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Tip: Postini is good and cost effective.

Blogs, Podcasts, Aggregators & RSS

There are four new technologies that geeks and wanna-be geeks are talking about these days: blogs, podcasts, news aggregators, and RSS. While these four are for the tech-savvy right now, they are very quickly becoming mainstream. We'll try to explain them, why they are important, how to use them, and why they will all become one technology within a year.

What They Are

Blogs are the oldest of these. A blog is like a diary online. Traditional blogs (going all the way back to the late 1990s) are a combination of a writer's thoughts on a subject (not normalized or edited in any way) combined with links to other sites or blogs that the writer finds interesting. Popularity of any given blog is easy to determine in this very democratic medium--each blogger links to other bloggers, and the most linked blogs end up being the most read. Mainstream news is starting to get more into providing blogs online.

Podcasts are technically just a computer file--often an MP3 (like songs), usually in a radio show-like (talk radio) format, that will play on any device or computer that plays music. At first, they were (like blogs) unedited and "indie" but many mainstream news outlets are now publishing podcasts of whole news shows, often even including video for those using computers to keep up on news. Many of these are quite good, sometimes better than real newscasts. Many podcasts are subscriptions (usually free, but some not).

News aggregators allow anyone to choose which news sources they want to keep up with. That tool then collects headlines of the stories for them and provides links to the stories. The big differences between using a news aggregator and just going to NPR is that you choose programming you want, and the tools allow you to get the news from a variety of "stations" (NPR, NYTimes, the Slate, etc.) This is something that just didn't used to be possible, with TV, radio, newspapers, or generally on the Internet. If you use my.yahoo.com to read news, you are already using a news aggregator!

RSS (Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication) is the technology underlying most news aggregators today that

allows tools to go to certain sites, and only grab the recent headlines that haven't been read.

What is so cool about Blogs and Podcasts

Blogs have become the *defacto* editorial medium on the Internet--if you want to know what people think about what is going on, you don't turn to the news, you find a blogger that is commenting about what you're interested in. While they are often still just special interest, the more local and regional or interesting blogs have been gaining a lot of attention (a couple are even noted in Newsweek each week). Mainstream news outlets have picked up on this trend, and despite a few early failed attempts, news outlets are starting to harness the medium in a way that can draw readers to their sites. By providing a pulpit for the better bloggers, mainstream media can often get editorial content for free; bloggers aren't censored (which is against the rules of blogging), although their links can always be turned off.

Like blogs, the first podcasts were home-grown. Since the beginning of 2005, though, they've evolved in two directions. First, when most people talk about podcasts now, they're talking about feeds. You setup software to check certain locations, and you pick up the latest podcasts (like articles) from their sites. Although you can still transfer them to an iPod, many people listen to their feeds on their computers. Second, many mainstream news organizations (NPR, ABC, the Slate, etc.) have been pushing to get all their newscasts (both audio and video) on the web; they're calling these podcasts, as well.

How To Get In On The Cool Stuff

If you know the blog you are looking for, the subject, or the name of the writer, you shouldn't have much trouble finding what you are looking for. Google "blog *subject*" or use www.bloglines.com to find blogs on any subject you could imagine. Bloglines is owned and powered by AskJeeves.

For Podcasts, the most common utility for downloading podcast feeds is called iPodder (free), although there is other software (both free and not) that does the same work. Most of the software integrates with iTunes, although you can get most feed software to work with other programs (like jetAudio, Windows Media Player, or WinAmp) as well. iPodder lists common podcasts for you to choose from, and will automatically download the ones you choose, so that you can listen to them at your leisure. This allows you to use your computer like a radio that plays only the news that you're interested in. Some feeds are free, and some require subscriptions. While



the audio quality of the feeds tends to be good, they vary in the quality of programming. Also some contain ads now.

iPodder provides a directory to help you get started. While many of the podcasts listed in the iPodder directory are tech oriented, this seems to be shifting. A few of the many podcast subscriptions that may be worth checking out:

Late Night with David Letterman (ABC)

MarketPlace (PRI)

In Business (BBC Radio 4)

Also, google "news podcasts" to get TV news stations. Here are a few how-to sites, if you want to start podcasting:

- <http://slate.msn.com/id/2119317/> --site with description of how to get Podcasts
- <http://ipodder.sourceforge.net/index.php> --site to download iPodder software (free)
- http://www.npr.org/rss/podcast/podcast_directory.php --podcasts available from NPR

As far as news aggregators and RSS tools--some are better than others. Searching for RSS feeds is difficult. Best to do, is think of which sources (stations/programs) you want, and see if they have an RSS feed. Searching for feeds will likely improve in the coming months. Here's a quick rundown of the RSS readers and news aggregators:

1. Yahoo news is perhaps the best (didn't know that Yahoo was an RSS tool, eh?). Customizing Yahoo news with my.yahoo.com is a great way to get news stories that you want to read.
2. Two free products (there are many, and these are two of the better ones):
 - SharpReader (XP Only, www.sharpreader.com, version 0.9.6.0)
 - Pluck (www.pluck.com), not bad, but limited
3. Two brand new entries:
 - MSN Start (www.start.com/3/)
 - Google Desktop (not quite a full reader, but the desktop you customize uses fuzzy logic to help pull in feeds from sites you visit. It then discards sites that you don't read, desktop.google.com)

Also check out the following if you'd like to read a little more about using RSS with NRP or the BBC:

<http://www.npr.org/rss>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/help/rss/default.stm>

How These Are Merging

If you know the news sites you want, RSS is a good tool for aggregating them. Blogs are good to read, but hard to find unless you know what you're looking for. Podcasts are great if you know which ones you want to subscribe to.

But why can't they all be in one tool that aggregates regular news stories, blogs, and podcasts? The answer is that they can. Google desktop is already starting to move that way (although it is still youthful).

Over the next few months, we'll likely see improvements in products that help you set these up more easily, do real searches for feeds across different types of media, and that allow you to use one tool to search and get updates from multiple media types.

Price Watch

In the last few months, we've seen dramatic drops in component prices. Hard disks and RAM are less than 1/2 what they were in May, and 17" and 19" monitors have likewise dropped significantly. Also, all but a few of the processor chips have dropped with Intel starting large-scale production of dual-core chips in the last couple of months. Also, competition between vendors has caused significant drops in laptop pricing--especially Dells. What does all this mean?

- Now is the right time to buy desktops, high-end workstations, laptops under \$2,000, and especially servers. Prices will likely stay low until around year end (high-end laptops have been stable in the last year).
- Hold off on buying plasma and LCD TVs until just before the holidays or just after the Super Bowl--there are strong indications that big price drops are coming on 42", 50", and 52" models of Plasma/LCD flat panels.
- Buy 17" and 19" LCDs now. Forget about 15" flat panels--the 17" are only a little more.
- Put at least 1GB or RAM into all desktops and 2-4GB of RAM into all servers
- Buy large hard drives for backup--now is the time!
- If you can wait for that new gadget, hold out until Christmas season to buy iPods, speakers, stereos and other consumer electronics and devices--many new models are coming out now, and in a month, competition for Christmas customers should significantly reduce prices.
- Get Treo 650s--they are down to \$229-\$289 (depending on carrier, and with a 2 year agreement). They probably won't drop a lot more, until the next generation product is out. Next generation Treos are rumored to be Microsoft based--it may be a year or longer, and that date may be for early adopters.



Iteon News

We're sure everyone has noticed that Iteon is growing. Raza Micic has taken over our office (quite literally, which is a good thing!). Marcin Grela has come here from Europe (Spain and Poland) to join our technical team, bringing great experience with both Windows and Linux operating systems. Of course, all of you also know that we have a new office at 74 Tehama St., 2 blocks South of Market in San Francisco. Please do come by and join us for an espresso! We look forward to seeing you. And, as always, thanks for your business and your referrals.

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