

Tales from the Terminal Room

January 2005, Issue No. 59

Editor: Karen Blakeman
Published by: RBA Information Services
ISSN 1467-338X

<http://www.rba.co.uk/tftr/>

Tales from the Terminal Room (TFTR) is a monthly newsletter, with the exception of July and August which are published as a single issue. TFTR includes reviews and comparisons of information sources; search tools; resources dealing with technical and access problems on the Net; and news of RBA's training courses and publications.

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RSS

Regular readers of the web based version of Tales from the Terminal Room will have spotted that TftTR is now available as an RSS feed at <http://www.rba.co.uk/rss/tfttr.xml>. One of the advantages of RSS feeds is that newsletters such as this one do not have to run the gauntlet of processed luncheon meat filters on recipients' mailservers. If you are new to RSS and would like to give it a go, here is an FAQ on the topic.

What is RSS?

RSS can stand for Rich Site Summary, RDF Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication. It is a way of delivering news and headlines direct to you, the reader.

How is it different from email alerts?

RSS feeds are designed to be read by RSS aware programs, sometimes called feed readers or news aggregators. This means that all your news alerts can be gathered together in a single location rather than clutter up your inbox with dozens of separate messages. Email newsletters and alerts are often blocked by pink gunge filters on mail servers: RSS feeds are not. When you no longer want the feed, you just delete it from your RSS reader: with email alerts you have to go through an unsubscribe procedure that is not always obvious – especially if you have lost the instructions or changed your email address.

Won't I be inundated with headlines all the time?

A good RSS reader will allow you to specify how often your feeds are updated and how long headlines are to be archived. You choose when to view your news. When you no longer need the feed, just delete it.

How can I tell if a news service or web site has an RSS feed?

Look for the XML or RSS icons. Most of the major services such as the BBC, Yahoo News and Moreover offer feeds in this format.

Do I get the full stories or just the headlines?

You usually receive just the headlines and excerpts, for example the first couple of lines or sentences. It depends on how the author of the RSS feed has set it up and also which reader you use. There is normally a link attached to each item so that you can view the whole article, either within the reader or your browser.

What do I need in order to read RSS feeds?

Web based readers

Bloglines (<http://www.bloglines.com/>) is a free web based feed reader. It has the advantage that you can access your feeds from any Internet terminal.

Stand-alone readers

If you prefer headlines to be stored on your desktop there are many stand alone applications for your computer. Try FeedReader (<http://www.feedReader.com/>) which is free or FeedReader (<http://www.feedReader.com/>).

Firefox and Thunderbird

Both Firefox (<http://www.mozilla.org/products/firefox/>) and Thunderbird (<http://www.mozilla.org/products/thunderbird/>) have "Live Bookmarks" that enable you to store the URL of the feed and view RSS headlines.

In Firefox go to Bookmarks, Manage Bookmarks, File, New Live Bookmark and enter the URL of the feed.

In Thunderbird go to Tools, Account Settings, Add Account, RSS News & Blogs.

How do I get the feed into my reader? When I click on the link in my browser it's unreadable.

When you arrive at the "unreadable" page copy the URL in the address box of your browser. Then open your RSS reader, choose the option for setting up a new feed and paste the URL into the relevant box. Some services display the URL as ordinary text on their information page so that you can do a straightforward copy and paste.

Further information

There is a very useful RSS primer for publishers and content providers by Malcolm Moffat on the EEVL web site at http://www.eevl.ac.uk/rss_primer/. Also take a look at RSS for Non-Techie Librarian by Steven M. Cohen at <http://www.llrx.com/features/rssforlibrarians.htm>

Some RSS feed sites to get you started

Moreover <http://www.moreover.com/rss/>
BBC <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>
Syndic8 <http://www.syndic8.com/feedcat.php>
Feedster <http://www.feedster.com/>

Firefox takes on IE

<http://www.mozilla.org/products/firefox/>

2004 saw Microsoft's Internet Explorer come under fire and it looks as though IE's share of the browser market will continue to fall in 2005. IE is a prime target for hackers and the regular security scares have sent users looking for a more secure alternative. Firefox has become the most popular alternative. It is inherently more secure but not immune. As its popularity grows hackers will no doubt turn their attention to Firefox, but its programmers have always been quick to respond to alerts and produce patches.

There have been 25 million downloads to date and various web site visitor statistics show that between 7 and 15 per cent of us are already using Firefox. As well as being more secure than IE, it is faster and has some excellent features:

- When installing you can copy all of your IE data across, such as favorites and passwords
- Downloading is much faster
- Tabbing – stay in one browser window and open up new tabs to go to different pages
- The pop-up blocking is better than IE
- Live bookmarks - Useful if you take RSS feeds

If you want to add extra features or functions there is a host of free extensions (plug-ins). My own favourites are:

- Adblock to block adverts
<http://adblock.mozdev.org>
- Copy URL <http://copyurlplus.mozdev.org/> for cutting and pasting URLs and page titles in one go
- Google toolbar available at
<http://googlebar.mozdev.org/>
- Nuke Anything
<http://ted.mielczarek.org/code/mozilla/> Kills annoying elements of a page such as images, flash – useful when printing out "busy" pages
- User Agent Switcher
<https://addons.update.mozilla.org/extensions/> Fools annoying web sites that insist on you using IE that Firefox is IE.
- Web Developer Extension
<http://www.chrispederick.com/work/firefox/webdeveloper/> One mainly for those who author web pages but has useful features for ignoring style sheets attached to pages to improve accessibility.

Internet Librarian International - Call for Speakers

<http://www.internet-librarian.com/index.shtml>

The 7th annual Internet Librarian International has been announced and will be held on Monday and Tuesday, 10-11 October, 2005 at London's Copthorne Tara Hotel in Kensington. The Call for Speakers and a submission form are on the web site.

The conference will cover Internet Research, Web Design & Development, E-Resources & Digital Libraries, Collaboration Tools & Strategies, Library Technology Planning & Trends, International Library Issues & Initiatives, Information Resources & Tools

Search Engine News

Google

Google has increased the limit on the number of terms that you can have your search strategy from 10 to 32. As several people have commented, this is long overdue and means that one can use more complex and precise search strategies. It will also make searching on lengthy quotations much easier.

MSN Search out of beta

MSN search is out of "beta" and on the main MSN site at <http://www.msn.com/>. The News search now offers RSS feeds for alerts; these are provided by Moreover.

Exalead

<http://www.exalead.com/>

Exalead is a relatively new search engine launched in October 2004. With 1 billion Web pages in its index it may seem small in comparison with the likes of Google, who claim to have 8 billion pages, but the quality of Exalead is excellent and there are some cracking good search features.

For starters it supports wild cards (an asterisk) that can be used to represent any number of letters after a specified string of letters. Then there is word stemming that can be set as the default under preferences, and which finds the variants of a word such as plural/singular and verb conjugations.

If you are not sure how to spell a word try phonetic search or the approximate spelling search on the Advanced Search screen. Another approach is to use the pattern matching feature. Begin and end the "pattern" with a forward slash (/) and use a full stop or period to represent single characters in the pattern. If you are not sure how many characters are in the middle of a word use the full stop followed by an asterisk (*). The help file suggests that pattern matching is ideal for solving [should that be 'cheating at?'] crossword puzzles!

Full Boolean search is supported (AND, OR, NOT) and there is a proximity command, NEAR, that will search for words within 16 terms of one another. Filetype, country and

language search options are supported. RSS and blog search options are promised for the near future.

You can both search and sort by date but be warned that this is never reliable. The date assigned to a page is when it is loaded or reloaded onto the web server, and some pages always give today's date.

The results page is pretty nifty too. The usual list of results is augmented with a snapshot of each web page (you can switch this off if you prefer or just display the snapshots), suggestions for related terms, options to view the results by geographical location and file type (for example .doc, .pdf, .xls).

Highly recommended.

Yahoo Desktop launched

<http://desktop.yahoo.com/>

Yahoo is the latest search engine to launch a desktop search program and in my opinion it is by far the best. It searches the usual "popular" file formats such as PDF, Microsoft Office, html etc plus "over 200 more". A full list can be found at <http://desktop.yahoo.com/filetypes>.

It retrieves any file on your computer, regardless of where it has been stored and displays results as you type. The preview option is excellent and most files look exactly as they should for example Excel looks like Excel.

In my tests, it found all the files containing the text I specified, including files without extensions and my Open Office files. My only gripe is that when it is indexing your files, it takes a while to realise that you have started accessing other files before it pauses.

Requires Windows XP or Windows 2000 SP 3+

Information Resources

Bureau van Dijk - Inview

Global analysis of equity investment funds
<http://www.bvdep.com/>

Published in conjunction with Heale Financial, Bureau van Dijk's Inview is now available online. Inview presents a global analysis of equity-holding investment funds and the quoted companies in which they invest. You can view the detailed institutional shareholdings of companies around the world or analyse the objectives, strategy and investments of individual funds. Coverage is global and sourced from a variety of areas. For example, Spanish, Luxembourg, German, Portuguese and US data comes from the regulatory bodies and their associates, whilst UK, Latin American and Asian data tends to come from the fund managers themselves.

Heale Financial estimates that Inview covers over 85% of equity holding mutual funds globally with comprehensive coverage of Europe and emerging markets in addition to countries where the filing of such information is mandatory.

You can search by several criteria including type and characteristics, investment type, main asset allocation, status and net asset value plus sector, market and region. Graphs and tables can be created that display the evolution of the fund and compare funds against other funds. Over a hundred search criteria can be combined to help identify companies and funds that match very specific criteria. You can also link to detailed company reports on BvD's global database of listed companies, Osiris.

This is a priced service but a free trial is available.

DASH now available online

<http://www.bvdep.com/>

Bureau van Dijk's DASH - Directors and Shareholders - is now available online. DASH is a comprehensive database of UK companies, directors and shareholders and the links between them. Reports are included for 3.2 million companies (1.3 million of which are primary records), 5.3 million directors (3 million of which are primary records) and 2.6 million shareholders. There is also information on 490,000 unincorporated

businesses, 1 million contacts such as sales manager or purchasing supervisor plus 300,000 branch addresses for companies. Priced service - free trial available.

Answers.com

<http://www.answers.com/>

GuruNet has launched a free reference service called Answers.com offering "the best definitions and explanations for over 1 million topics". Information on people, places, words and names is drawn from dictionaries, encyclopaedias and selected web sites.

A search on Winnie the Pooh came up with information gleaned from Who2, the New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, and Wikipedia. For the artificial sweetener aspartame Answers.com came up with definitions from a standard and a medical dictionary, an entry from Wordnet, the entry in Wikipedia including its Chemical Abstracts Number and structure, and translations into various languages. There are links to other topics that mention your term or phrase and to searches on Google for web pages, images and news. The blogs search option uses Technorati.

If you find you are becoming hooked on the service, as I am, you can download the 1-Click Answers bar and IE toolbar option. Once installed there is an additional feature that automatically runs an Answers.com search when you Alt-Click on any word or phrase. This works on any document in any program on your screen.

Some people have reported that their PCs sometimes crash after installing 1-Click Answers. I have not experienced any problems but for some of those who have it turned out that they have a large number of programs that run at start-up and stay in memory. 1-Click Answers was one memory resident program too far! For one person, spring cleaning their startups with WinPatrol did the trick. (WinPatrol appeared as Gizmo of the Month in the November 2004 edition of Tales from the Terminal Room)

1-Click Answers requires Windows 98/ME/NT 4/2000/XP or Mac OS-X 10.3 (Panther) or 10.2.8 (Jaguar) with Safari.

Land Register Online

<http://www.landregisteronline.gov.uk/>

The Land Registry has revamped its ecommerce site Land Register Online. This provides access to details of more than 19 million registered properties in England and Wales. Copies of title plans and registers held in electronic format can be downloaded in PDF format for £2 each. The register includes ownership details and where available property price information.

Searching Questions

Aspartame - good or bad?

Question:

I am trying to do some research on the artificial sweetener aspartame, in particular whether or not it causes serious health problems. The trouble is my searches come up with so many sites with extreme opinions about it, and I don't know who to believe.

Answer:

This is a case where you will have to make up your mind based on the evidence. In a situation such as this, a good starting point is Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>). This a free encyclopaedia but bear in mind it is designed so that anyone can edit it. Sometimes entries are vandalised but the page 'owners' are usually quick to repair the damage. One of its main policies is t NPOV, or neutral point of view, which means that articles should not be biased, and should represent differing views on a subject fairly and sympathetically. The page on aspartame is well balanced article with links to sites on both sides of the argument.

If you really feel up to it, you can search some of the peer reviewed medical and scientific literature via Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com/>) or Scirus (<http://www.scirus.com/>). You will be able to view abstracts free of charge but many of the articles will be priced.

The whole controversy started with an email circulated in 1998 and which is widely considered to be a hoax. If you are ever suspicious that a story is a hoax Snopes (<http://www.snopes.com/>) debunks many urban myths and legends.

Gizmo of the Month

Hijack This

<http://tomcoyote.com/hjt/>

This really ought to be called Un-Hijack This because it identifies and removes programs that have hijacked your browser.

HijackThis is a free utility that lists all installed browser add-on, buttons, startup items and allows you to inspect, and optionally remove selected items. The program can create a backup of your original settings and also ignore selected items. Additional features include a simple list of all startup items, default start page, online updates and more. Intended for advanced users. It examines key areas of the registry and hard drive looking for anything that could hijack your browser.

It does list legitimate programs so take care when deciding on what to remove.

Meetings and Workshops

Workshop: Google & Beyond

Organiser: UKeIG (formerly UKOLUG)

Presenter: Karen Blakeman

Venue: Regional Training Unit, Blacks Road, Belfast

Date: Thursday, 14th April 2005

Course fee: GBP 130 + VAT - UKeIG.

Others GBP 160 + VAT.

URL: <http://www.ukeig.org.uk/>

Workshop: Advanced Internet Search Strategies

Organiser: Manchester Business School

Presenter: Karen Blakeman

Venue: MBS, Manchester

Date: Tuesday, 26th April 2005

Course fee: GBP 215 + VAT - BIS/BINN

members. Others GBP 250 + VAT.

URL: <http://www.mbs.ac.uk/bis-training>

Workshop: Untangling your web: effective web site management

Organiser: Manchester Business School

Presenter: Karen Blakeman

Venue: MBS, Manchester

Date: Tuesday, 17th May 2005

Course fee: GBP 215 + VAT - BIS/BINN

members. Others GBP 250 + VAT.

URL: <http://www.mbs.ac.uk/bis-training>

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