

Blogging: Current Awareness in the Online Age

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Introduction

One of the challenges for any information service is keeping users up-to-date with new publications and other developments. Traditionally this was done using current awareness lists, usually produced each month, containing new accessions to the collection. In the digital age, where the Internet is always “on,” researchers expect much quicker access to information, and this is a challenge to which information services are beginning to rise.

Background

DrugScope’s collection of over 105,000 books, reports and journal articles grows every week, and our monthly lists of grey literature and monographs are consistently among the top five downloads from our website. This is indicative of a demand for good-quality, up-to-date bibliographic information, which led us to consider offering more frequent updates.

The Technology

Our monthly listings are produced from our catalogue, DrugData. The ideal situation for daily listing would be to generate an RSS- or atom-feed directly from the catalogue, so that users would be notified of new items. Feeds are web-based files of XML (or other mark-up language) code which can read using software known as “newsreaders,” many of which are free on the Internet. Feeds are attractive because they are “pull” technology: the end-user signs up for the feeds they wish to receive via a newsreader and decides how they want them to be delivered: by email, by logging onto the newsreader site, or by visiting the feed’s site itself. In other words, no maintenance is required to deliver news to the user: you simply create the feed and publish items to it.

When we were unable to generate RSS or atom directly from our cataloguing software, we looked at other options, and found that blogging met our needs. With very little knowledge of HTML, we were able to set up a page that matched our corporate look and called it 'DrugData Update' (<http://drugscope.blogspot.com>). We created two report templates on our catalogue – one for items with a direct URL and one for those without. At the end of each day, it takes 5-10 minutes to generate the two reports, proof-read them, and post them to the web. Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com>) provides an atom feed automatically, and it took less than 15 minutes to create an RSS feed using FeedBurner (<http://www.feedburner.com>).

The Market

The English language AOD sector already has a number of RSS-feeds and email newsletter services, some of which we use in our acquisitions process. These include:

- drugs.gov.uk (<http://www.drugs.gov.uk>) - a range of newsletters covering official documents
- Daily Dose (<http://www.dailydose.net>) - an email mailshot and a blog covering news and some key reports
- Drug Misuse Information Scotland Weekly Update (<http://www.drugmisuse.isdscotland.org>) - emailed to registered users
- ELDD News (<http://eldd.emcdda.eu.int/>) – a mailing sent out to users registered on the ELDD website (available in a variety of languages)
- NTA Update (<http://www.nta.nhs.uk>) - emailed to users registered with the NTA
- RDS Update (<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/updatemail.html>) – an email newsletter covering new publications on the Home Office's RDS website
- SAMHSA NCADI (<http://ncadi.samhsa.gov>) – covering SAMHSA publications (one of a range of SAMHSA email mailshots for which you can register)

Many publishers and news services also offer updates, and sites such as Google and Yahoo! offer the facility to set up tailored RSS feeds.

A Niche

We realised that none of the existing services offered exactly what we were able to provide: a frequent update of new evidence-based reports and articles with URLs or (where free URLs are not available) details on how to acquire them. We also found that even researchers who have been using our services for years were not aware of certain specialist elements within it – such as our collection of campaign materials. Users were wary of a service that was too broad – the real need was for bibliographic information.

Focus Articles

We want DrugData Update to be seen as a service for our users, *not* a marketing tool for ourselves. Our closest model in the “blogosphere” is InfoAlert (<http://www.infoalertuk.blogspot.com/>), a blog covering community, crime & justice, which provides useful links and bears no advertising of any kind. Following our website guidelines, our blog does bear our logo and links to the main site, as we felt it was important for readers to be aware of the blog’s owners and our wider work. However, we do not want to “push” our services onto them.

Throughout the week, our posts are simple bibliographic lists. Each Friday we post a short “focus article.” This highlights a part of the collection with which users may not be familiar, or an aspect of the wider work of the Information, Web and Library Service that they may find useful. This adds value to the blog, differentiating it from the monthly listings, and provides something interesting to readers at the end of the week.

Publicising the Blog

In October 2005 we began to publicise the blog: we emailed our networking groups within the AOD sector and added a link to our email signatures. We also registered the blog with dmoz (<http://www.dmoz.org/>), the internet directory, and on blog and

newsreaders, such as Bloglines (<http://www.bloglines.com/>), and Bloghop (<http://www.bloghop.com/>). We avoided sites that required us to “trade” links or adverts, as we are keen to promote the blog as a professional service. We have been writing brief articles and promoting DrugData Update at conferences and have received very positive feedback, indicating that there is a need for this type of service.

Future Plans

The development of each blog depends on the needs of the user group. We are monitoring the uptake of the blog and, should this continue to be strong, we will consider posting the blog directly to the New Books and Reports page on our website. In any case, our experience with blogging so far has been that it allows us to reach a wider range of people than our monthly current awareness listings alone. Interestingly, the uptake on our monthly lists has increased since we introduced the blog – it seems that while people like a daily taster of “what’s new in drug publications,” they also like to have a structured list from which to work.

As information users we look forward to seeing more blogs in the AOD sector while as information providers, we can recommend blogging as a useful modern tool.