

## Potential Benefits from Utilization of RSS Enabled Web Technologies Within Japanese SMEs and Higher Education

日本の中小企業および高等教育で活用可能な  
RSSウェブ技術による将来的な便益

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### Introduction

Kenneth Tsuye and Paul Walsh initially came to look at the subject of the application of Internet based tools which utilize RSS technology in academic and educational contexts and in Small/Medium Enterprises (SMEs) while collaborating on a podcasting project which was part requirement of Mr. Tsuye's 2004-5 STEP Global Entrepreneurship course at Hiroshima University of Economics. In this project two student teams produced two audio podcasts which were made available for download from the public Internet via a local web magazine site located at <http://www.gethiroshima.com/>.

The presentation portion of the workshop aimed, somewhat ambitiously as it turned out, to provide a general background to today's 'Web 2.0' Internet and the place of RSS and podcasting within it, how many of the features offered by today's Internet can be easily and usefully utilized in academic and educational

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settings in general, and to outline more specifically the direction of proposed future research. In the final part of the workshop, participants divided into two groups to discuss and provide feedback on the practical application of the technologies discussed, and on the possible research methodologies.

## **Background**

Today's Internet is markedly different to that of even as recent as the late 1990s. There is much debate as to the appropriateness of the term Web 2.0, often used to describe today's Internet, but the term 'The Living Web', coined by a Newsweek cover story in April 2006, seems to sum up well the shift towards an Internet characterized by participation and collaboration where the distinction between content providers and users is becoming increasingly blurred. A key feature of today's Internet that it is now almost as easy to contribute content as it is to consume it. Two examples serve to illustrate the contrasts between the new web and the 'old'.

The first is the shift from personal websites to weblogs, or blogs as they are more commonly known. Blogs are basically personal websites chronologically organized, often in a journal-style format. What makes blogs significant is that where it used to require at least some programming skills and a considerable time commitment to produce one's own website, it is now possible for anyone with skills no more technical than the ability to use a web browser or email software to produce their own template based web site in just a few minutes at little or no cost.

Wikipedia is the world's best know wiki. Wikis are a type of website that allow users to author, edit or even remove content quickly and easily, making them useful collaborative writing tools that, as the number of individual wiki pages, interconnected by hyperlinks, increases, can become easy-to-use user-maintained databases for searching information. By leveraging the willingness of its users to contribute and monitor its site Wikipedia is providing a challenge to more traditional providers of information databases such as Britannica

Online. Wikipedia illustrates well the shift in role of the Internet from giant online library to 'global conversation' in which the user not only consumes content, but also produces it.

An Internet in which everyone is a potential contributor means increasingly that however obscure the subject may be, there is likely to be a website/blog devoted to it, and if there isn't, one can be created within minutes. The downside is that finding the content we want becomes increasingly difficult.

RSS is a technology which helps to not merely to find content we want to access, but, as Warlick writes, to "train the information to find you".

## **Introduction to RSS**

The most common rendering of the acronym RSS is 'Really Simple Syndication'. A technology that has been around for some time, it has garnered a lot of attention recently due to the proliferation of blogs. It may indeed be 'really simple', but clear and concise definitions are hard to come by. Marketing guru Seth Godin's definition is one of the clearest :

"RSS is just a signal that comes from a favorite blog or site, telling your computer that it has been updated. If you have an RSS reader, whenever a blog is updated, it shows up in your reader and you can catch up on the news. If there's nothing new, it doesn't show up and you don't have to waste time surfing around."

If web pages -be they blog pages, wikis or any other kind of page- are programmed to generate RSS (XML) files which can be detected by feed aggregators (either special desktop or web based software packages, or built into browsers such as Firefox and Safari) users who subscribe to these sites can be informed as and when they have been updated. This makes it unnecessary to check one's favorite web sites, or websites one is obliged to check daily for updates as one is automatically informed whenever there is new content.

## **Practical uses of RSS in academic/educational settings**

RSS has great potential for use by academics, both in research and in the classroom.

### 1. News

The chronological nature of news articles and their general format of headline, followed by brief synopsis, followed by main text make RSS ideally suited for the collection of news feeds. Setting up news feed through a service such as Google (<http://news.google.com/>) on a given research topic, or current theme being studied in a class means that any news story that, in this case, is indexed by Google will be sent direct to your computer. This allows you to browse the headlines and pick and choose which articles you read in full. Students can of course also set up news feeds related to topics they are currently studying.

### 2. Weblogs

Similarly, the chronological organization of most blogs makes them also well suited to using RSS to keep track of many blog sites efficiently. Subscribe to a blog and you will be notified whenever a new post or even a comment to a post on that blog has been published. This makes it easy to keep up to date with many blogs without having to visit and check if they have been updated each day. As well as making it easier to keep track of blogs that cover one's areas of interest, blogs (especially those that are trying to establish themselves, fighting for recognition among the thousands of new blogs created every day) are more likely to be visited if they do not have to rely upon their audience remembering to take the time to check if the blog has been updated. Taking an example close to home, I was pleased to see that blogs have been set up for each of Hiroshima University of Economics' Koudoukan projects. Despite having a personal interest in the activity of these groups, it is rare that I feel I have the time to check the blogs for any new content that may (or may not) have been published recently. If, however, such posts were to appear in my RSS reader I would be far more likely to visit the blogs and, even if not, be aware at least

of the latest ‘headlines’.

### 3. Podcasts

The term podcast generally refers to an audio file that can be downloaded and listened to on a mobile device or computer. RSS technology means that if one subscribes to a podcast one is not only notified of new updates, but those audio files can be downloaded automatically to a computer and or mobile audio device. The English department at Osaka Jyogakuin University was one of, if not the, first educational institution in the world to utilize downloadable audio files in its teaching of English language. In 2004 mobile audio devices were distributed to new students at the entrance ceremony and it was required that they listened to them audio files before classes started. Students were able to listen to the audio files on their long commutes to and from school and English teaching staff have reported a noticeable improvement in grammar and pronunciation.

The potential uses of Podcast technology in educational settings are many, including making course or guest lectures available for download on demand, diffusing the vision of the institution’s president and, of course, student created ‘programs’.

## **Practical implications of RSS in the Japanese workplace**

Why is the utilization of RSS and its intertwined web technologies important? In a nutshell ; efficient use of time and resource allocation within the business workplace. An example raised during this workshop was - can increased proliferation of audio only podcasts or video podcasts supplant or enhance the Japanese tradition of *chourei*?

Chourei is loosely defined as the morning orientation held in a majority of white and blue collar firms across Japan. Each division or section’s chourei is lead by a section chief or division manager, what most North American-based management might define as a morning pep talk to the troops, so to speak.

A majority of workshop participants agreed this approach of utilizing the RSS function built in to any podcast – i.e. on demand choureï ; uploaded by any section manager may be especially time/resource efficient, in particular when applied to the sales function of an organization.

## **Research**

### **Collection and collation of data?**

Some methods suggested were:

1. Web-based questionnaire.
2. Skype-based audio or video supplemented interview(s).
3. Descriptive statistical methods if it were questionnaire-based.
- 4..Non-descriptive methodology also added if the study were interview based.

### **Closing Comments and Future Implications for Further Research**

Developing quality research models which report on the implementation of RSS based web technologies- like audio or video podcasting, within the Japanese workplace is a long-term proposition even though the need may be immediate. Meaningful modeling will require sound theoretical foundations as well as knowledgeable and motivated research personnel.

To that end, podcast only related research should be questioned as whether it should be focused solely on its merits alone or in combination with other on-demand RSS driven technologies, like traditional web blogs. Furthermore, the effects of cross cultural variables in the way information is disseminated in Japan and North American should be examined.

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