

Under Surveillance: Teaching Topic Monitoring as a Research Skill with RSS Feeds and Email Alerts

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RSS feeds and email alerts are ubiquitous monitoring tools often overlooked or unknown to students. Those who do use RSS feed readers may not notice how easy they are to use with library resources, nor how they can be used to support research. When librarians teach students about monitoring tools and guide them to appropriate feeds, they empower their students with the tools, skills, and content that helps them choose the sources from which they learn.

A theoretical justification for teaching monitoring skills as part of the research process can be found in Bates' model for information seeking and searching, which classifies all related activities into four major behaviors: searching, browsing, monitoring, and being aware. Searching is active and directed, browsing is active but undirected, monitoring is passive but directed, and being aware is both passive and undirected. Monitoring is searching's passive companion, and when practiced, it develops the advanced literacy skills of skimming, scanning, pattern recognition and keyword selection. A simple lesson in finding and creating RSS feeds and email alerts, along with instruction in setting up feed readers will help students to use library resources routinely without the need to search.

RSS feeds and email alerts provide methods to make the monitoring process systematic and relatively easy. These two tools taught in tandem provide options for users with different technical needs and abilities. Email alerts use a technology all users know, and are ideal for those who have email open all day and want to monitor particular sources. RSS feeds are especially useful for mobile users, for those monitoring multiple sources, and for tagging, saving, sharing, and taking notes on important content. Librarians can teach users how to set up RSS feed readers, show them how to find and create alerts and feeds, and suggest useful feeds and sources for specific courses and topics. Content and course management systems allow for easy integration of RSS feeds onto guides or course sites, and librarians can create "RSS starter packs" for courses. When the author has collaborated with teaching faculty in providing this instruction, students appreciate the cost saving benefits of using library sources instead of subscriptions, enjoy the passive process of receiving content from news sources, continue to use feeds for both formal and informal learning after their courses, and prefer using these technological tools to help them follow topics and stay informed. Librarians who integrate RSS feeds and email alerts in their library instruction will address an important research skill, provide alternative methods for delivering library resources, and empower students with tools for lifelong learning.