Book Reviews

Coming to Grips with RSS Feeds and Standards

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*Developing Feeds with RSS and Atom*

Ben Hammersley  
270 pages  
US$39.95  
O’Reilly, 2005  
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Content syndication has exploded on the Internet owing to the sheer volume of material available and the desire to personalize the information that individual users see. In *Developing Feeds with RSS and Atom*, Ben Hammersley presents two major technologies at the forefront of content syndication: RSS and Atom. Coming to grips with RSS standards is, quite honestly, a nightmare. Hammersley provides an excellent brief history on the development of the many standards and their origins.

By the time you finish reading the introduction, you feel as if you’ve walked into an ongoing family dispute and need to take sides. Which standard you choose will likely depend on your needs and the type of content you wish to syndicate, but Hammersley mainly focuses on RSS 1.0, RSS 2.0, and the Atom Syndication Format. This book will lead you through these standards, with explanations and examples of each. It should be in the library of any serious Web developer or site author providing or using content feeds. However, it shouldn’t be your only book; you’ll need other resources to provide deeper detail for your chosen standard and probably a good solution cookbook for your chosen development language.

**Audience**

The first question I always ask when reviewing books is, “Who is the target audience?” This book is definitely not for the beginner. Although it includes a great appendix titled “The XML You Need for RSS,” you shouldn’t infer that this is a primer for the neophyte. This book is for experienced Web developers and site authors. Although it covers the major standards and provides examples, be aware that most of these examples are in Perl, which could cause the book to lose much of its potential audience.

**Completeness**

When considering this book’s completeness, I asked myself how easily the right audience could go off and be productive after reading it. There’s no question that Hammersley does a great job in laying out the potential for content syndication and providing specific tools to do it. The chapter “Unconventional Feeds” is a case in point. It provides some great ideas for using content syndication that aren’t limited to blogs and news but cover aspects such as Google to RSS with SOAP.

However, although Hammersley covers the breadth of this topic area very well, some of the depth is lacking. You’ll definitely need additional source material, even if it’s to resolve the still (at time of publication) changing standards. (Microsoft’s adoption of RSS 2.0 in Internet Explorer 7, however, might now be a major driver in your choice of standards.) The breadth of coverage shouldn’t be
belittled. Hammersley covers standards very well and also includes chapters such as "Parsing and Using Feeds," "RSS 1.0 Modules," and "Developing New Modules."

This isn’t a cookbook of solutions for content syndication. It provides many of the ingredients, but you’ll still need to do some cooking to develop good, usable content feeds. The focus on Perl in the examples cause many readers to look for additional material related to their chosen development language—if not for a better understanding then certainly to speed up their own development process.

If you’re looking for a better understanding of and insight into content syndication, Developing Feeds with RSS and Atom is one for your library. If you’re new to the topic, you should do some reading and experimenting first, but this book should be on your wish list.

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**Related Links**

- DS Online's Web Systems community (cms://dsonline/topics/was/index.xml)

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