

EDiplomacy Op-Ed

## **It's Real Simple**

by Emily Sopensky

Until recently, keeping abreast of current events was as simple as tuning to CNN. In fact, the Department has sometimes measured its responsiveness to world news in how quickly it reacts to fast-breaking, frontline news broadcast by CNN.

But creeping into everyday vernacular is another way of staying current. RSS, or Really Simple Syndication, is a means of receiving headline news from many news and web log sites. Tailoring an Internet connection – be it a desktop, smartphone or PDA -- to accept RSS feeds is as simple as downloading a free RSS reader.

The beauty of RSS is that the user can pick and choose the news sources as well as the frequency for receiving the feeds. Reading the news is like reading email. While the visuals that CNN provides are immediate and often lasting, news feeds from RSS are searchable and archivable.

Generally, sites display a pictogram ( **XML** or **RSS** ) on their web pages to indicate they provide RSS-ready news. Sites generating RSS feeds include state.gov and the International Information Program's Washington File that goes to overseas audiences. State.gov recently added RSS-ready news, such as press briefings, press releases, and remarks by the Secretary of State. Even the interagency OSIS uses RSS feeds on the home page.

But here's the rub. Inside the State Department, getting RSS feeds is by exception rather than rule.

"It's nice to see State.gov jumping on to the RSS bandwagon. Now I just wish I could install an RSS news reader on my OpenNet+ workstation," says a State officer in Guangzhou.

No RSS reader has been approved for the baseline configuration, so none can be downloaded. In contrast, to watch CNN, you need a TV, a place to plug in, and a signal unhindered by the physical infrastructure's thick, secure walls – a far more expensive and physically challenging solution to staying on top of world events.

A workaround is to use Bloglines to get access to information as one analyst in the Economic Bureau is doing. However, he says: I rely on a number of RSS-enabled websites to give me information on telecom developments throughout South and East Asia. It would be useful and nice if RSS gave me just another folder next to my email to review several times a day.

Having an automatic news aggregator certainly is more efficient than visiting dozens of websites daily on trigger subjects.

For those publishing websites or even newsletters, being able to generate up to the minute headline news is a valuable time-saver. Whether RSS is used to produce State news internally on the ClassNet, OpenNet or OpenNet+, the department should approve for the baseline at the very minimum an RSS reader for widespread use and for more limited distribution, an RSS application.

Enabling the analyst or foreign service officer to be more effective is at the heart of this suggestion. The minimal cost of approving the reader for the baseline information technology configuration is more than offset by the ease of staying current and being informed.

As one officer puts it: "Saving even a few minutes a day by having everything in one convenient place is very nice."

We encourage the Chief Technology Officer to actively seek approval from the IT Change Control Board to put at least one free reader onto the baseline.

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