

Dave Winer's RSS 2.0 Political FAQ¹

Mon, Jun 30, 2003; by Dave Winer.

Question: Do you control RSS? Does UserLand? ↵

No. UserLand controls the specification I wrote for RSS 2.0, and even there the control isn't very tight. The copyright and disclaimer permit people to redistribute the spec, and use the spec in whole or in part, with the usual caveat that you must also reproduce the copyright. The terms are derived from the copyright the IETF uses for its specs and RFCs, and is similar to the terms of the Creative Commons for-attribution license, which the RSS spec predates by a few years.

Question: But I really meant Do you control the use of RSS? ↵

Perhaps influence is a better word. I am a leader, but not the only one, of the RSS community. For example, Sam Ruby and Mark Pilgrim wrote an RSS validator that many people use. Their judgement is part of the implementation of the software, so they also have a lot of influence over how RSS is used.

However, my influence is quite limited. For example, I felt strongly that Movable Type and Blogger should implement RSS in exactly the same way that UserLand does. First I expressed this wish privately, then publicly. However it made no difference, Blogger and Movable Type didn't change the way they do RSS. If I controlled RSS, they wouldn't have had a choice.

Basically, I have the power, like anyone else, to say what I think, but I can't make people do what I think they should.

Question: Could someone else write a spec for RSS 2.0? ↵

Yes, of course.

In the United States we have a Bill of Rights which among other things guarantees the right of free speech. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

Many western countries and emerging democracies offer the same guarantee. So even if I wanted to stop people from writing a new spec (I don't) -- I couldn't.

Whether it's a good idea to write a new spec is a whole other question. There is a group of software developers working towards that, led by Rogers Cadenhead.

¹ Last update: Sunday, July 20, 2003 at 8:13:00 AM Pacific.

I'm subscribed, and will help them however I can.

Question: What if I have a question that's not answered here? ↩

Please post it as a comment in response to this weblog post. Only respectful non-personal questions will be answered, and only time-permitting. My goal in writing this FAQ is to help people understand how RSS politics works.

Question: What does "funky" mean in the context of RSS 2.0? ↩

A feed is *funky* if it uses extensions to provide information that can be expressed by core elements.

If everyone strives to *not* be funky, then it becomes trivially easy to write aggregators, and new entrants to the market can get in quickly and at low cost, and users get more choice.

If we were to go the opposite way, with every source of feeds inventing their own replacements for core RSS 2.0 elements, the cost to enter would become increasingly high, and it becomes more likely that programs will express compatibility in terms of products, not formats. Then you'd have to use one aggregator to read BBC feeds, for example, and another to read SF Chronicle feeds. So "funky" is anti-interop; and "not funky" is pro-interop.

I never wanted to have to define this, because I hoped the issue would go away, quickly. But the people who could have done something about it refused to, so the wound festered. The problem, imho, isn't the term, but the practice. People should *try* to follow the spec, and if they don't we should ask them to explain why.

BTW, I don't think it's cool to repeat information two or more times in a feed. That makes it more complicated to understand. Keep it simple. That's the value of RSS. Anyone who can understand a little HTML can understand RSS. That's important!

Bonus: Don Park illustrates funkyness in screen shots.

Question: Is RSS stuck? If so, why? ↩

It is and it isn't. Here are some reasons why.

It's stuck because the RSS community is controlled by a small number of mail list flammers. A few people put themselves in the middle on the mail lists and express their opinions over and over, and ridicule those who differ, often attacking on a personal level. This has rendered the mail lists ineffective. Even new lists, even when they're moderated, descend into flames within days, chasing away people who want to get work done, and forcing those who remain to defend themselves.

There are just a handful of people doing this, but they use flames as a filibuster, and it works. At times they coordinate, when one leaves, the next one takes over. I've watched their IRC chat channels where they plan these work-stopping activities.

RSS is stuck, lately, because of lack of agreement among the vendors about what RSS is. Both Blogger and Movable Type went with RDF as their default form of RSS, as the non-RDF version was becoming the consensus. Blogger's change happened within the last few weeks. I have no idea why they did it, I have asked privately, and then publicly. The format refuses to coalesce into a single easy to support format. I've seen sites that point to my spec while they implement the RDF format, and wonder if they have any idea what's going on. I feel helpless to sort it out, every time I try, the flamers swoop in and make their accusations. People see my name in the middle of flames and assume I must be at least somewhat to blame. The flamers know how that works, very well.

Another trick that works is where people say there are seven different RSS formats. In some sense that's true, but RSS 0.91, 0.92 and 2.0 are really the same format, and 0.93 and 0.94 even if they had been deployed widely (they weren't) are also the same format. So that means that five of the seven can be collapsed down to one. The remaining two formats, 0.90 and 1.0, are different from the 0.91-inspired thread *and* from each other. But 0.90 is hardly in use now, it was replaced quickly by 0.91 in 1999, there's not much 0.90 left. It certainly is not a concern for people producing RSS feeds in 2003, and for people writing aggregators, the same code can be used to read 0.90 and 1.0. In other words, for all practical purposes, there are *two different forms of RSS*, and they are very different. This is unfortunate, but the situation is nowhere near as bad as some people say it is.

Now, in some ways we absolutely are *not* stuck. The vast majority appears ready to go with RSS 2.0. Just a few holdouts, some who flame and some with considerable installed bases, make the difference. There are lots of great examples of simple easy RSS 2.0 feeds. The people producing them get more flow for their ideas, the people who read them are able to use the Internet far more effectively. There are many reasons to be excited about where RSS is and where it's going. And if we could simplify RSS even more, then there's absolutely nothing stopping RSS from going all the way.

There are effective ways to help move RSS toward consensus. We need a steady stream of reasoned advocacy and evangelism on behalf of RSS, to counteract the flames. We can't be against anything, we have to be for more syndicated content, and more publishers, small and large, being effective through syndication. The First Amendment on the Web. The Internet & Society. Those are our causes, they are positive ones. We're not trying to stop people from syndicating with other formats. In a perfect world, no one would be stopping people from syndicating with RSS 2.0. But it's not that perfect world. Study the

Linux Advocacy Howto. It's a classic, perfect for any community on a mission to create new cool stuff.

What can you do to help? If you'd like to write a testimonial for RSS, or the Blogger API, or MetaWeblog API, please do so, and send me a pointer. I think it's time for developers to hear from other developers and users who would like continuous evolution, and respectful cooperation among developers, vendors and users.

Question: Dave, do you understand namespaces? ↩

Yes I do. Flamers say I don't to help distract from the serious discussions we should be having about how to create a great user experience in syndication and aggregation.

Question: Why have you always been against namespaces in RSS? ↩

Some people have said that, but it's not true.

I think namespaces *belong* in RSS, honestly I've always thought so, but I foresaw a sequence of events that would make namespaces successful in RSS, not just an appendage that introduces complexity with little benefit.

Namespaces make the format more difficult for less technical people. Read Zeldman's critique of RSS 2.0 for an idea of why that's important.

RSS has namespaces now, please use them, but use them sparingly, when they're really necessary, not just to make your feed more interesting to people who find XML interesting for its own sake. Keep in mind that people will View Source your feed and use it as an example for their feeds. If we want to encourage people to use RSS, the simpler your feed, the easier it is to understand, the more it interoperates, the more likely they are to actually be able to complete the project and be pleased with the result.

Further, test your feed with one or more of the aggregators and readers that claim to support RSS 2.0, and if you have problems, work with the community to resolve them.

Question: Hey I heard about this Mr Safe guy. What do you know about him? ↩

I had a talk with Mr Safe on 7/3/03.

A. Funkyness Illustrated²

This is an attempt to remove the ongoing confusion over the funkyness I have accused MT and Six Apart of perpetuating. I hope these examples will dispell any FUD hanging over us.

NOT-FUNKY RSS FEEDS:

```
<rss version="2.0">
- <channel>
  <title>digiboy | m
  <link>http://www
  <description>Take
  ☺ <copyright>Copyri
  <ttl>60</ttl>
- <item>
  <title>About thi
  <link>http://ww
  <description>I've
  <comments>http
  <guid>http://w
  ☺ <pubDate>Sun, :
</item>

<rss version="0.91">
- <channel>
  <title>Boing Boing
  <link>http://boing
  <description>The E
  ☺ <lastBuildDate>Sat
  ☺ <language>en-us<
- <item>
  <title>Chris Piril
  <link>http://boi
  <description>Dig
    href="http://
  </item>
- <item>
  <title>My new p
```

² From <http://www.docuverse.com/blog/donpark/2003/06/23.html#a615>

FUNKY RSS FEEDS:

```

<rss version="2.0" xmlr
  xmlns:sy="http://pu
  xmlns:admin="http:/
  xmlns:rdf="http://w
- <channel>
  <title>Blank Blog<
  <link>http://notal
  <description />
  😞 <dc:language>en-1
  😞 <dc:creator>blog@
  😞 <dc:date>2003-06
  😞 <admin:generatorA
  😞 <sy:updatePeriod>1
  😞 <sy:updateFrequer
  😞 <sy:updateBase>21
  - <item>
    <title>Blank Blo
    <link>http://noi
    <description>Thi:
      2.64....</desc
    <guid isPermaLink
  😞 <dc:subject />
  😞 <dc:date>2003-
  </item>

<rss version="2.0" xmlr
  xmlns:rdf="http://w
  xmlns:funky="http:/
- <channel>
  <title>PapaScott<
  <link>http://www
  <description>I am
  😞 <dc:language>en-1
  😞 <dc:creator>shan:
  😞 <dc:rights>Copyri
  😞 <dc:date>2003-06
  😞 <admin:generatorA
  <admin:errorReport
  <sy:updatePeriod>
  😞 <sy:updateFrequer
  😞 <sy:updateBase>2
  - <item>
    <title>Cacophor
    <link>http://ww
    <description>Foi
      was battered.
    <guid isPermaLink
  - <content:encode
  - </CDATA>

```

As you can see in these examples, funky RSS feeds replace common RSS tags with RSS 1.0 extensions.

B. Blogging formats and protocols in 2003³

Posted by Dave Winer, 5/27/03 at 6:00:21 PM.

I've been thinking about the great RSS and protocols debate as Evan has and as the Trotts have.

My position is fairly simple. When one of the blogging tools vendors goes first, if the others implement what they've done, compatibly, then they should use the same name. Examples: the implementation of the MetaWeblog API in Movable Type; the implementation of the Blogger API in Movable Type, Radio and Manila; the upcoming implementation of Trackback in Manila.

Why? Consider this counter-argument. Suppose when UserLand implemented Trackback it changed how it works so it wasn't what the Trotts were doing, but still called it Trackback. It would have been wrong, it would have penalized the Trotts for going first, and I don't think anyone wants this. I sure don't. I'm glad they tried out a new idea. I'm willing to support it if only to show that I'm glad about that and to encourage them to do it again.

Now it gets tricky when Blogger wants to change what the Blogger API is. Version 2.0, as spec'd, is not compatible with the first version. I know Evan put a disclaimer on 1.0 saying it was subject to change, but reality is that the API was widely deployed anyway. He may feel literally within his rights to break it, hey there's no law that says he can't, but I don't think it's right. If he wants to be incompatible, fine, use a different name. In his think-piece he even suggests other reasons this would be a good idea.

The same philosophy dictates an end to the disagreement over RSS. If they want respect for the formats and protocols they implement, they must do RSS exactly as UserLand does. To not do it, would say that UserLand would be in its rights to break Trackback and the Blogger API. UserLand could implement the Blogger API using some other transport, or add RDF bits to it, or call the MetaWeblog API the Blogger API. The thing that Blogger and MT call RSS is not only not what UserLand does but it isn't even an improvement over what UserLand does. Lose-lose. And nasty too.

Sure, other people encourage this nasty thing, but that doesn't make it right. I've written to all the parties privately on this. It's important, if the blogging API world is to come together in a rational way, we must have basic agreement over RSS and adopt the golden rule. It's time to settle this argument now. This is the nasty stuff the big companies do. Let's get over it and get some principles in place now.

³ From <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/blogginFormatsProtocolsMay2003>

About APIs, I request others support the MetaWeblog API without reservation. If you want to me move the docs to a neutral place and put an IETF-like disclaimer on it, I'm happy to do so. Maybe this is something Harvard could help with. I ain't going with MIT, they're the competition. 🤔

Dave Winer

Checking in with Mr Safe⁴

Mon, Jul 7, 2003; by Dave Winer.

Mr Safe: You're Dave Winer aren't you?

Me: Yup.

Mr Safe: Tim Bray [said](#) you're all washed up, kind of like Charles Goldfarb.

Me: Yup.

Mr Safe: Why am I talking to you?

Me: Tim was wrong.

Mr Safe: Why did he say something so nasty about you? There must be something wrong with you?

Me: I think Tim basically means well. He looked at RSS and thought "Wow that's really simple, I can make that better." What he didn't know is that there are all kinds of XML gods gathered around RSS thinking the same thing. So when Tim said Dave is dead, they all said "Wow, now I can be Dave. Right on." The problem is that they can't all be Dave, in fact none of them can be, because there's only one me.

Mr Safe: Dave, why don't you just take a hike. We don't need or want your personality. You're a jerk. You're not a nice person. No one likes you. Neener neener!

Me: Hmmm. That doesn't sound like you Mr Safe.

Mr Safe: Someone made me say that.

Me: What did you really mean?

Mr Safe: What role do you play in this stuff?

Me: I co-designed RSS 0.91, and designed the extensions that built on it, 0.92 and 2.0, with the help of a few other people.

Mr Safe: Wouldn't it be better if a community designed it?

⁴ From <http://backend.userland.com/checkingInWithMrSafe>

Me: Nice idea, but format and protocol design doesn't actually work that way no matter what some open development advocates say. They're mostly well-intentioned people, many of them users like Larry Lessig, who want software to work for them, without the usual tricks that software developers play to lock them in. I share that goal, totally. But people like Eric Raymond and Richard Stallman have told them that they have figured out how to design software without a designer, but unfortunately their technique only works for *cloning* ideas that have already been designed. When it comes to new ideas, like RSS was in the late 90s, you need to have a designer, or at most two or three. Someone who makes the decisions, that, for better or worse, people live with. There are always different ways to do it, but at some point the arguing has to end if you want to get anywhere. In RSS, the basic argument ended in 1999, with RSS 0.91. That's the safe choice, Mr Safe. If you don't want to stick your neck out, and get embroiled in a full-scale Internet flamewar, you just can't go wrong with 0.91. You will probably get a few emails from RDF zealots telling you you're an idiot, but it's safe to ignore those emails, many have before you, and they're still alive and they still have their jobs. In other words, they're safe, like you want to be.

Mr Safe: But what if my application needs more than RSS 0.91 provides?

Me: Well, then you have a choice, and you probably can't go very wrong either way you go. You could add some RDF "syntactic sugar" to your feed and then use elements from namespaces to add the extra bits that you need. If you like that approach, you'd ask the RSS-DEV mail list how to proceed, which, imho, really is the RDF-DEV mail list.

Mr Safe: What's the other approach?

Me: There's a format called RSS 2.0, which is a strict superset of RSS 0.91. Its designed to be as safe as RSS 0.91 with more power. RSS 2.0 relaxes some of the limits of 0.91 and adds optional elements that have proven useful in a bunch of RSS applications. What's nice about RSS 2.0 is that if everyone uses the extra elements it specifies, we all interoperate, and users have choice, there's no lock-in. That's very good for people who want safety, especially users who are worried the blogging tools vendor they like may be acquired by Evil Software Inc next week, or some other terrible thing might happen. RSS 2.0 is cool because it's all specified in one place, written in simple non-technical English that your VP-Business Development could probably understand. It's the ultimate in safety because it's frozen. It can't change. And people are respecting that, even the people who want to rock and roll. Hallelujah.

Mr Safe: How did Tim Bray miss that?

Me: I don't know. I thought he was a smart guy. Maybe he's all washed up? 🤔



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