technorati.com">www.technorati.com</a>
Yahoo News	<a href="http://news.yahoo.com">http://news.yahoo.com</a>

trends that will impact your customers and the direction in which your industry is moving.

Now that you know how to unleash the utility of RSS, you have a powerful tool for competitive intelligence knowledge maintenance. In a single location, you automatically receive the very latest news on your competition and industry. With your smart lists, you have a pinpoint focus on the topics of highest priority to you and can see the breadth of information and opinion about those topics in one quick scan. You are better armed with information to use in value-added analysis and CI products.

Even better than before, you can provide your customers with the competitive insight they need to succeed.

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*August Jackson is a voracious consumer of Internet content and a technology enthusiast. In his role as senior analyst at Evidence Based Research, he works with government and corporate clients to provide the maximum value from open-source information found on the Internet and other sources. He has delivered competitive intelligence for companies including British Telecom, AT&T, and MCI, and technology companies around the world, as well as government agencies. August can be reached by e-mail at [august@augustjackson.net](mailto:august@augustjackson.net) and through blogs at <http://www.augustjackson.net>. He produces a podcast on competitive intelligence that can be found at <http://www.cipodcast.com>.*