

Web Syndication

Scenario

Professor Boyer is teaching a senior seminar called Growing Food in the Cityscape, limited to 16 students. A central part of the course is for each student to follow current projects related to urban gardening. She instructs them to use whatever online tools and sources they find to develop streams of dynamic content, which will be available online—to others in the class and to the broader community.

Jake starts his collection by subscribing to a blog feed from a local nursery, posting it on a Tumblr page he's using for the course. Other students use different social networking tools for their work, and some students build their own web pages. Amy, an avid photographer, has a Flickr page where she posts pictures she takes of urban gardens, and several of the students subscribe to that page. Kyle maintains a blog about an indoor herb garden in his apartment, and Jake features that blog on his page, which focuses on individual gardening. Other students highlight community gardens, and still others find a particular interest in using fruit trees in municipal landscaping. The syndicated feeds are automatically refreshed whenever new content is added, and the students continually find new sources of information and meet new people in the community, creating a web of connected, engaged individuals.

From the students' work, Boyer chooses content for a class-wide web page that covers the various topics that students have chosen to pursue. Various resources are represented, including how-to blogs, photos and videos, Pinterest pages, and even locavore cooking sites. A scrolling display uses Twitter hashtags to show updates about workshops at the local demo garden, plant sales, and open houses at public gardens.

Over the semester, the students' use of web syndication tools shows them how to learn and apply knowledge in a context of continually evolving information. They discover obscure and remarkable resources and become discriminating consumers of what they find online.

1 What is it?

For print and broadcast media, syndication is the process by which content from a single source is distributed in multiple other venues, as when news produced by Reuters, for example, is included in local news outlets. **Web syndication applies the principles of discovery and distribution to the online environment**, with more producers of information, more formats for content, and more channels of distribution. Syndication in this context encompasses both the production and consumption of content, and a growing number of web users take advantage of web syndication to organize and filter content from social media, blogs, news, and other sources. They can feed selected content into various applications on phones, tablets, or e-readers and into locations such as websites or social media, even including aggregated “feeds of feeds.” In this way, common online activities such as “liking” people or organizations or “following” keywords or hashtags also become forms of syndication, allowing individuals to create personally curated content streams. Syndication becomes a way to streamline content, collect data, and re-share with others.

2 How does it work?

Web syndication offers content producers and readers a flexible, powerful, and largely automated means of accessing and distributing content on the web. Blogs, tweets, social bookmarking sites, even online forums such as Reddit can be made to produce a “feed,” an automatic update service that readers can subscribe to in many different ways—from e-mail to RSS readers to websites set up to aggregate feeds, including another website. RSS feeds were early examples of web syndication, popularized by such sites as the New York Times, which generated individual RSS feeds for most of its internal sections. Readers, in turn, could assemble a customized set of the newspaper's feeds, which then presented stories tailored to the interests of the subscriber. Other forms of syndication and subscription have emerged, with sites such as Tumblr and Twitter, in which one “follows” a blogger or Twitter user to see all updates automatically. Some users will find “reblogging” or “re-pinning” easier than using RSS feeds, though these techniques are typically specific to one platform only, as in Facebook's “share” feature.

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3 Who's doing it?

The 20th-Century Russia website at Virginia Tech is a recent history project that makes elegant use of syndication in an academic context. The site offers a media-rich magazine layout, with blogs, source links, a Twitter feed, and editorial commentary, all relating to research into Russia in the 1900s. During the course that spawned the project, content on a “motherblog” was syndicated from 38 individual student blogs that doubled as student portfolios. To develop their own content, students used open-access multimedia collections that included primary resources for the era. Each week a new edition curated content from the student blogs, with particularly intriguing posts highlighted. The approach encouraged engagement and content development as students blogged or tweeted in their own online spaces. Syndication technologies allowed individual composition spaces and practices to be aggregated within a dynamically updated central curation point. At the University of Notre Dame, in a course called Introduction to the First Amendment: Freedom of Expression in the Digital Age, students pull in course material from multiple sources, subscribing to information feeds rather than using a traditional textbook. In this case, **students use hashtags and other tools of web syndication to compile the reading material and other resources for the course** and, sometimes, to continue discussion on Twitter outside class.

4 Why is it significant?

Web-based syndication tools have changed the dynamic of information gathering. The one-to-many syndication model, popularized by news organizations in the 20th century, gave end users access to only those syndicated articles presented by the supplier and selected by the local news editor. The web has enabled broader access, including news close to the source, sometimes from eyewitnesses. At the same time, information consumers can gather, repurpose, and share resources quickly and fluidly and can, if they choose, restyle and re-present information via their own blogs, websites, or other online venues. The result is a many-to-many model in which individuals can serve as curators for colleagues and friends. In academe, instructors and learners can harness these web tools to accommodate specific learning requirements, using David Weinberger's notion of the web as “small pieces loosely joined” as a guiding principle to create resources that are infinitely configurable and can be tailored to fit any learning need.

5 What are the downsides?

The opportunity to select one's own news suppliers, particularly when that selection is based on shared interests with like-minded others, **can serve as an echo chamber rather than represent a broad view.** Moreover, news postings made in near-real time may lack expert vetting or interpretation. Web users often find it difficult to validate a resource or trace the provenance of information, especially when syndicated information has been redesigned to look native to a recipient site. As a result, the tools of web syndication might create new challenges for properly crediting sources, raising intellectual property concerns.

6 Where is it going?

As web syndication becomes more broadly understood and used, **the proliferation of sharing options promises a more complex future ecosystem.** There will be more pieces of information available and more and better ways of joining that information, allowing pieces to fit together more effectively and enabling increasingly complex conversations among consumers. New tools should also simplify and extend syndication and help content providers manage an ever-broadening stream of updates. Just as some instructors today add notes to e-texts, soon students may routinely highlight passages in the course text, post queries for the instructor, and share comments with classmates, thus initiating discussions that can move seamlessly to a class forum or to social media and potentially into learning environments much larger than a single course or a single university. Content will become more interactive, and the bright line that once divided production from consumption will become increasingly blurred.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Web syndication allows students to become producers of knowledge as well as consumers of information, and it may also encourage them to think more creatively and develop complex analytical skills. Students who build their own information networks are likely to be mindful of the content choices they make and circumspect about the ways they acquire and distribute that content. Students may rely less on textbooks and explore more fully what constitutes useful curation, and courses that use web syndication have the potential to cultivate in students the capacity to critically evaluate content. **Information coming from a wide variety of sources may broaden student learning horizons as it inspires discovery, curation, and sharing.**