
Taking the pain out of your RSS

Joe Hilton

Project Manager – ticTOCs,

University of Liverpool

Tel: 07807 106 509

E-mail: jo555@liverpool.ac.uk

Roddy MacLeod

Senior Subject Librarian,

Heriot-Watt University

Tel: 0131 451 3576

E-mail: R.A.MacLeod@hw.ac.uk

The aim of the ticTOCs project is to develop a service which will transform journal current awareness by making it easy for academics to find, display, store, combine and re-use journal tables of contents (TOCs) from multiple publishers in a personalisable web-based environment.

JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) is the primary funder of the ticTOCs project, which will run for two years from April 2007. Fifteen partners are involved in the project. Led by the University of Liverpool Library, the consortium also includes Heriot-Watt University, Cranfield University, CrossRef, ProQuest, RefWorks, Emerald, Nature Publishing Group, SAGE Publishers, Institute of Physics, Inderscience Publishers, MIMAS, Directory of Open Access Journals, Open J-Gate and Intute.

The ticTOCs project was born from an inspired idea of Roddy MacLeod of Heriot-Watt University (<http://www.hw.ac.uk/libwww/libram/rodody.html>). Roddy identified the potential for exploiting existing technology to create an online directory of publisher journal table of contents RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds.

The project name, ticTOCs, is not as mystical as it first appears. The term 'TOCs' is merely an abbreviation for a journal's 'Table of Contents'. The 'tic' in ticTOCs stems from the fact that users will merely have to tick the TOC they wish to view and subscribe to. It is this 'simplicity' which, it is hoped, will contribute to the success of the project. The ticTOCs service will enable academics, researchers and anyone else to discover, subscribe to, search within, export and re-use standardised journal table of contents RSS feeds and their

content for thousands of journals from numerous publishers without having to understand the technical or procedural concepts involved in the process. In addition, it will facilitate the re-use of aggregated journal TOC content on a subject basis by gateways, subject-based resource discovery services, library services and others, where it can act as a showcase of the latest research output. It will also make it easy for users of library and information services, commercial and open-access journal publishers, online gateways, content aggregators and journal directories to subscribe to journal TOC RSS feeds of interest, with one click, via a freely available personalisable web-based interface. The ticTOCs service will also be encouraging the production of standardised journal TOC RSS feeds, and will thereby facilitate their interoperability and improve the quality of their data.

Efficient journal current awareness services are of the highest importance to researchers and academics, whatever their discipline. Ensuring efficient and easy access to the contents of the latest journal publications is also important for publishers of scholarly journals, a business that is estimated to be worth \$5 billion per annum. Authors of articles in scholarly publications also want their output to be available to as wide an audience as possible, as soon after publication as possible.

At the present time, the contents of latest issues are 'discovered' in various ways. This is, of course, known as journal current awareness. None of the existing discovery methods have demonstrated themselves to be particularly efficient.

Current discovery methods include:

- 1 Physically browsing current issues or photocopies of tables of contents: this suits some users, but is declining as the importance of print journals declines.
- 2 Browsing latest issues online via publishers' websites, or aggregator websites: this method does serve a purpose for those who adopt it, but can be time-consuming and is not efficient.
- 3 E-mail table of contents alerts: these are very popular and considered effective by a number of those who use them. There are various problems, however – for example, there are numerous services; services sometimes change; publishers change; titles move; extra-registrations and passwords may be necessary; re-registration may be necessary; users move. Therefore there are administrative overheads involved in using e-mail table of contents services. Some people also report

being 'haunted by alerts' and 'self-inflicted spam'.

- 4 RSS feeds of TOCs: in March 2005 there were 1139 journal TOC RSS feeds available from 13 publishers, and by October 2006 this had risen to 7042 feeds from 38 publishers. Today there are even more. In addition, there are third-party feeds from services such as Zetoc and Ingenta. Today, therefore, there are metadata syndication possibilities for TOCs. The way it works just now suits some people; however, it requires some understanding of the concepts, and can be confusing. There are various publisher websites and feeds and aggregator feeds, various desktop readers and web-based readers and various confusing icons. There is little standardisation and the process requires some effort and understanding, and is therefore not very user-friendly.

The ticTOCs project intends to take advantage of recent technological developments and Web 2.0 possibilities and make this process much more user-friendly.

Use of RSS for the distribution and receipt of frequently updated online content of various kinds is becoming increasingly widespread. Originally associated with the syndication of news headlines and blog entries, RSS can be used in conjunction with most kinds of regularly updated information. RSS has, therefore, enormous potential as a current awareness tool.

RSS has certain advantages over e-mail as a way to be alerted to TOCs. For example, using RSS, it is not necessary to register at external publisher sites and remember additional usernames and passwords. TOC RSS feeds include direct links to articles, and RSS is less intrusive as an alerting method – you can look at your TOC alerts whenever you like. Also it is usually much easier to unsubscribe from an RSS feed than from an e-mail alerting service.

However, there is the issue of locating TOC RSS feeds for particular journals. An academic may be interested in a number of journals from a variety of publishers, and to retrieve all relevant feeds may require some effort. A certain level of understanding of the actual process of subscribing to RSS feeds, via a desktop or web-based reader, is necessary to make the most of the protocol, and then there is the issue of feed versions (RSS 1.0, RSS 2.0, RSS 0.91, Atom), plus the differing RSS icons and terminology sometimes used by publishers.

In order to overcome all of this, one option might be to 'force-feed' all academics and others with

information about RSS, in order that they can subsequently make the most of what is obviously a useful protocol. A completely different option, however, has been adopted by the ticTOCs project.

The ticTOCs approach will be to cut through the jargon, the 'techno-speak' and to simplify the whole process so that even somebody with few or no IT skills can use and benefit from the service.

Put simply, the intention is that a user arrives at the site <http://www.tictocs.ac.uk>. After a simple registration process (if they want to save their data) or simply visiting as a guest (if they do not), they can then conduct a journal search by title, publisher or subject. The results of the search query are displayed and the user can browse through the results. Then, to subscribe to any of the TOCs they just need to tick the TOCs they require and these will be added to their account, which they can view as and when it suits them. They will be able to add and remove TOCs from their account whenever they feel it necessary. The user will be in control and by a simple process of, shall we say, 'click & tick' they will have access to literally thousands of journal TOC feeds, available to them in one place.

Since the project was launched and some minimal publicity undertaken, interest from publishers wanting to include their TOC feeds into ticTOCs has been overwhelming. The degree of interest has caught us unawares but we should not be too surprised. The benefits of the ticTOCs service to all three types of stakeholder – researchers, publishers and authors – will be immeasurable. Both the demand and supply sides of the journals market stand to reap the rewards brought about by the service.

A public pilot version is expected to be launched in April 2008.

For further details, information and progress updates you can visit our public blog at: <http://tictocsnews.wordpress.com/> or contact: Joe Hilton (jo555@liverpool.ac.uk), Roddy MacLeod (r.a.macleod@hw.ac.uk) or Terry Bucknell (t.d.bucknell@liverpool.ac.uk)