

# RSS: A Brief Introduction

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**Abstract:** The *JMMT* website has recently added an RSS feed. This technology allows users to keep track of changes to websites of interest without having to regularly visit those sites. This article briefly discusses the history of RSS, explains how to access RSS feeds, and provides step-by-step information on using this new feature on the *JMMT* website.

**Key Words:** RSS, *JMMT* Website

**R**SS, an acronym for “Really Simple Syndication” or “Rich Site Summary”, is a simple yet very powerful technology that assists Internet users in keeping abreast of changes to websites that they have an interest in. Websites offer this service by making available to users a special type of file called an “RSS feed,” also commonly referred to as a “news feed,” “web feed,” “RSS stream,” or “RSS channel.” This method for sharing data reduces the effort required in continually re-visiting websites to check for new content. In turn, it allows anyone publishing information on a website to let readers know when something has been added to that site.

## Brief History of RSS

RSS has been around in some form since about 1999 when it was first introduced by Internet-browser pioneer Netscape, but it has only matured and become widely adopted over the past few years. In 2002, *The New York Times* started offering RSS feeds on its website. This proved to be a kind of “tipping point” after which much more attention was given to the format. In 2005, major players in the web browser market started integrating the technology directly into their products, including Microsoft’s Internet Explorer, Mozilla Foundations Firefox and Apple’s Safari. Today, nearly every significant site on the web provides at least one such RSS news feed.


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## Accessing RSS Feeds

Websites that have their own RSS feed(s) for notifying users of new syndicated content will usually display a standard icon (in most cases a rounded orange square with white radio waves inside; ) and a text link (hyperlink) to their feed’s URL (Uniform Resource Locator), a file located on a web server that is written following a particular standard format. In order to take advantage of these feeds, users require either a desktop-based or web-based application called a “feed reader” or “aggregator” that can read these RSS-formatted files. By adding a feed to a feed reader, a user becomes subscribed to the feed. Although some applications will have an automated process to subscribe to a news feed, the basic way to subscribe is by simply clicking on the RSS icon and/or text link. Alternatively right-clicking (or control-click if you’re on a Mac) on the RSS icon or text link, selecting Copy Shortcut (Internet Explorer browser) or Copy Link Location (Mozilla Firefox browser) and then pasting the resulting link directly into a feed reader is another way to subscribe.

There are essentially two types of feed readers: desktop applications and web (or browser-based) applications. Aside from these two variants, there is also feed reader functionality available inside other applications such as email programs like Microsoft Outlook and Mozilla Thunderbird. Desktop applications offer the advantages of a potentially richer user interface and of being able to provide some content even when the computer is not connected to the Internet. Web-based feed readers offer the great convenience of allowing users to access up-to-date feeds from any Internet-connected computer. Web-based feed readers are often as feature-rich as their desktop-based counterparts and, given recent advances in the ability for web applications to provide a valuable user experience when offline as well, will likely continue to lead the way in usage and popularity.

Both types of applications will periodically and automatically access the web server of subscribed news feeds for items that have been added since the last time the user checked. They also offer the convenience of tracking which feed items a user has read, therefore only displaying new content. All but the most basic feed readers will also allow items to be saved or kept as “unread” so that they will be available until actively removed. In this way, users can keep an archive of past items that are deemed important or that are to be re-read at a later time. The news item will sometimes be a brief introduction to a more complete article that will then be “linked to” from within the item, allowing users to visit the originating site to read the complete article and view other articles.

Some common desktop feed readers include Great News (<http://www.curiostudio.com/>), which is free, and Feed-Demon (<http://newsgator.com>), which is available for purchase for approximately \$30 at the time of this writing. The most common and likely the best web-based feed reader is Google Reader (<http://google.com/reader/>), which is very user-friendly and feature-rich. Other common web-based readers include Bloglines (<http://bloglines.com>) and Netvibes (<http://netvibes.com>). The web-based feed readers listed here are all available at no charge.

It is important to note here that most feed readers will allow exporting of a users list of subscribed news feeds into a single OPML (Outline Processor Markup Language) formatted file that can then be imported into almost any other feed reader. This offers the ability to try various different feed readers without the hassle of having to re-enter all of the feed URLs.

## The JMMT RSS Feed

With the release of the latest issue, JMMT has launched its very own RSS feed. Whenever a new issue is released or whenever some important additions or changes to the web-

site occur, subscribers to this feed will be automatically notified via new items in their feed reader. The RSS icon and text hyperlink can be found on the left side of each page of the site (<http://jmmtonline.com>) below the Subscribe link. No longer will users need to periodically check the site looking for new content, although we encourage visiting the site often to take advantage of the existing large archive of articles and resources.

The following is a step-by-step explanation of how to access our news feed using Google Reader. For those who don't yet have a Google Account, you can sign up for one from the Google Reader home page found at <http://google.com/reader>. Once you have a Google Reader account, follow these steps to subscribe to our feed.

1. Go to <http://jmmtonline.com>
2. Locate the orange RSS icon and text located on the left side of the page right under Subscribe
3. Right click on the icon or text
4. Select Copy Shortcut if you are using Internet Explorer for a browser or Copy Link Location if you are using Firefox; this will copy the feed URL to your clipboard
5. Log in to your Google Reader account (<http://google.com/reader>)
6. Click on Add Subscription found in the upper left part of the page
7. Hold down the control button and hit the ‘v’ key; this will paste the feed URL from your clipboard into the text box that appeared
8. Click the Add button

The JMMT news feed will now be added to your Google Reader account. From this point forward, whenever you log in to your Google Reader account, it will be easy to see if there are new items available on the JMMT site. There are several other ways to subscribe to a news feed but the steps described above should work regardless of the browser you use. Welcome to this added feature on the JMMT website! ■