



Blogging, RSS and Podcasting: Why you really need to understand the new language of the web.

A few weeks ago I was listening to a small item on BBC Radio about podcasting. The presenter was talking about an internet subculture that was growing rapidly in popularity. So much so, that the mighty Beeb itself was experimenting with it. It sounded interesting but thought little more of it. However, you know when you first hear about something new, and suddenly you start bumping into it wherever you go? It was just the same with podcasting. Overheard conversations, snippets in the media, something to do with blogging and RSS; intrigued, I decided to find out more.

What I discovered was an entirely new way (well at least it was to me) of looking at the web. Being a teacher and wannabe ICT consultant, my thought process rapidly turned to schools and how they might use this new means of web communication.

At this point, a little explanation is in order. RSS has been around since 1999. It doesn't actually mean anything but is variously described as Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication. It was developed to provide a standard format for news companies to put out a data feed containing story headlines with a URL linking back to their website. Anybody with an RSS News Reader (a piece of software that checks websites and picks up RSS feeds) can display the headlines on their desktop and link to the original web article. The clever bit is that you tell the News Reader (also called an Aggregator) which RSS feeds you want to subscribe to. So, on my desktop, my RSS News Reader is picking up headlines from the Times Ed, BBC Sport, Pez Cycling News and a host of other web sites. I keep in touch with all my favourite sites without constantly having to trawl round them to check to see if they have published a new story. The reader can run in the background checking the web at pre-determined intervals and communicating with me whenever a new article is published.

As well as using a News Reader, other websites can pick up an RSS feed and incorporate it into their own site. On Crumpsall Lane's children's home page we now have CBBC Newsround headlines appearing in a nice and neat branded BBC box. On my own website, my home page includes the Times Ed RSS feed – it's a great way of bringing up-to-the-minute content to my site. This is a useful educational application in itself, and as more and more companies start to twig that putting out an RSS feed can attract more visitors to their websites, the more commonplace it will become. Start to look out for the little orange box labelled RSS; it's amazing how often you will spot it.

So far, so good. You can download a free RSS News Reader (I use Awasu), subscribe (tune) to your favourite RSS feeds and already you will be using the Internet more efficiently. (You will also be banging off emails to website editors encouraging them to start publishing an RSS feed). This is a useful time-management and research tool, but not one which will have educationalists shouting from the rooftops. That is, until they realise how easy it is to create their own RSS feed, and what you can include with it.

This is where Blogging and Podcasting come in. Blogging is a relatively new phenomenon; it's short for web logging and is a simple way that any individual can create their own website and publish their ideas for next-to-nothing. It first came to prominence in the last Iraq war where people on the ground started publishing their own experiences of the war. Biased, certainly, but these people, lacking in journalistic objectivity and training, were bringing a fresh and startling new angle on the covering of conflict. What most people don't realise is, that their web diaries automatically create an RSS feed (or an Atom feed: see sidebar). In other words, anyone with an RSS News Reader can subscribe to their site and every time they publish a new diary page, it pops up in the News Reader's viewing pane. This concept has many potential educational applications. Create a staff blog at school and teachers can be kept up-to-date with key issues without having to check their email; create a parents' blog to disseminate information without photocopying; keep in touch with your international contacts by children updating a school blog, the possibilities are endless!

Podcasting takes Blogging one stage further by including a sound file in the RSS feed. Thus, when the user starts up his or her News Reader, it checks each of the websites (channels) that it is tuned to, and automatically downloads the content in a format that can be listened to in your media player, be it iTunes, Realplayer or Windows Media Player. The sound file can also be transferred to your MP3 player for listening to on the move. The BBC are now putting up some of their favourite radio shows as podcasts, allowing the consumer to choose when and where they listen to the show, and repeat it as often as they like. Podcasting has become a real phenomenon in the States with loads of minority interest groups pushing out their own podcasts. The Dawn and Drew Show has already achieved legendary status, and a visit to Podcasting.net will reveal a mind boggling array of podcasts to choose from.

The key feature of podcasting is its use of MP3 technology. Already, millions of Ipods, MP3 players and cellphones that can playback MP3 files are in the hands of consumers. Already, many US colleges regard an Ipod as an essential educational tool: all the key lectures are available as podcasts to be listened to repeatedly, and in the student's own time (as if students needed another excuse to skip lectures!).

This linking of RSS to blogging to create podcasting really got my creative juices going. Next time your school sends home a newsletter, you know, according to chaos theory, it is just as likely to be made into a paper dart/ left at the bottom of Billy's reading bag, dumped in the nearest bin/playground, or not read because half the parents don't read English and your Arabic/Urdu/Mandarin speaking teaching assistant is off sick. Now imagine that same newsletter being read aloud and recorded using a digital voice recorder in any of the languages that are relevant to your school. Put those recordings into a podcast and the parents will receive it, automatically downloaded to their PC. The key is, making sure that all parents are aware of the service, and they know where to get an RSS news reader from. Solution: you give it to them, branded with your school logo and pre-tuned to your school's RSS feed.

Once you've understood the simplicity of this, the ideas are endless. Start up a school "radio club" creating programmes to be podcast to the school and its community; set up blogs to foster links with schools around the world; set up an internal blog to spread information around your organisation more effectively; do like Abraham Moss High School in Manchester have done and create MP3s of set texts for revision. Rob Adkins, deputy headteacher, is convinced that listening to, as well as reading texts while revising has improved exam performance.

Blogging and podcasting is not without its issues. They are both perfect examples of the anarchic nature of the web. There is no control over the content posted and as a result it would be a brave headteacher indeed who allowed the children to set up their own blogs in school (you can bet your life that quite a few already have). It is probably better to use blogging in a controlled way, either to create a news blog from school or a podcasting club. An alternative is to use an RSS feed creator such as Feedforall. Using this software, you create the RSS feed on your computer, and when you are ready, upload it to the web.

The idea of lots of people downloading podcasts from your website also has implications for your web host. Podcasting requires a fair amount of bandwidth, and if you are intending to set up such a feed from your website, you would be well advised to talk to your hosting company about the capacity and specification of your web package. Creating a simple RSS feed without the audio content won't have the same issues.

For the receiver of podcasts, the bandwidth issue is less of a problem. The introduction of "always on" broadband Internet connections means that for large periods of the day, Internet connections lie idle. It was this "spare" bandwidth capacity that led Adam Curry, creator of the podcast concept, to ask developers to allow the inclusion of MP3 files in an RSS feed.

Companies in the know are aware that this whole area of web use is about to get huge. A Google search for "podcasting" elicits more than 5 million hits. Google themselves have acquired Blogger.com, and the latest versions of Netscape include an RSS reader built in. What price that the next version of Internet Explorer also includes one? It won't be long before educational software houses start to cotton on to the potential for educational applications using RSS, blogging and podcasting. Indeed, Kudlian software are about to launch an authoring tool for schools to create their own podcasts. Expect to see many more applications being launched in the coming months. The difficulty for schools is that nobody has yet produced a safe blogging environment for their pupils. Think.com goes part of the way, but the fact that only community members can view the web pages, and it doesn't generate RSS feeds for consumers to pick up, limit its potential.

In essence, RSS, blogging and podcasting are yet more means of using the web to communicate. You might argue that we've already got a school website, we use email and some of us even use instant messaging, so what do we need RSS for? To do that is to deny the unique features that RSS technology offers. Its ability to communicate with the widest possible audience for your output coupled with its simplicity and cheapness already make it an attractive proposition. Add to that the potential for motivating children to produce high quality speaking and listening resources for any conceivable area of the curriculum surely makes it an application you can't afford to ignore.

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Until recently, the author was ICT co-ordinator at Crumpsall Lane Primary School. He has now started his own ICT consultancy, Creative ICT, specialising in INSET and advice on multimedia and new technology. He may be contacted at john@creativeict.co.uk.

RSS v Atom

Within the world of online syndication, this story rivals the Windows/Open Source wars of recent years. RSS was originally created in 1999 by a Harvard Fellow and blogging guru, Dave Winer. Through the acquisition of Netscape (for whom Winer wrote the specification) by AOL and the subsequent closing of the RSS project, various versions of RSS have appeared. Recently a new kid on the block, Atom, popped up claiming that because RSS was five years old, it couldn't meet the needs of current users. Much bad blood and backbiting ensued. As ever, the consumer didn't notice, most RSS readers, including the one I use can understand all the different formats and the end user is none the wiser.

This list of web resources is highly selective, it is stuff I use; there are many free RSS Aggregators available – use the web

Free RSS Aggregator

www.awasu.com

RSS Feed Creation

www.feedforall.com

Examples of RSS feeds incorporated into a web site

www.creativeict.co.uk

www.crumpsall.manchester.sch.uk/childrenindex.htm

Podcast sites

<http://dawnanddrew.podshow.com/>

www.podcasting.net

<http://live.curry.com/>

Educational applications

www.kudlian.net

Free Blog Service

www.blogger.com

Further reading about RSS

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/help/rss/3223484.stm>

http://www.downes.ca/files/RSS_Educ.htm

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/online/story/0,3605,1171185,00.html>

<http://tinyurl.com/8qngy>