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<http://itasth.qc.ca/itatice/index.asp>

RSS feeds described to my teachers...
"The content and information you want, when you want it!"

Idea, design, development and writing:

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On the menu:

- * Definitions, concepts, and utilities*
- * Taking advantage of RSS feeds using aggregators*
- * Taking it a step further*

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"I've been looking at the future of information, and part of it is spelled R-S-S."
Noted technology journalist Dan Gillmor



If these three letters sound strange, take the time to demystify them—you won't regret it!

Teaching establishments, unfortunately, make little use of RSS feeds (in contrast to major corporations, media outlets, etc.) in spite of their proven potential and advantages. While this Internet technology is still limited to initiates and requires the installation and use of aggregators (among other things), it holds certain promise for the future, and I'm willing to bet that it will soon be widely used.

Already, Web tools and technologies are making greater use of RSS feeds (content management systems (CMS, blogs, browsers, etc.), and the number of internautes subscribed to these feeds can only explode in the years—or better yet months—to come; soon, RSS will be spoken of with the same offhandedness as bookmarks and favourites.

This report on RSS feeds, therefore, stems from a firm belief that this technology presents an extraordinary opportunity to create effective means of communication and provide updated watch at all levels. We used to speak of research and information processing; now, with RSS feeds, the focus is squarely on processing.

This report could just as well be entitled "Content Syndication and the Fight Against Information Overload."

Suggestions, comments and encouragement are welcome ;;)

Happy reading!

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PART I: THEORY

Definitions, concepts and utilities

What is an RSS feed or wire?

An RSS feed, also called an RSS wire—the acronym is short for “Really Simple Syndication” or “Rich Site Summary”—is a syndication format for Web content that makes it possible to disseminate Web site news, blogs, and so forth, and quickly consult them without visiting the Web site. “Content syndication” denotes the possibility of publishing, on a specific Web site, content from another Web site.

Thus, an RSS feed is a kind of living, changing bookmark, one that automatically notifies you of changes on one or several sites. Imagine yourself visiting all of your favourites and blogs for pages that have been updated and modified... RSS feeds take the principle of the bookmark a step further.

When people register (subscribe) to an RSS feed, they are immediately informed of the latest news from the editor/originator. However, tools that interpret these feeds and extract information in a readable format are necessary to achieve this.

Recognizing an RSS feed

RSS feeds are symbolized by small, generally orange icons on Web pages and blogs marked XML, RSS or ATOM (ex. RSS, XML). Sometimes, they appear as text at the bottom of a page or a lateral column. These acronyms designate adherence to a news syndication feed. Clicking on these icons or on the text links you to:

- a Web page explaining how to read the feed
(ex. <http://www.tv5.org/>)
- more often than not, directly to the address (the URL) and an XML file display containing the RSS feed
(ex. <http://www.ledevoir.com/rss/ledevoir.xml>)

At first glance, an XML file is of no interest to the great majority of people, for whom it doesn't mean anything. These files are meant to be read by a software application called an aggregator or by specific browsers.

How do RSS feeds (XML files) work and how can they be used?

The XML programming language—the acronym stands for “Extensible Markup Language—is the basis for the RSS feed. It consists of a small Web-based news or current events file that allows content producers to identify their content with tags such as “title,” “link,” “description,” and so forth. Indeed, the XML format may contain titles, authors’ names, hypertext links, news briefs, updates and more.

Technically, an RSS feed is an XML file with a well-defined structure including content (text) and borders surrounding the content field.

```
<?xml version="1.0" ?> identifies the file as xml  
  
<rss version="YY"> identifies the file as rss, with its YY version  
  
<channel> identifies the channel providing the information feed  
  
<item> describes the first data item  
<title> identifies the title of the data item </title>  
<link> identifies the URL link to this information </link>  
<description> describes the information</description>  
<PubDate> identifies the date and hour of publication</PubDate>  
</item>  
  
<item> identifies the next data item  
...  
</item> ici fin l'élément d'information suivant  
<item> as many as ten items or more may be added  
...  
</item>  
  
</channel> the channel is no longer identified  
</rss> end of rss
```

Example of an RSS feed in XML format: [Vitrine APO](#)

Note that there are several other ways to use XML to describe texts, notably ATOM, probably the most popular current standard after RSS. Several versions of the latter exist. However, the operating logic remains the same.

For more on RSS-XML formats, versions and specifications, please visit the following sites:

<http://www.stervinou.com/projets/rss/#whatIsRss>

<http://www.rss-specifications.com/>

If this format is illegible and inoperative directly, software applications and tools called aggregators make it possible to “subscribe” to RSS feeds. These applications/tools scan subscription files to extract news content, updates, etc. This makes it easy to obtain fresh information in real time from Web sites of interest. Subscribing to RSS feeds puts the information at your fingertips in a centralized and dynamic manner, in contrast to bookmarks and even distribution lists. To find out how to operate and take advantage of this technology, please see part II of this report, which deals with practical aspects.

Other advantages of RSS feeds

On top of allowing you to realize the idea, “*The content you want, when you want it!*” and making the information “mobile,” RSS feeds are an excellent watch tool. They make it possible (thanks to aggregators) to target specific information (by subscribing to feeds of interest) as well as highly diversified information for all tastes and interests. There is nothing to prevent someone from subscribing, from a single location, to feeds touching on a wide variety of areas and topics—education, technology, cuisine, health, government, stock exchange, and agriculture. The simplicity and standardization of this technology makes it portable on all platforms (software reader, Web sites, blogs, Mac, PC, telephone, etc.)

RSS feeds play a powerful informational role. And when it comes to developing communication strategies for today’s Web, the focus has shifted from finding ways to draw visitors to your Web site for content, to making that information as mobile as possible. Feeds are an essential part of this communication strategy. Many businesses, organizations, and institutions have begun to use RSS feeds for mass emails, for example to issue news releases, notices, updates and promotions.¹

RSS feeds also make it easier to circulate information on a business intranet and to support the development of communities of practice, particularly from the point of view of knowledge management and sharing.

¹ For example, Health Canada’s RSS distributions:
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/home-accueil/helpeaide/rss_f.html

Finally, the RSS format facilitates the publication of electronic newsletters: Rather than subscribe or unsubscribe, all that's needed is the address of the RSS feed. RSS technology is an excellent means of avoiding the inconveniences associated with newsletters. It is no longer necessary to provide an email address. Users simply enter the RSS feed once, and the information is then consulted in the aggregator. Unlike email software, therefore, RSS makes it theoretically difficult to broadcast junk e-mail (there is little or no Spam) and viruses (until there's proof to the contrary!).

If you're not already convinced and are looking for other reasons to use RSS feeds or for other potential applications of this technology, please consult the following document: [100 uses of RSS](#).

PART II: PRACTICE

Taking advantage of RSS feeds using aggregators

Introduction

Hundreds of aggregators are available for Windows, Mac OS and Linux, from the simplest to the most complete and complex; and while some are free of charge, high-end aggregators can be quite expensive. Among the references cited at the end of this document are links to specific Web sites listing aggregator software programs capable of reading RSS feeds. Our intention is not to draw comparisons between different RSS readers but to single out simple and effective RSS readers that meet our requirements. The technology and the aggregators are evolving so quickly that it would be pointless to spend time experimenting in an effort to select the best. However, we have tested specific RSS readers, and our “quick picks” are based on user-friendliness, simplicity, functionality, language, as well as internaut comments and test results.

Aggregators, it may be thought, are bound to disappear, since their functions will eventually be integrated into future generations of Internet browsers or email management software. In fact, Microsoft already has plans to integrate this technology into upcoming versions of Internet Explorer (version 7) and Outlook (the browsers Mozilla, FireFox and Safari already offer this option, as does the Google search engine).

A wide variety of such readers and tools (aggregators) are available. They may be divided into three types:

- **Web sites and online services:** In this case, subscriptions to RSS feeds are managed through Web interfaces; thus, they are directly available on the Web with no installation required.
- **Independent dedicated applications:** May be installed on a computer in the same manner as software.
- **Functionality integrated into applications:** These applications come with browsers or email software.

The pedagogical approach hereby adopted focuses on the click-stream for specific services and tools that come under these three types. Through this click-stream, we will cite a few manipulations to carry out as well as details that may be used to benefit from this RSS technology.

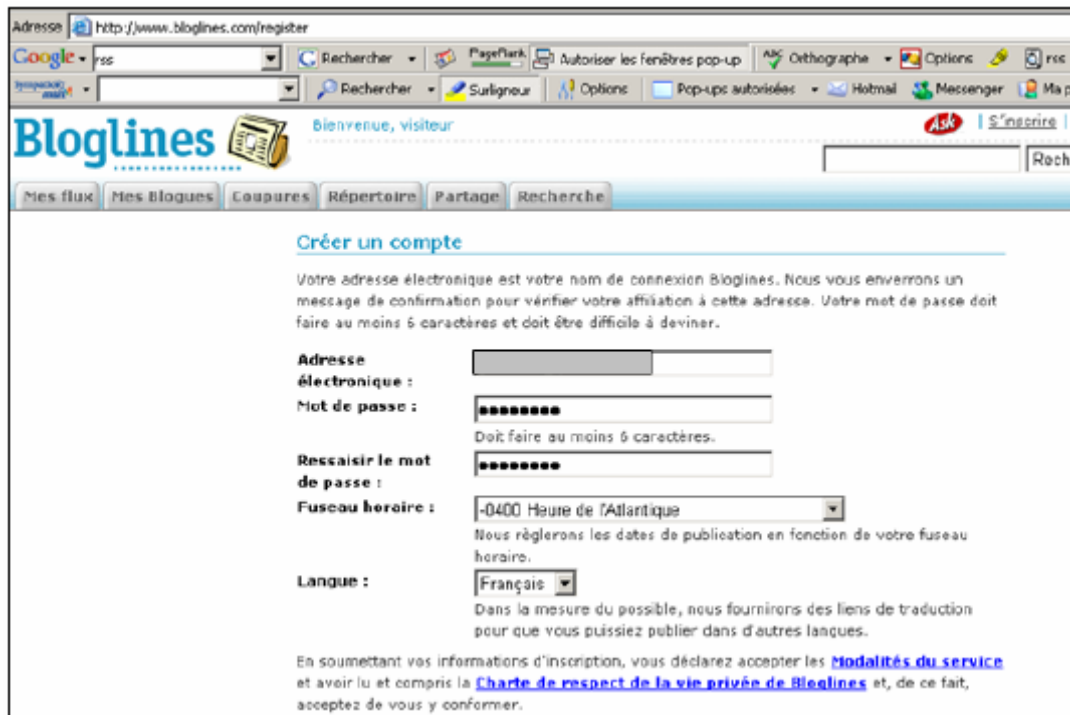
1. Web sites and online services: online RSS aggregators

For this type of aggregator, we recommend that users consult the following document comparing RSS aggregators offered online: [Online RSS aggregators](http://vtech.canalblog.com/docs/Comparatif_RSS.pdf).
http://vtech.canalblog.com/docs/Comparatif_RSS.pdf

Bloglines

While users may be lost at first, they do grow accustomed very quickly, and after a few minutes, the subscriptions begin to show results.

- First and foremost, users must register on the site:
<http://www.bloglines.com/register>

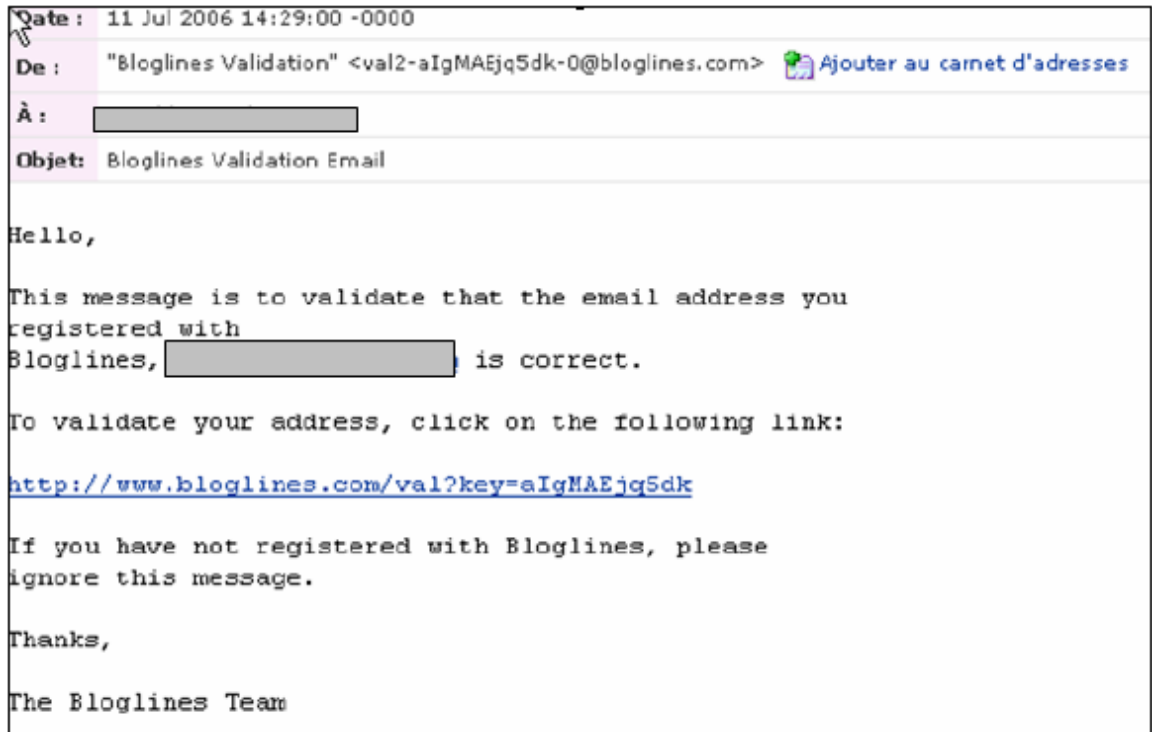


The image shows a screenshot of a web browser displaying the registration page for Bloglines. The browser's address bar shows the URL <http://www.bloglines.com/register>. The page features the Bloglines logo and a navigation menu with options like 'Mes flux', 'Mes Bloques', 'Coopures', 'Répertoire', 'Partage', and 'Recherche'. The main content area is titled 'Créer un compte' and contains a registration form with the following fields and instructions:

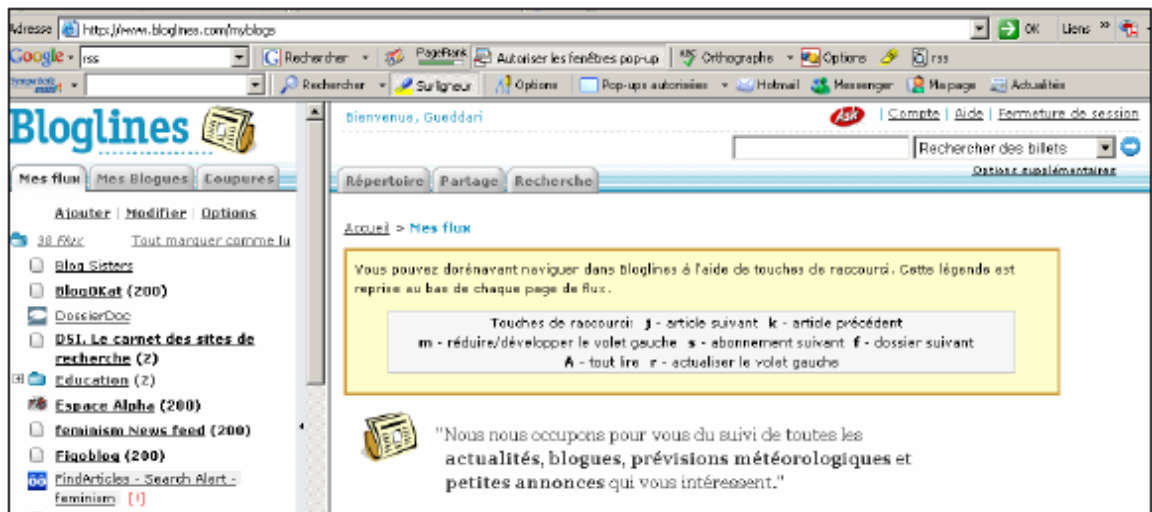
- Adresse électronique :** A text input field for the email address.
- Mot de passe :** A password input field with a note: 'Doit faire au moins 6 caractères.'
- Reccaisir le mot de passe :** A second password input field for confirmation.
- Fuseau horaire :** A dropdown menu currently set to '-0400 Heure de l'Atlantique', with a note: 'Nous réglerons les dates de publication en fonction de votre fuseau horaire.'
- Langue :** A dropdown menu currently set to 'Français', with a note: 'Dans la mesure du possible, nous fournirons des liens de traduction pour que vous puissiez publier dans d'autres langues.'

At the bottom, there is a disclaimer: 'En soumettant vos informations d'inscription, vous déclarez accepter les [Modalités du service](#) et avoir lu et compris la [Charte de respect de la vie privée de Bloglines](#) et, de ce fait, acceptez de vous y conformer.'

- Once registration is complete, an email is sent to the address provided by the user to validate registration.

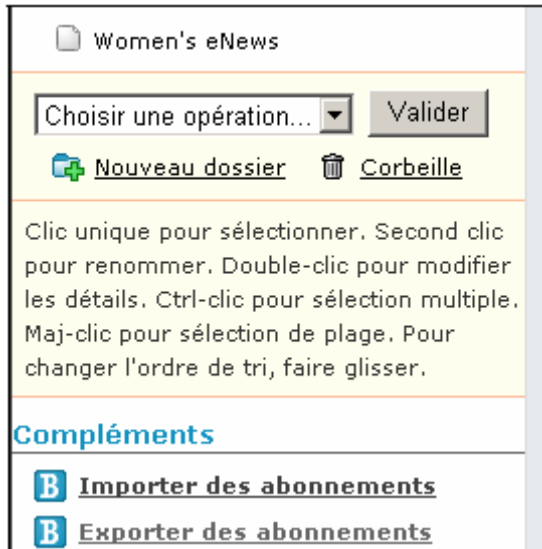


- After opening a session, users may capture (add/modify) pre-identified feeds through the "my feeds" tab.



- For help, please consult the online help/FAQ at <http://www.bloglines.com/help/faq>

- A few of the possibilities that caught our attention:
 - Category management
 - Importing and exporting a set of feeds (in one OPML file)

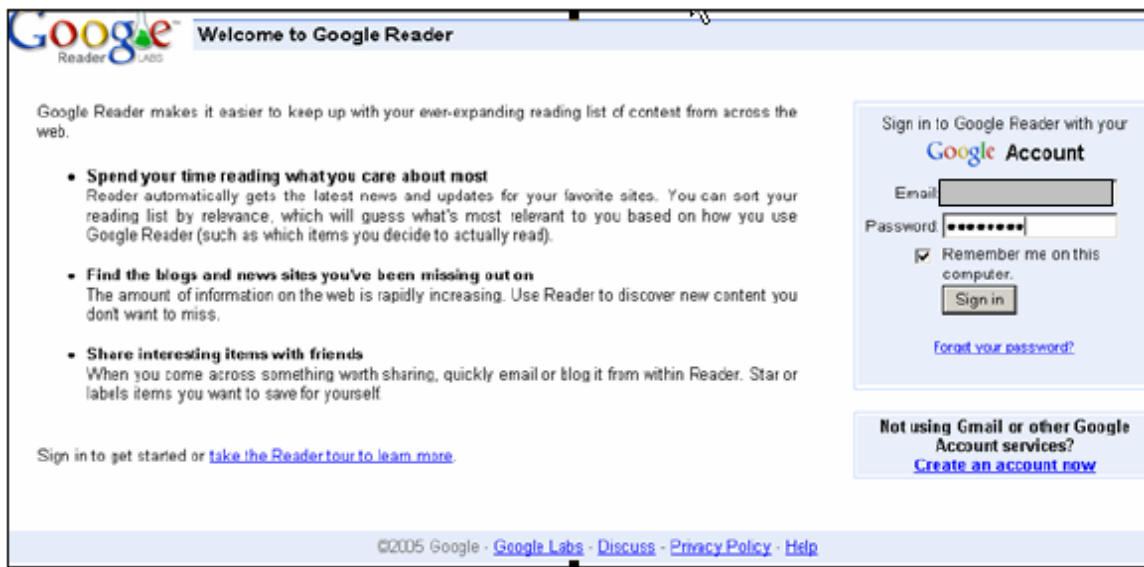


- Sharing RSS feeds with other users:
 - <http://www.bloglines.com/help/share>
 - Simple and advanced searches: in the feeds, on the Web

Google Reader

Another online aggregator: Google Reader

<http://www.google.com/reader/lens/> (requires a free Google account)



Thus far, in addition to being in English, it doesn't seem to be operating at 100% capacity; watch for it to progress, though.

Netvibes

Site: <http://www.netvibes.com/>

Netvibes holds great promise. In addition to being intuitive, its interface is professional, ergonomic, flexible and customizable.

Comes with a list of feeds, and there is now a Netvibes Canada. In addition to managing feeds, other interesting possibilities include: favourites management, search engines (including wikipedia), note-taking, adding modules, and more. The windows may be moved and reorganized and the tabs reduced, which makes *Netvibes* highly flexible and adaptable.

A range of services in only one location. Impressive... the Web at its best. In our view one of the best—to be used without restraint!

Included with this document is a quick-reference guide to RSS feeds with Netvibes.

2. Independent dedicated applications: offline RSS aggregators

These applications are increasingly common, and many are similar, though the interface may differ. However, once browsers and email software integrate RSS readers and management functionalities, these aggregators will lose popularity. The following three caught our attention, with a slight preference given to RSSOwl and FeedReader in particular.

For a comparative look at these offline aggregators, please consult the following study:

AlertInfo

This application is offered free of charge by GESTE (Groupement des Éditeurs des Services en Ligne), which brings together the major Web content editors (press, radio, television, independent editors). *AlertInfo* comes with several hundred feeds grouped into categories. It functions only with Windows.

- Download: <http://www.geste.fr/alertinfo/telecharger.html>
- Installation and instructions:
<http://www.geste.fr/alertinfo/modedemploi.html>

RSS feeds



RSSOwl

Why "Owl"? The owl (translation: Hibou) is a traditional symbol of wisdom, a silent and effective hunter.

RSSOwl is user-friendly freeware. Its ergonomic interface—which is also in French—makes it possible to easily save selected information in various formats for subsequent consultation, sharing, and much more. RSSOwl is also fast and cross-platform (Mac, Windows, Linux, Solaris, etc.).

- **Installation**

As RSSOwl is a Java application, a Java environment must be installed on your computer (Java Virtual Machine: JVM) for the software to function. If you don't already have Java, please visit the following Web page: <http://www.java.com/fr/download/installed.jsp> Click on "check installation."

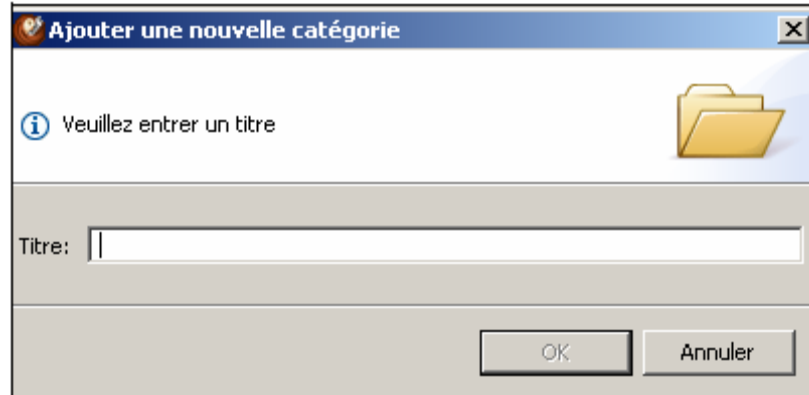
If the virtual machine is properly installed, the following message will appear, together with the version; if not, proceed with the installation.



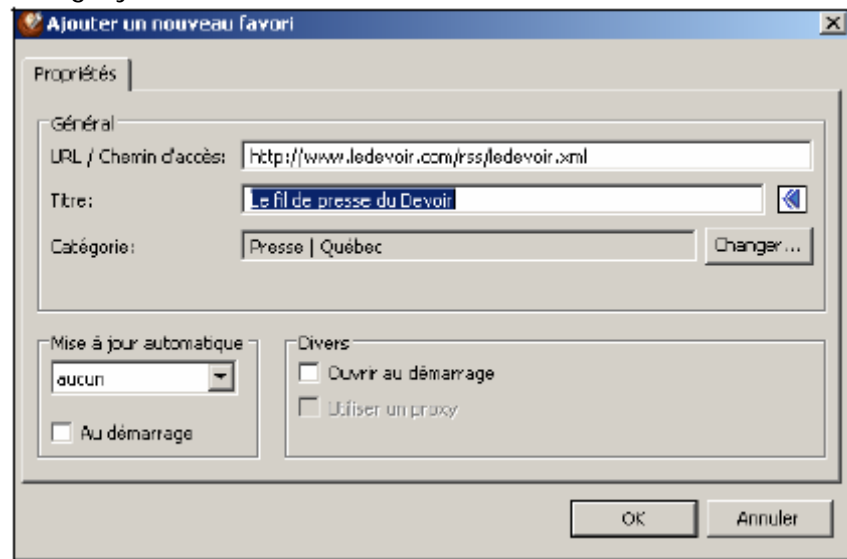
1. Go to <http://www.rssowl.org/>
2. Click on "Download" and specify your operating system (Windows, Mac). Select the option corresponding to your geographical location and click on "Download" in the right column.
3. Click on "Execute" and follow the instructions. (You must have installation rights on your computer; if not, contact your computer technician).
4. Once installation is complete, the application opens. To re-open it after it closes, go to Start/Programs/RSSOwl/ and select RSSOwl.

- **Quick tutorial**

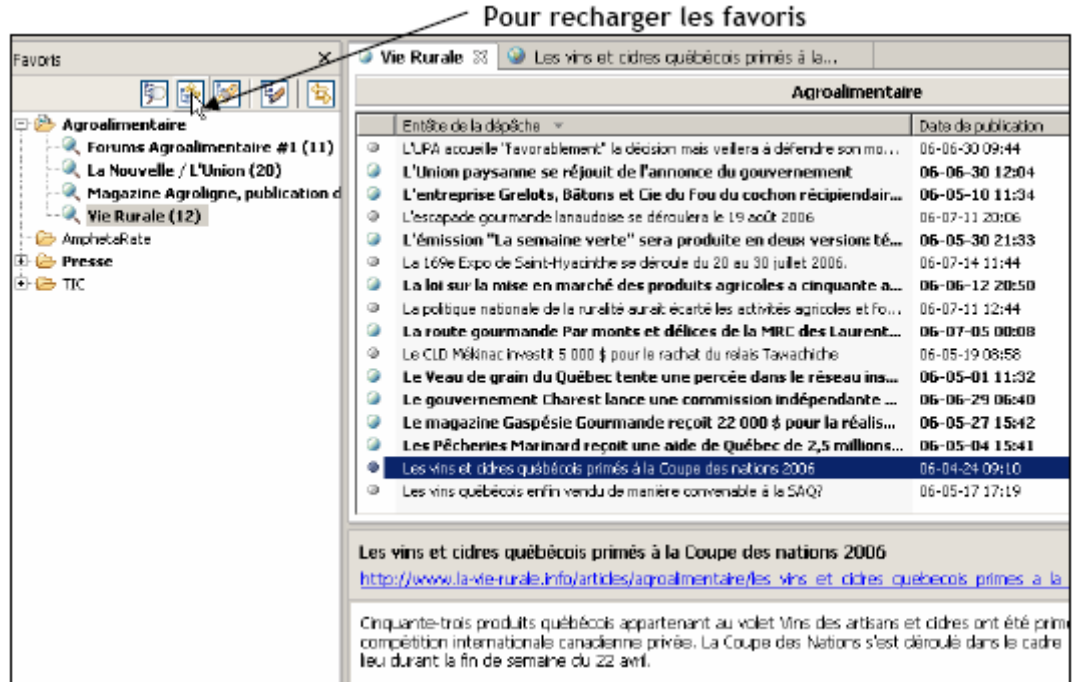
1. The software comes with default classification categories for RSS feeds. To customize the tool to meet your needs, you may erase by selecting files and creating your own.
2. Creating categories: choose File/New/Category (the right button on the left window may also be used). When the window opens, enter your category. You may add a new category.



3. Users may add as many categories as they wish, as well as sub-categories and sub-categories of sub-categories.
4. To subscribe to a free RSS feed, it's necessary to know its URL address (ex. The RSS feed for the Quebec newspaper Le Devoir: <http://www.ledevoir.com/rss/ledevoir.xml> or the vitrine APO: http://ntic.org/nouvelles/nouvelles_rss.php). Go to File/New/Favourites. When the window opens, enter the URL address, an explicit title, and place the feed in its category.



5. Repeat this step for other RSS feeds. The reader then monitors the targeted feeds and places the information at the user's fingertips.
6. The left side of the screen will appear as an email box. Double-click on the desired feed to select it. A list of news items (title, date and hour) from this feed will be displayed on the right. By clicking once on a title, a summary is displayed at the bottom, together with a link to edit or view the details of this news item.



7. To proceed further:

- a. Functionalities of the main screen:
<http://fr.tutorial.rssowl.org/elements.html>
- b. For details, advice and tips:
<http://fr.tutorial.rssowl.org/index.html>

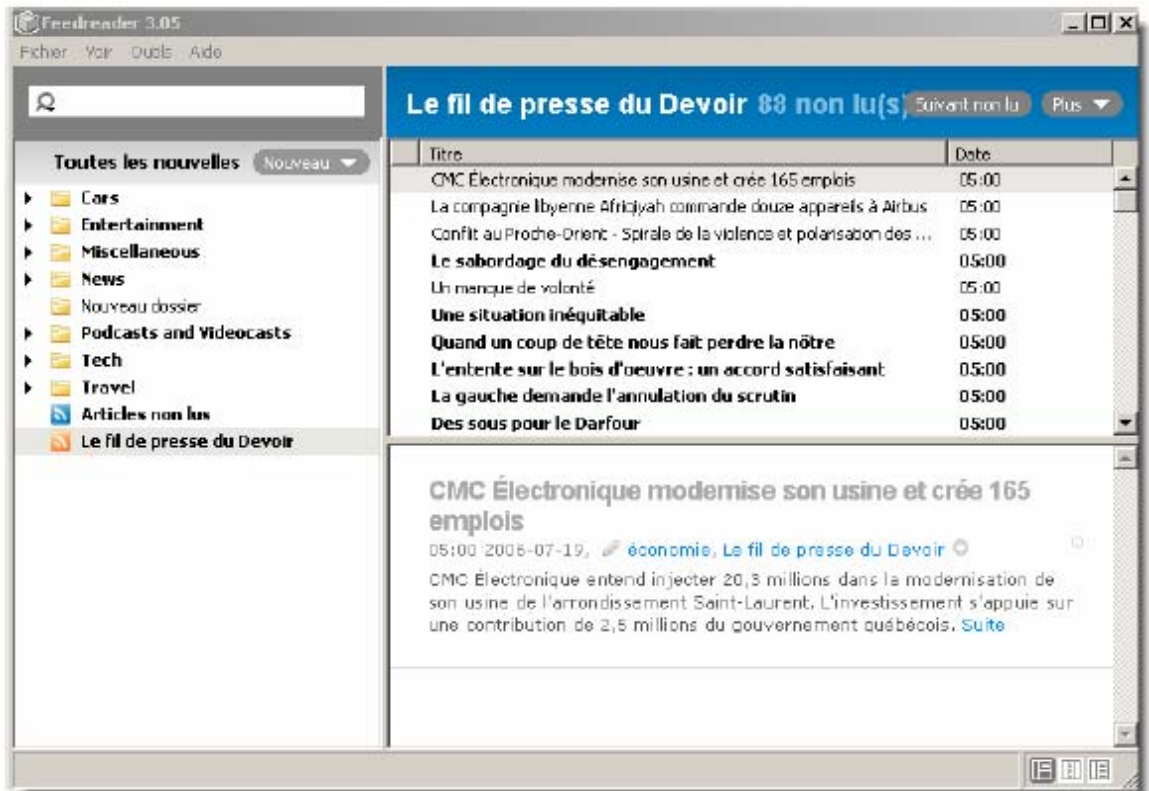
FeedReader

Among the readers tested, FeedReader proved to be one of the best. It is ergonomic, intuitive, user-friendly and complete. What's more, version 3 offers a French interface. Unfortunately, however, version 3 is no longer freeware (under GNU - GPL license) but freeware under copyright! Also, in contrast to RSSOwl, which is multi-platform, FeedReader is meant for PC and Windows. In spite of this, users will be satisfied with the user-friendliness and comprehensive functionality of this tool, which meets a range of different needs.

- **Installation**

1. Go to <http://www.feedreader.com/download> to download the software (version 3, July 18, 2006, 3.7 Mb). Save the software on your desktop (once the download is complete, double-click on FeedReader305Setup.exe) or execute it directly. Follow the installation procedure. (You must have installation rights for your computer; if not, contact your computer technician.
2. Once installation is complete, the application will open. To re-open it after it closes, go to Start/Programs/FeedReader/ and select FeedReader

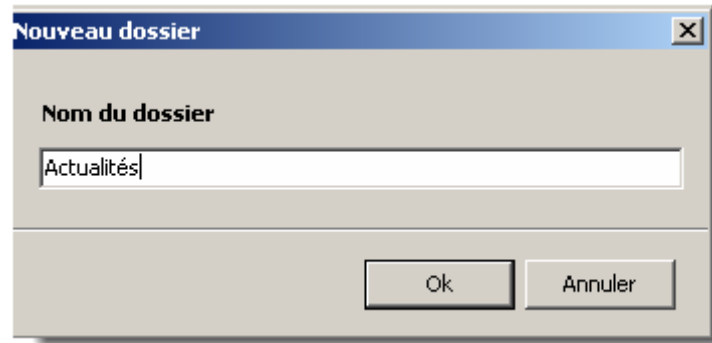
- **Quick tutorial**



1. **Adding a new feed:** go to File/New/Feed (or press F3). Enter the address of the RSS feed (ex. Le Devoir newspaper feed <http://www.ledevoir.com/rss/ledevoir.xml>) and click on OK.



2. **Adding files (categories):** Files may be created to classify feeds on similar topics and themes. Go to File/New/file. Enter the file name in the window that opens:



3. By dragging and dropping, feeds can be moved into their corresponding files (created beforehand).
4. **Search engine:** Interesting searches can be carried out inside the feed. Simply enter one or more keywords to initiate a search.



The search can cover a title or the title and body of the RSS content. The user can also search for an entire sentence and use the logical operators (OR, AND).

5. For other functionalities and details (ex. Feed update notification, the addition of tags, etc.), please consult the following help facility:
<http://www.feedreader.com/documentation>

Other readers

The following is a shortlist of readers: <http://www.rssspecifications.com/rss-readers.htm>

3. Functionalities integrated into applications: browsers and email software

Internet Explorer (browser)

In its current version (6), the Internet Explorer browser has yet to integrate an RSS reader. Applications that attach to the browser must be installed to use one feed (ex. Lektora: http://www.lektora.com/visite_guidee_debut.html). The next version of Internet Explorer (7) is expected to include an RSS reader.

FireFox (browser)

Consult the following site: <http://formation-profession.org/index.php?lien=rss>

Email software

As with browsers, some email software (Mozilla Firebird, for example) already integrates an RSS reader. Microsoft is expected to follow suit by including an RSS reader in the new version of its email software, Outlook.

PARTIII: Taking it a step further

This short section suggests ideas for those who wish to go a step further and optimize their use of feeds—and, why not?—by creating their own feeds.

Where to find the right RSS feeds

- Sharing subscription files (OPML) and RSS feeds
- Consulting sites and blogs that offer this technology (ex. the site [thot](#)) + Internet search
- RSS directories: Web sites that compile and categorize RSS feeds and services. Ex.: www.lamooche.com

Creating an RSS feed and putting it online

- Integrated modules (Web sites, CMS, blogs, Intranet, etc.). Some Web-based tools integrate automatic feed creation: ex. DotClear, SPIP.
- Manual editing of RSS feeds adhering to the XML file structure (tedious!)
- Feed editors:
 - Extension: ex. rsseditor (FireFox extension) (<http://rsseditor.mozdev.org/>)
 - Online editor: ex. <http://www.flashmop.com/>
 - Editor for installation: ex. Feededit (<http://www.banham.cc/feededit/feededit.htm>)
- Programs and scripts
 - Dynamic languages (perl, php, asp, javascript): news extraction from a text file or database to generate and/or interpret an RSS feed in xml format.
- RSS feed validator: ex. <http://feedvalidator.org/>

Example of a technical application of RSS feeds in an educational setting

To illustrate the potential uses of feeds, we have developed an experimental project aimed at using RSS technology in an educational setting. Throughout this project, our goal is to offer and extract news related to teaching subjects and disciplines, based on pre-selected feeds. We also hope to establish profiles based on fields of interest to people (teachers, professional, students) in education.

For more on this example:

<http://www.profweb.qc.ca/kqueddari/rss/index.asp>

Glossary

Syndication

1. The term "syndication" was coined in the U.S. Syndication consists of selling the right to reproduce content or distribute a program to several distributors. The syndication system was created by the American print media, with syndicates selling their publications (cartoons, comic strips, columns, etc.) to several local newspapers.

Source: <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syndication>

2. Procedure whereby content from another Web site is re-published in an automated manner and updated regularly.

Source: [Office québécois de la langue française](#)

RSS: Syndication format for Web content, based on XML, which makes it possible to index Web content in an automated manner and make it instantly available on other sites. In fact, the RSS format is a means of describing Web content (articles, information, events) and, more generally, any page with updated content. RSS allows Web sites to automatically post the latest headlines from another site. Originally created by Netscape, the RSS format is now widely used, notably in blogs, to share content between Web sites. RSS files may be accessed using aggregators, which are specialized readers for RSS wires. The acronym "RSS" stands for *Really Simple Syndication* (RSS 2.0), *RDF Site Summary* (RSS 0.9, 1.0 and 1.1) or *Rich Site Summary* (RSS 0.91)

Source: [Office québécois de la langue française](#)

Aggregator: Application supplier that serves as an intermediary between press publishers and businesses looking for customized content for their Web sites.

Source: [Office québécois de la langue française](#)

XML: Standard defined by the W3C, making it possible to create specialized and customized data structuring languages. Thus, XML is called a "meta language" but is also a file format. XML-based languages allow users to manipulate, process and communicate all kinds of data and text. Examples of these languages include XHTML or RSS.

Source: <http://www.dicodunet.com/definitions/normes/xml.htm>

OPML (Outline Processor Markup Language) is an XML format that makes it possible to gather and identify titles (outlines) of a text. It was initially developed by Radio UserLand as a file format for applications using these titles. It has since been adopted for multiple uses, the most common being the sharing of RSS feed lists between RSS news aggregators. The OPML standard defines an "outline" in a hierarchical manner, with an ordered list of attributes. The standard is open, meaning it can be used with various types of applications. Microsoft Vista™ uses OPML to classify RSS feeds and other types of data.

Source: http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline_Processor_Markup_Language