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LOOSE WIRE

By JEREMY WAGSTAFF



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How to Read 35 Million Blogs

EMAIL PRINT MOST POPULAR

With So Much to Keep Track of, Here's a Little Help in Narrowing the Options

May 19, 2006

The blogging revolution is about five years old now, and already it's out of control.

Blogs, or Web-based journals, have proved wildly popular; the total number out there is doubling every six months, according to Technorati Inc., a company that tracks more than 35 million of them. And this creates a problem: How can anyone find what they want among all that information?

Of course, it isn't as if we don't have tools to help: Most blogs nowadays -- and a lot of mainstream Web sites, including parts of the site of this newspaper -- are available as RSS feeds (which stands for either Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary, depending on whom you ask). These allow you to subscribe to those blogs you like and receive updates from them without having to repeatedly revisit them, via a browser or a separate program called a news reader, which collects the feeds together rather like an email program collects your emails. But all this has done is make it easier to add more stuff to our growing list of what we feel we need to read.

A recent case in point: Monday morning, I again tackled my blog surplus. As I started looking through the blogs I track to decide which ones to weed out, I got reading. And following links. Within half an hour, I had removed three blogs but added nine new ones. By lunchtime I had committed myself to 274 feeds -- 17 more than I had started the day with -- containing 3,624 items. But hey, it isn't hopeless. I only have 3,582 more blog posts to read. At present reading speeds, and assuming nothing happens between now and then, I should be up to speed by November 2033.

This is the problem with blogs. They're too good. Sure, among those 35 million-plus there are probably some real turkeys. But find one good one, and you'll

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quickly find dozens more. By definition, each blog isn't hermetically sealed, since it contains links to other blogs. Like me, you'll get sucked in very quickly, following links like paper trails until the early hours.

The challenge, then, is to turn the blogging world into a place where you're only able to read what you can manage, and to ensure that what you're reading is the best there is on the subject.

One solution: [BlogBridge](#). On one level it's just another (free) news reader. It lets you collect and organize RSS feeds into folders according to theme (Technology, Sport, Squirrel Waterskiing, etc.). But BlogBridge goes further.

First off, BlogBridge calls its folders "Guides" or "Reading Lists." These aren't just static collections of feeds, but are lists carefully collated by experts in the relevant fields, whose credentials you can read on the site. Instead of subscribing to a single feed, you subscribe to an expert's Guide or Reading List. Conversely, if you felt you were an expert on Squirrel Waterskiing, you could share your list of exciting blogs and other feeds on the subject as a Reading List, allowing other Squirrel Waterskiing enthusiasts to download it into their BlogBridge program.

Nothing too revolutionary here, since it is already possible to share groups of feeds, although only really for the seriously nerdy fringe. But one of the neat tricks with BlogBridge is that any Reading List you subscribe to can be dynamically updated. If the expert in any particular field decides to replace one feed with another, or add a feed, those changes will automatically be reflected in your Guide. The responsibility for monitoring those 35 million-plus blogs (and the millions of other RSS feeds out there) has shifted from the reader to a sort of uber-reader, the informal expert who has put the Guide together. As the guy behind BlogBridge, Pito Salas, puts it: "This is a bit like being a publisher, but in the blog mentality of being decentralized."

It isn't perfect. BlogBridge is Java-based, meaning that it will work on all platforms, but also that it isn't overly pretty to look at. Subscribing to a list could be easier. And right now there aren't that many lists to choose from. There's a danger that BlogBridge ends up getting swamped with bad lists, or too many lists, or lists that aren't what people are looking for. And, of course, there's still the danger you'll get swamped with more than you can ever read.

Still, I suggest you check it out, whether you're new to RSS or not. Don't get too excited about the Squirrel Waterskiing list though; I'm still working on it.

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