

Too much information

Present and future strategies for combating RSS fatigue

Humans have always passed on interesting information and have always been looking for interesting information to consume, but never before has this information been so accessible for and so valued by so many people. RSS¹ feeds, and the newsreaders, or 'aggregators', used to read them, were designed to make life more convenient for such people.

'[Newsreaders] made it 'really easy to... keep track of a large number of your favourite websites or blogs, without having to remember to check each site manually (Google, 2007).'

Instead of users going to the websites for the news, the news now comes to the user. The result is RSS 'Inboxes' that daily fill up with hundreds of new articles and, consequently, that symptomatic problem of the modern age 'information overload':

'Take a day off and you're behind. Take an hour off and you just missed 300 more blog posts. (Perez, 2008)'

This report will consider the existing strategies for combating what has been dubbed 'RSS fatigue', taking in both their strengths and limitations, before concluding with an assessment of what the future must bring if these limitations are to be overcome.

Existing solutions

Social media curators

The oldest solution to RSS fatigue is 'social media curators' (Wilson, 2007), sites which aggregate individual feeds and filter them to produce a single new feed of the internet's most popular blog posts. The most prominent of these sites is undoubtedly Techmeme (Techmeme, 2008), which concentrates on technology news. However the usefulness of such sites rests on the algorithm it uses to judge the worthiness of new articles and for techmeme in particular, this has come under heavy criticism as news organisations learn how to 'game' the system, manipulating it to ensure their articles always achieve prominence (Wilson, 2007).

It might be expected that curators which rely on democratic voting systems, rather than impersonal algorithms, such as Digg, might escape

¹ 'At heart, RSS is simply a specification that a site uses to produce a page of XML code. The code breaks up each entry or story on a website by title, description and direct link. An aggregator then determines how to display that output in a reader.' (Singel 2003)

this problem, but these sites also come under frequent criticism for 'gaming' (Kirkpatrick, 2008b).

Already there are a number of alternatives to the main curating sites, such as TechWatching (2008), claiming to offer systems less vulnerable to abuse. However some commentators predict that as one site replaces another, it too will inevitably fall victim to gaming and be replaced (Lewin, 2007).

A few sites, such as TechDispenser (2007), are curated by humans rather than algorithms, and while this makes them immune to gaming, they simply cannot handle the volume of feeds or react with the speed that automated sites can.

A more general problem than gaming afflicts all curators however. For many users, they do not go far enough in making feeds manageable. Despite existing to funnel through only the best of the net, Techmeme and similar sites still produce many dozens of articles a day. 'Tech Web' (Techmeme, 2008) is simply too general a subject for many potential subscribers. Other services are even worse in this respect, for example RSSmeme (Golub, 2008) and LinkRiver (Stilessoft Inc., 2008) simply offer the most popular posts on the internet, with no regard for subject matter at all.

Personalised curators

The solution may lie in new services like BlogRize (2008) and Vocal Nation (2008) which show the most articles on the net amongst specific communities of interest. Vocal Nation allows multiple ways of ranking articles -- popularity, newness, number of comments, user ranking and political leaning – and allows filtering by geographical region, newness, political leaning and media type. Favorit (2008) is another promising service that offers a highly customisable way of viewing incoming news, combining ranking and categorisation with keyword filtering (see below).

Informal curating

A completely alternative form of curating comes in the form of simply watching the activity of prodigious bloggers on social networking websites:

'Why read through hundreds of unread, unranked items just to stay on top of the news? If it's any good, you'll hear it on Twitter or see it shared on FriendFeed. Some users are even positioning themselves as "human information filters" (Perez, 2008).'

This kind of unofficial curating has seen a substantial boost with the arrival of feed-sharing application Feedhead on Facebook (Romero 2008).

What will hold this form of curating back however, is the fact that sites like FriendFeed and Twitter are themselves 'noisy and bloated' super-producers of information overload (DeSoto, 2008).

Filtering individual feeds

One criticism levelled against all forms of curator sites is that they are just 'echo chambers of the real blogosphere' and that instead of trying to stay on top of all news sources, the best strategy is to find '100—200 blogs' of real unique quality (Warfield 2007) and rely on them.

Such a reliance on individual feeds is made more plausible by one new service, AideRSS (2008), which effectively allows filters the articles in any given individual feed by popularity. The service has been taken up with considerable gratitude (Kirkpatrick 2008) and looks set to grow stronger with its partnership with NewsGator's (2008) prominent newsreader. As with the curators however, the reliance on a single one-size-fits-all popularity algorithm presents limitations, creating a strong bias in favour of English-speaking US-focussed articles for example.

An alternative way of filtering individual feeds is through excluding or requiring certain 'keywords'. Feed Informer (2008)², Feed Sifter (2008), FeedZero (Mammorth Media Pty Ltd, 2008), Feed Rinse (Electric Pulp, Interactive Agency, 2008) and FilterMyRSS (2008) are all sites which offer this service in one way or another. The difficulty here is that one would need to be certain of what keywords indicate an article of interest or disinterest. Unless the user is reporting on or researching a very specific subject, this is very difficult, since the point of news feeds is generally to keep up with new ideas, which by their nature cannot be anticipated,

Better browsing techniques

This would certainly be the attitude of those feed-consumers who believe that the answer to RSS fatigue is not better filtering, but better techniques for browsing through hundreds of articles a day. They advocate abandoning the 'must read anything' mentality and replacing it with a policy of treating feeds as an endless 'river of news' which the user skims through when she or he has the time, and abandons to the unconsumed ether when she or he doesn't without worrying about what has been missed (Kirkpatrick 2008).

The creators of alertle believe the problem is that the interface of read-feeders relies too much on the heritage of email clients. They have taken care to ensure the alertle interface is made not for going from article to article in turn, but for rapidly scanning through hundreds of headlines in the same way that one might do while reading a newspaper.

Other feed-consumers adopt a policy of continuous 'ruthless... pruning' (Dellow, 2007) of their feeds, whittling their sources down to only the most valuable. Feed-consumer 'JS' (2008) follows a simple rule:

² Feed Informer also allows users to mix individual feeds together and, most usefully for combating information overload, prevent the appearance of duplications.

'if I don't star³ anything in a feed for a week or so, I unsubscribe and bookmark that site in del.icio.us. I check that blog collection if I run out of things to read in [Google Reader]'

A bubbling river of news

But for many users, both the 'river of news' and the 'ruthless pruning' approaches work only for certain kinds of news at certain times. With some feeds the user will not want to miss anything and will want to be able to come back to old articles if they don't have time to read them when they are fresh (Tropea, 2008). Other feeds will be valued much less, but not so much less than the user will be willing to 'prune' them altogether.

A deft combination of filtering and 'river of news' surfing is provided in the form of private project Tubejumper (McCollum, 2008). Instead of simple filtering, specific words (as well as specific feeds) are 'weighted' according to the extent to which the user is interested in them. The interface ensures that heavily-weighted articles will 'bubble up' to prominence, without lightly-weighted articles being filtered out completely. Low-weighted articles will automatically fade away over time, regardless of whether they have been read or not. The result is an application which ensures particular topics of importance will not go unmissed, while the rest of the news can be treated in a 'river of news' fashion.

Another unique feature of Tubejumper is its ability to group together particular feeds and keywords into 'bundles, as opposed to the traditional interface of simply sorting feeds into folders.

Automatic interest-learning

Yet another way of curating individual feeds is through services which automatically detect what the user is interested in. oddflower (2008), for example, detects the links between different feeds and users, and recommends new feeds based on the strength of these links. Particls (Faraday Media Pty Ltd, 2008), Vocal Nation (2008) and Mindity (2008) all use some combination of user-rating and/or the time the user spends reading particular feeds, to judge how interested the user is in particular subjects and makes recommendations based on this. However all of these services tend to concentrate on recommending more feeds instead of pruning existing feeds, hardly a solution to information overload.

³ 'Starring' is a simple Google Reader feature which marks an article as being of particular interest.

The future

All of the above solutions offer helpful aids to overcoming RSS Fatigue. What is lacking is a single application which offers all the existing solutions in one integrated interface, synthesising the best of everything. This absence has astonished Feed Rinse's co-founder Aaron Mentele (2008):

We launched Feed Rinse in March of '06 and figured the need for [our service] would be obsolete by the end of the year.

With the continued reliance on external filtering services like Feed Rinse, feed filtering is 'hard work' (MacManus, 2008) and in some ways only adds to the burden of managing information overload.

Key features of a future integrated application would be a multiplicity of possible views (see 'personalised curators, above), a combination of the various filtering options described above and, in particular, the inclusion of Tubejumper's unique 'bubbling' and 'bundling' features.

In all probability the afore-mentioned multiplicity of customisable views will only appeal to the more advanced user. For less web-savvy users, the ideal newsreader should draw on the work of simple curating services like Zebtab (2008) and alertle (2008) (see 'better browsing techniques').

One as-yet unmentioned but critical feature is excellent service for mobile handsets (Dellow 2008) as convenient news consumption on the move becomes ever more popular.

One of the 'concepts online with the most potential' (Kirkpatrick 2007) is APML (Attention Profiling Markup Language). This is a planned standard for recording a user's interests (their 'attention profile') which can then be easily ported between different interfaces and devices (Unknown 2007). This will go a long way to providing automatic, more effective and more easily-editable filtering based on users' interests (Bizannes 2007). The success of APML is linked to the emergence of semantically-derived tags, that is, hierarchies and networks of terms which the computer understands in the way humans understand (Carpenter 2008). The ultimate solution to RSS fatigue turns out to be the same solution that will usher in the next phase of the internet general: the semantic web.

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How does my research report connect to my major project?

This is a difficult question to answer, since my group has still not decided upon a major project. Currently we will almost certainly do something web 2.0-related and quite probably something aimed at helping people save time. Since the topic of RSS fatigue fits very much into both these areas of interest, the research report will be at its most useful if we decide to do a project relating to feed-reading. I am now very aware of what the current state of affairs of feed-reading applications is, what the gaps are and what the challenges would be for creating a new application in this area.

Since the problem of RSS fatigue is intertwined with all the problems in navigating the internet, researching the report has greatly increased my understanding of where the internet is going, which will, needless to say, be of great help in developing a new internet application. Looking specifically at the dissertation, the report has reinforced my interest in tagging, semantic tagging in particular. I've realised this subject is rich and significant enough to make it worthy of a dissertation; and since it will probably be related to whatever practical project we decide upon, I will probably go ahead and do a dissertation on the subject.

Even if my group decides not do a web 2.0 or time-saving project the report will still be useful to the major project because it had to do with staying up to date with specialist news. Since it is vital that we be at the forefront of new developments and understand our fields, it is vital that we consume the huge amount of available relevant news on the internet in an efficient manner.

In addition to information consumption, the report research also made me more aware of how to effectively find information on the internet and in what very tech-savvy internet users use as news sources. Once again this will be very useful whatever we do as a major project.

Something else I have become aware of while doing the research report which will be very useful regardless of what we do as major project is that it is very difficult to innovate without already being immersed in a subject. Before I embarked upon the report I had various ideas myself for how RSS fatigue could be combated. When I started the research I quickly discovered that people had been thinking about RSS fatigue years ago and that there were already a dozen or more companies offering the kind of solutions I had been thinking about.

The problem is that one needs to be at the forefront of change to identify the problems with those changes before anyone else. The effective innovator needs to identify problems that users will face when using a technology before the vast majority of people have even heard of the technology in question. Although I adopt new technology earlier than most people I know, I tended to be one of those people that waited for the technology to come to me, instead of actively paying attention to new developments – in a more committed way than simply subscribing to BBC Technology news – and trying them out. As a student of interactive media I'm ashamed that it's taken me so long to figure out how to stay on top of new developments.

We will certainly need to bare this phenomenon in mind as we select an idea for our major project, since everything we think of someone else is very likely to also have thought of; probably several years ago.

Reflection I

During our two group brainstorming sessions, it was interesting to observe the interplay of the group dynamics and the system we used to quantify our collective conclusion and direct the discussion. During the first brainstorm we went through every idea and individually ranked them from zero to five, before tallying up the totals and concentrating on the highest-ranking ideas. For the second brainstorm we had a much more informal process consisting of just talking about the ideas and seeing where that led.

During the middle of the second group session, one group member said that the discussion seemed to be focussing on a particular problem, that of time-saving, and suggested concentrating our conversation on solutions to that problem, which we did. However, at the very end of the brainstorming, we quickly went through the other problems and asked each group member what they felt about that. It transpired that problem-solving was no more popular in terms of people's interests than many of the other identified problems; two of the five group members were not actually interested in a time-saving major project. Instead, the informality of the process and the differing personalities of the group had led to an unintentional distortion of the real focus of the group's interests.

Reflection II

Our tutor Rob White had several times stated that we should choose our group members on the basis of shared interests, not on the basis of necessary skills or how well we got on. I had been somewhat dubious about this, but during the day of the group-choosing workshop, I went along with the 'map' of people's interests and this led to me being in a group that was based on shared interests, with four of the few people on the degree with whom I had never worked. This was a risk but, judging by the work so far, I'm very pleased with how it has turned out. Because everyone is interested in web 2.0 developments there is a huge wealth of collective knowledge about what is out there and a great enthusiasm for the project.

I realise that even if I had worked with some of the people I know to be very able workers, they would not have been interested in the same things and would have tried to pull the project in a different direction.

Reflection III

Working on the research report reinforced for me the importance of planning ahead and getting 'stuck in' as soon as possible. My primary research for the report has consisted of signing up to a lot of sites and testing out their functions first-hand. Many of these sites are still in the beta-testing phase and many of these are invite-only. I've applied for invitations but suspect that by the time I receive them it will be too late and I will not have time to include the research in my report.

Likewise I would ideally have liked to interview some relevant people. However, I saw no point in arranging for interviews before I had finished immersing myself in the secondary research and the afore-mentioned website case studies. Without this knowledge I would not know the questions which needed to be asked in the interviews. Now of course, I'm fairly certain I haven't left enough time for the interviews.

The reason I left the research report so late was mainly because I wanted it to be related to our major project.

Reflection IV

My research report has focussed heavily on issues of productivity and convenient information consumption. This and the fact that my old pda phone broke down for the first week of research unit, have turned my mind to reflections on the usefulness of my having pda phone. While it would be possible to mimic the phone's functions with a standard mobile phone and a good pencil and paper diary-come-notebook, as I did several years ago, the pda phone is infinitely more

convenient for me. For a start, I never have to worry about running out of space or having to erase things as I make modifications.

Secondly I only need to update one set of information – the pda synchronises with Microsoft Entourage (Outlook for the Mac) and automatically updates my address book, notes, Word files, Excel files, tasks and calendar entries. With a paper notebook I would have had to constantly be manually transferring information between the diary and my computer, not to mention the mobile phone.

Thirdly I can make notes at any time in a format that I can easily revisit and use. Previously I used to make many paper notes which I very rarely actually used because I could barely read my handwriting and because it seemed such a hassle to go through and transfer the information to my essays written on my PC. Now my notes are synchronised with my macbook these are no longer issues.

Finally I can check my emails and my news feeds at any time, making it easier to deal with information overload, since there are many times when I am away from a computer that I will have a few moments with nothing to do and email or feeds will be a welcome distraction.

Reflection V

Starting the major project has highlighted for me the way my own career aims and understanding of myself have changed over the course. When I began the course, I wanted to be a Flash-specialised web graphic designer and developer. I enjoyed doing this kind of work and knew, from keeping up to date with job adverts, that it would lead to plenty of work.

However, have reached this point in the course I know that my 'passion' is not in graphic design or programming. While I do enjoy actually doing these two things, I am completely uninterested in reading about them and find learning new techniques tedious. I can do them well but am not sufficiently interested in them to become very good. However, while working on the 'business' project I discovered I found web 2.0 solutions fascinating. Researching them was always interesting and ideas for synthesising existing solutions and improving them seemed to come easily. I learnt that I'm much more interested in what problem-solving tools *do* than in putting them together (development) or in what they look like (graphic design). The research project, being on a thoroughly web 2.0 subject, has only reinforced this interest.

I also discovered that I'm a much more motivated worker when working in a group (assuming the fellow members of that group are responsible workers of course). Working as a freelancer seemed an attractive prospect before, because of the flexibility I imagined it would allow, but now I'm much keener on working in a company.