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**The Sunday Times**

## **All your web wishes at one click**

**Why hunt for your favourite topics all over cyberspace? Robbie Hudson unveils the latest internet marvel, which puts all your interests on a single page**

It is a normal day: you are going online for the news headlines and football scores, to check the latest celebrity gossip, monitor the progress of an auction on eBay, scope a weather forecast for your weekend in Cornwall and check your e-mail. While you are online, you might as well see whether your sister has posted any new photographs of her beautiful baby twins, and whether iTunes has released any new downloads. It is fantastic that the web can provide all these temptations, but annoying to have to load and scan through the dozen relevant sites.

Imagine a world in which all this is accomplished by clicking a single button. The latest piece of internet wizardry brings you that world. It is abbreviated, inevitably, as RSS, and it delivers a personalised, immediate online summary of all the information and entertainment you choose. It's a 24-hour crib sheet to update you on your specific interests. See how our three guinea pigs in the Russell family, right, have tailored their various needs, from share prices to gardening to podcasting.

RSS stands for either Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary, depending on who you ask. All you need to know is that it is a way of checking the newest material on a selection of websites without having to visit them. A single RSS feed is a frequently updated list of one site's contents, and can be supplied by corporate sites (BBC, Amazon, CNN) or the homespun (personal weblogs). Ready-made programs called "newsreaders" can display on a single web page highlights from numerous sites. These are no harder to use than e-mail programs or web browsers — discover how in the Getting Started box, right — but they are only part of the RSS revolution.

If you don't want to grapple with new software, you can turn to a ready-formatted supplier such as Feedster ([www.feedster.com](http://www.feedster.com)), an RSS search engine that hunts information from 1m feeds. My Yahoo! ([my.yahoo.com](http://my.yahoo.com)) is similar.

Soon, even these sites may not be necessary. Firefox, the latest alternative web browser to Internet Explorer, has “live bookmarks” that demystify the process, and the next generation of operating systems for Apple and Microsoft will also contain RSS features. As the bestselling tech author Chris Pirillo explains, the point about RSS is that it feels like evolution rather than revolution.

One example is the podcasting phenomenon, where people create or download personal radio shows based on RSS technology. Pirillo believes that this evolution is vital to combat “the growing problem of information management”.

Spam is killing the newsletter delivered to your e-mailbox, but RSS, says Pirillo, is unspammable. This, of course, does not mean that it is bereft of adverts — after all, anything someone has chosen to receive will be irresistible to advertisers. On the other hand, advertising is the reason that so much web content has stayed free for so long. As Adam Penenberg of Wired News points out, “the trick will be to make it as unobtrusive as possible”; if you find a feed’s adverts too obtrusive, you can always remove the feed.

Pirillo accepts that RSS might not be the holy grail, but sees it as a powerful weapon in the war against irrelevant information. He is particularly interested in how it can relieve the pressure on e-mail, which is drowning in a deluge of junk. “Now, colleagues can keep each other updated on specific projects through an RSS feed that archives every update, without all the clutter of an e-mail inbox,” he says.

This new age of convenience surfing sounds great, but there is a huge potential downside, especially with filtered news. In 1995, Nicholas Negroponte famously predicted what he dubbed The Daily Me, an electronic newspaper “printed in an edition of one” and created by software that would “read every news wire and news-paper, and catch every broadcast on the planet, then construct a personalised summary”. RSS suggests that the self-tailored Daily Me might finally be upon us, but with one huge loss: areas of interest that we might not otherwise confront. Traditional media present us with a breadth of information, as well as pot-luck insights that are a vital part of our social education.

In his book *Republic.com*, Cass Sunstein has argued that person-alisation leads to a narrower outlook because it merely reflects our prejudices. On the other hand, he believes that RSS newsreaders give people access to “a range of topics and even opinions”, thus ensuring that “people don’t lock themselves in echo chambers of their own devising”. This optimistic view assumes, for instance, that the individual who opts for the BBC, CNN and Al-Jazeera also requests feeds from political blogs such as Voxpolitics, Number 10’s official site, The Economist and New Scientist, as well as such aggregators of intelligent thought as Arts & Letters Daily and the blog 3quarksdaily.

In a world where many individual news outlets are becoming partisan, RSS might prove the perfect way to collect and compare opposing points of view.

## NATURAL BORN TECHIE

### **Sophie Russell, 19, medical student**

Sophie is in her first year at university. She can't imagine a world without the internet. Her uptake of new technologies is instinctive, and RSS is integral to how she approaches the net. She loves her Mac laptop, and her newsreader is NetNewsWire. She turns to [www.newsisfree.com/sources/bycat](http://www.newsisfree.com/sources/bycat) for quick access to information (BBC News, television headlines from Digital Spy, health news from Reuters and gossip from Ananova, as well as CNN and No 10). She also subscribes to feeds from her friends' web logs and they subscribe to the feed from hers (which she made using [www.myrsscreator.com](http://www.myrsscreator.com)). This is not a way of sharing private thoughts, but of co-ordinating diaries. Sophie chose [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com) to host her online photo album because it has an RSS feed, so her family and friends know when a new picture has been posted. Her latest joy is podcasting (downloading and recording internet radio): she learnt about it at [www.podcastalley.com](http://www.podcastalley.com), downloaded iPodder from [www.ipodder.net](http://www.ipodder.net) and updates her radio show, Sophie's Sensible Collection of Tunes, almost every day. She doesn't think about RSS at all.

## EARLY ADOPTER

### **Ken Russell, 46, accountant**

Ken works on computers all day and sees himself as an early adopter. While he lacks his daughter's techie intuition, he did not find RSS difficult to pick up. Following the advice at the BBC's RSS page, he downloaded FeedDemon (£16 from [www.bradsoft.com](http://www.bradsoft.com)), which is recommended by resident Doors expert David Hewson. A nifty "newspaper" facility takes Ken's favourite feeds in a particular category — news or sport, say — and lays them out in a simple, configurable scheme of headlines with a text summary underneath. The newsreader does exactly what it says on the tin. Ken selected his feeds from [www.syndic8.com](http://www.syndic8.com). These include the usual solid news sources for share prices and financial comment, as well as Accountancy Age and sports updates from the Arsenal Times and Cricinfo. By the time he has scanned articles at The Economist (to which he happily subscribes), The New Yorker and the fabulously eclectic Arts & Letters Daily, he feels extremely well informed — and quickly.

## SILVER SURFER

### **Ruby Russell, 74, grandmother**

Ken's mother, who lives in Edinburgh, is one of thousands who have painstakingly discovered the joys of e-mail and the web in order to keep in touch with their families. She does not want to learn any more about computers, so one of her favourite bookmarks is My Yahoo! ([my.yahoo.com](http://my.yahoo.com)), which simplifies RSS. Her granddaughter, Sophie, helped

personalise her page so that it collects news from the BBC (Scottish news and links to Radio 4 interviews), as well as Sophie's web log and photos, which Ruby pretends to be shocked by, but shows to all her friends. Adding new feeds is just like using a search engine — simply search for a keyword, then click "Add" — so she can now go straight to Cold Climate Gardening tips. Ruby's only complaint is that most of the genealogy sites with feeds are American, but she has still found a wealth of information.

## **GETTING STARTED WITH RSS**

The simplest way to enjoy RSS feeds is to bookmark a website that acts as a reader, such as my.yahoo.com or [www.feedster.com](http://www.feedster.com). The advantages of a newsreader program are that it archives the headlines you have viewed and can be personalised more easily. The BBC offers an excellent introduction at [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/help/rss/3223484.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/help/rss/3223484.stm), which links to a number of good readers. Once you have downloaded a reader, you will need to add feeds. This is a matter of finding feed addresses (similar to web addresses) and copying them into your reader. You can locate addresses by going to a favourite site, looking for a small orange button marked RSS or XML and clicking on it; alternatively, visit a site that collects feed addresses, such as [www.syndic8.com](http://www.syndic8.com) and [www.newsisfree.com](http://www.newsisfree.com). As RSS gives access to all the perils of the web, don't be surprised if it leads to rudeness. At least with RSS, you can turn it off.