

Ken MacLeod's RSS Political FAQ

Introduction

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This Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page serves as a counterpoint to Dave Winer's RSS 2.0 Political FAQ page. It also provides a place for me, as an individual not as a representative of any other group, to offer my opinion on political or social questions that I can about RDF Site Summary (the other RSS) and the project currently referred to as Pie/Atom/Echo.

Comments on and questions for this FAQ can be posted to the QuickTopic Ken MacLeod's RSS Political FAQ, emailed, or posted on your weblog (please Cc me to let me know).

Does the RSS 2.0 Advisory Board control the RSS 2.0 specification and therefore RSS 2.0?

For all practical purposes, yes. To be specific, the RSS 2.0 Advisory Board is the only rightfully authorized entity able to make changes to the most current version of Really Simple Syndication, RSS 2.0, the original, authoritative version of the RSS 2.0 specification. The RSS 2.0 specification does legally allow anyone to copy and create modified versions of it, but as long as the original lives at Berkman, there can be no question about what the official version is. Neither Berkman or the Advisory Board are "standards" organizations, which means they cannot tell anyone what they must do. Rather, they are acting in a role similar to the World Wide Web Consortium, they make the specification available and it is up to the users and developers using those specifications to adhere to them. Most strive to conform as closely to the official specifications as possible.

But doesn't Movable Type and Blogger's different use of RSS mean the Advisory Board doesn't control RSS 2.0?

No. The RSS 2.0 spec is unclear on certain points. In a scenario not unlike the child's game of "Telephone", one developer created an RSS template they believed to conform to the RSS 2.0 spec, they published that template and it was widely received, it was made part of the basis of the Feed Validator (co-authored by the same developer), where Movable Type and Blogger then picked up that version of the template. Later, in a long, roundabout way that caused great confusion (re. "funky"), the RSS 2.0 author eventually said the developer was wrong. A group formed to address that issue among others, while around the same time the ownership of the RSS 2.0 specification was transferred to

Berkman and put under the governance of the Advisory Board. The specification still does not address that issue.

What does "open" mean?

When speaking of specifications, "open" refers primarily to whether membership in the governing entity is open to interested and qualified parties, and secondarily to the process by which the specification is developed, decisions are made, and issues publicly addressed; the implementability of a specification is not relevant to its openness.

When speaking of software, source code specifically, the most widely accepted meaning of "open" is the The Open Source Definition (which explicitly includes Free Software). Primarily, software source code is "open" if one is allowed to make changes to the source and redistribute the source in whole in its changed form. Software source code that is published, but does not allow modified redistribution, is not "open"; for example, MicroSoft's "Shared Source" is not "open".

Is RSS 2.0 "open"?

No. Its governing entity is not open to interested parties.

Is RSS/RDF 1.0 "open"?

Just barely. The RSS 1.0 Working Group has an "invite only" charter, but by its actions have shown that they admit any party interested in developing and furthering the specification. Further, their process is open, any member of the public may call for a poll, and they have shown that they address all issues publicly.

Why won't RSS 1.0 change their name?

I participated in this discussion from near the beginning. My recollection of this discussion, and I'd be glad to review it fully if pressed to do so, is that members of the RSS community originally proposed "RSS 1.0" as the "next" version of RSS to follow on to Netscape's RSS 0.91. The proposal's name itself came as a surprise to many of the other members of the RSS community and a massive flame war erupted that truly hasn't settled to this day. It was never made clear why some members of the RSS community were "more entitled" to the RSS acronym than others. One of the more popular solutions was for both parties to use "RSS" as a base to their names. A very vocal minority made it clear that they would never accept RSS 1.0 using a name with the letters "R S S" in it, while the original members who proposed RSS 1.0 made it clear they would not accept being disenfranchised; that stalemate continues to this day. For what it's worth, RSS 1.0 is commonly referred to as RSS/RDF.

Would RSS/RDF changing its name solve anything?

Not for the world at large, those who are believed to be "most confused" by the same acronym. Both formats are logically the same in form, identical in purpose, and both derived from Netscape specifications. It would make more sense, to this author, for the two to use the same base name "RSS" and adopt project names. As an example of why it won't solve the political or social issues involved, many people also say that the newer Pie/Atom/Echo project also causes confusion -- and it *does* [will] have an entirely different name, form, purpose, and is not even derived from Netscape specifications.

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