



## What is RSS? Do I need it on my website?



The web has many millions of websites, and the busier websites carry thousands of stories and articles at the same time. Every minute, thousands of new stories are hitting the web from all of these sources.

Even if you limit your surfing to a few favourite websites, it can be difficult to keep up with this deluge of information.

Traditionally, your only option was to visit your favourite sites regularly, and inspect them to see if anything new or important had shown up. This can be tedious and annoying. For instance, if a major news site is updated many times per day; it can be easy to miss important headlines entirely if you do not check often enough. On the other hand, if a site is updated once per week or less, there is no point in checking it several times a day, but it might be several days or even weeks before you notice that an update has appeared.


Some sites use email alerts to send notifications to subscribers when new content appears. This can be useful in some cases, but often causes more problems than it solves. Email alerts can clutter your Inbox, pushing other mail out of view, and generally acting like spam.

About 5 years ago, a solution to this problem began gaining popularity. It was called “RSS”, which stood for “Really

Simple Syndication”. What RSS does is make a website’s headlines available in a very simple format. This makes it easy to grab all the headlines from all of your favourite websites, and see them all at once. Furthermore, the headlines can automatically update themselves as each website acquires new stories. That means you can spot when new updates are available for reading without actually having to go to each site and manually inspect its table of contents for new items.

### How do I use RSS?

A website can publish any number of “web feeds”. Each feed is essentially a list of links with some descriptive information. A large news site might have different feeds for each section, so that you can monitor just sports, or entertainment, or top stories. A smaller site such as a blog might have just a single feed that contains everything on the site.

Websites that make their feeds available will typically have an “RSS” link somewhere on their web page, or will use the RSS icon 

For example, at <http://cnn.com>, you will see the RSS link at the top right, whereas at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/> it is near



the bottom of the page. Sometimes clicking on the RSS link will take you to a web page that describes all the web feeds you can choose from, but sometimes it links directly to the web feed itself (which is a strange-looking document in XML format).

In either case, the important information is the URL to the web feed. If you have a modern browser such as Firefox or Internet Explorer (IE) 7, it will know what to do with the web feed if you click through to it directly.

Otherwise, you should save the URL (right-click on the link, and select “Copy Shortcut” or “Copy Link”), and paste it into your RSS reader (see below). This is analogous to “subscribing” to the web feed.

To see all of the headlines from the sites you subscribe to, you need to use your RSS reader program. Again, a modern browser like Firefox or IE 7 can take care of this for you. Alternatively you can use a specialized RSS reader program, or an online service such as Google Homepage (recently renamed “iGoogle”). Your RSS reader program will take care of automatically checking the feeds for new headlines and displaying them when they are available. If any of the headlines look of interest, simply click on it, and you will be taken to the story on the original website. Your RSS reader will check the headlines regularly and automatically for you, so you no longer need to manually check every website for updates. (Congratulations, you have just automated your web surfing!)

### **Publishing Web Feeds**

You may benefit from publishing your own web feeds if you are running a website that posts regular itemized updates, such as:

- news articles
- blog postings
- events
- new products
- forum comments

Updates like this are easy to treat as discrete destinations and provide a simple link to visit them, which is how web feeds want to work.

In theory you could write the RSS feed file yourself, if you are willing to type the XML code directly. However, RSS feed creation is best done by an automated content management system (CMS). The CMS detects when new

items appear on the website, and automatically updates the feed file with no special effort on your part.

If your CMS does not do this, or you have a custom-built website, your web developers can design your website so that it automatically generates a new web feed file whenever you post a new update. Then you simply have to make this web feed file available to the public via an RSS link on your normal web pages.

### **How does RSS affect your traffic and visitors?**

The quality of visitors that arrive through web feeds is higher, because they are already attracted to a particular piece of content, rather than just idly surfing. It also increases the chances that they will be satisfied with their visit, since the amount of browsing and searching has been minimized. It is unlikely to affect traffic from casual and new visitors, since they will not be subscribers to your feeds yet. However, it is possible for other websites to republish your feeds as normal web links; this may help to drive new traffic to you as visitors on those other websites follow feed links back to your website. Finally, it is a good way to keep your regular visitors returning to your site, by making sure they are always reminded of your content.

### **About Exware**

The Exware Content Management System includes RSS web feeds to allow your visitors to subscribe to your latest news items and postings. In addition, Exware’s Content Management System allows you to publish third party RSS feeds on your website. This may be beneficial to keep website visitors or members up-to-date on the latest industry news for your sector.

Exware offers full-service, turnkey web solutions to businesses, associations and non-profits. For more information, visit [www.exware.com](http://www.exware.com) or call 604-684-9440.



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