

## E-Pollution: Wading Through Mounds of Data

By Wayne Hall



Does absolutely everyone know how to find me?

Between handheld devices that fuse voice and text communications, broadband Internet access that promises no waiting, and wireless technologies that promise no boundaries, I am flooded with new information and

offers everyday. And if I'm not getting information, I'm trying to find it.

This flood of data can needlessly complicate matters, making it sometimes harder rather than easier to make sound decisions.

So, if you are someone who (like me) wants all of the facts before rendering judgment, good luck. It won't happen: new and improved figures are always available. While indispensable, technology sometimes puts too much information within reach for my own good.

Data overload is particularly acute for users of the most popular Internet application, e-mail. This ever more critical communications tool is under an increasing number of attacks, with the worst offenders being writers of malicious code who would love to wipe our computer drives clean, and spammers who fill our e-mail boxes with unwanted sales pitches to fix our bodies and lower our mortgages.

Estimates are that 70 percent or more of e-mail is unsolicited commercial e-mail (a.k.a. "spam"). This data deluge has spawned a thriving industry devoted to shielding us from such unwanted advances as well as viruses and hackers. While these tools are ever improving, we still struggle to get our feet under us as we wade through the river of information flowing around us.

In the aptly titled story "E-serenity, now!" the *Christian Science Monitor* reported last May on a nascent movement called "information environmentalism" that intends to study how data pollution—the everyday electronic clamor for our attention—affects our lives. Fortunately, public administrators, having spent the better part of the past 10 years turning paper processes into electronic exchanges, now have at least one tool to make the right information available to the right people at the right time—syndication.

One syndication format in particular for distributing news and information on the Web that is growing in popularity is "RSS," a variant of HTML. An acronym for Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication (take your pick, both are widely used), this Web programming language is used to make frequently updated information available to those who

merely have to configure their Internet browsers to ask for it.

It works like this: Using software similar to a browser, interested people subscribe to your site (without using their e-mail address) to fetch information as it is updated on the Web site of interest. Subscribers control everything from how often they get updates to the amount of text displayed on their screen. They can also check headlines from multiple sources in one place.

By using syndication, information providers such as businesses, news services and state governments no longer need to send the information to anyone. The added bonuses to this system are that there are no e-mail address lists to keep, hacker attacks aimed at pirating your e-mail lists are eliminated, and the information you provide is regularly delivered to those who really want it.

Syndication has caught the attention of prominent software developers, who will soon incorporate it into Web browsers. Several state governments have begun to use RSS to distribute frequently updated information as well.

Utah, for example, makes new procurement bids available by syndication. Vendors can simply review new information on their computers as it becomes available. There are no Web sites to navigate and no outdated information to wade through. The progress of bills moving through the Utah Legislature has also been syndicated.

In Missouri, agencies can syndicate news feeds through the state portal. The Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau also provides updates using RSS to legislators it serves.

Since e-mail is not used, state government is relieved of the burden of maintaining e-mail lists, which are attractive targets for data thieves. Citizens and colleagues alike can get the information they want when they want it.

Considering syndication's potential, it is surprising that more states have not adopted a policy to syndicate regularly updated information. Add to this the possibility that the RSS method could even restore some civility to electronic information exchanges, and it only seems to be a matter of time before your customers begin asking for syndicated content. This suits me just fine. Because when it comes to online information exchange, please don't call me; I'll call you.

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