information services and technology

IS&T

News about Information Services and technology throughout MIT

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This Is Spinal Tablet: A Better Tool for Teaching Neuroanatomy

• Robyn Fizz

Dr. Rutledge Ellis-Behnke is a research scientist in MIT's Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences. He and Prof. Gerald Schneider teach 9.14, Neuroanatomy, a course that relies heavily on illustrations and handouts. Reproducing all of the course materials in color was prohibitively expensive, so in 1998 Ellis-Behnke began to explore the option of using tablet PCs in class and dispensing with paper. Over the next few years, he and his colleagues discovered that using tablets greatly increased the students' ability to learn and retain information. There were other, unexpected benefits as well. Here's a look at how tablets have transformed the learning environment of 9.14.

The Classroom Experience

Ellis-Behnke began by comparing over 60 different tablet models. After narrowing the field to two models and testing them for a semester, he opted for a Hewlett-Packard (HP) tablet – it was sturdy, had good battery life, and was easy to maintain. The tablets are loaned to students through the MIT Libraries, which allows the instructors to stay focused on content.

PowerPoint slides and other handouts for 9.14 are posted to Stellar, MIT's online course management system. This makes the course materials easy to maintain and revise, and easy for students to access via the Web (like laptops, tablets have built-in wireless network cards). This setup doesn't require a special classroom or a plug at every seat.

The instructors, also equipped with tablets, no longer use blackboards. As they lecture about a slide, they can annotate it on their tablet: both the slide and annotations are projected onto a large screen. The students, viewing the same slide on their tablets, can take notes right on the display using a digital pen, or type notes using a mobile keyboard. They tend to switch between the two, and use multiple colors to highlight different anatomical structures.

Students can add keyword tags to each page and then do searches to find material for review. This saves them a lot of time, especially compared to flipping through vast amounts of paper. Required reading has increased from 1100 pages, pre-tablet, to 1500 pages, and slides have increased from 700 to 1200. But students have not been overwhelmed by these increases because the tablets let them organize the material effectively and access it instantly.

Through trial and error, Ellis-Behnke and his colleagues found that you don't want to give all the material to the students up front, or they become passive learners. They need to take notes during class in order to learn. Providing about 60 to 70 percent of the intended material on each slide makes students pay attention, take notes, and learn – without turning them into stenographers.

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Spinal Tablet

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Changed Interactions

While Ellis-Behnke and his colleagues expected tablets to enhance teaching and learning because course material could be delivered in color, they were surprised to find that tablets also introduced fundamental changes in behavior. There were more student interactions after class and in eating areas. Students were seen explaining points to other students, using their digital pens to circle the areas under discussion. Tablets became part of the dialog, which has not been the case with laptops. This may be due to the tablet's small size, or perhaps because laptop covers, flipped open, act as a kind of barrier. Ellis-Behnke has observed the same increase in student-to-student interaction in tablet-based classes in other cultures (he also teaches at a medical school in Hong Kong) and in other age groups (elementary school children). Tablets act as magnets to bring students together.

Since the teaching assistants (TAs) for 9.14 no longer need to spend the hour before class making photocopies, they are able to greet students as they come to class and spend more time with them. Students have reacted positively to this in-person time with TAs. Tablets have also boosted the effectiveness of online office hours: instructors and students, while in different locations, can use the tablets for quick drawings to get their points across.

Another surprise was that students used the tablets everywhere. Tablets appear to meet a critical threshold of convenience in terms of weight and size. With class materials available in this highly portable format, students study when they are ready to study, as opposed to studying where the materials are. Instead of lugging around textbooks, or making a trip to the library, they turn on their tablets whenever they have spare time. That might include a 15-minute ride on the subway.

Tablets have also given instructors more flexibility. Being able to quickly access selected chapters from different textbooks lets them customize the way they teach the course.

Bottom-line Results

Ellis-Behnke has been measuring the results of using tablets in the classroom. The benefits to learning efficiency are clear. Even with significantly more class materials, the bottom 25 percent of the class improved a full letter grade after the tablets were introduced. This cohort learned as much as the average student did before the tablets were used. These are objective findings, since the neuroanatomy exams are based on short answers, which require students to demonstrate understanding of the material.

In terms of dollars, the cost of tablets offsets the cost of photocopying. Neither is inexpensive. A tablet costs about $2000. However, photocopying with only some color handouts costs $700 per student per class, and that does not include the cost of textbooks or the environmental costs of paper storage and recycling. In addition, the Libraries loan out each tablet to an average of eight students a year – for courses and special projects.

Use of tablets in the classroom has also proven successful for Prof. Julian Wheatley in teaching Mandarin, a pictographic language; similarly, Dr. Hai Ning has developed tablet-based software to facilitate peer review of design concepts in MIT mechanical engineering classes. To learn more about tablets in the paperless classroom, look for Ellis-Behnke's seminar on the topic on the Crosstalk page at

`http://web.mit.edu/acs/Crosstalk/`

MIT Libraries Working with Google on Scholar

The MIT Libraries have collaborated with Google to give MIT faculty and students greater access to materials retrieved through Google Scholar searches. Google Scholar, launched in November 2004, is designed to locate scholarly literature – such as peer-reviewed papers, theses, books, and preprints – on the Web. While some of these materials, such as those found in DSpace@MIT, are available for free, in most instances, users can't gain access to the full text of publications without a subscription or other form of payment.

By collaborating in a test project with Google, the Libraries are able to provide the MIT community with access to most of the 20,000-plus journals and other serials to which the MIT Libraries subscribe. Google Scholar now automatically recognizes connections originating from the MIT campus and shows an "MIT Access" link to full-text articles found in the electronic versions of these publications. If an electronic version isn't available through Google Scholar, the Libraries may own a print version. In this instance, users should try searching the Libraries' online catalog, Barton, or VERA: e-journals + databases.

In addition, by going to

`http://scholar.google.com/scholar_preferences`

MIT users can choose MIT as their preference (certificates required). This allows Google Scholar to identify the computer as part of the MIT community, even from off campus.

Testing and Feedback

Google Scholar is currently a beta service. As the MIT Libraries work with Google on improvements for the MIT community, your feedback is welcome. You can send comments to <webmaster@libraries.mit.edu>. For more information on "Making Google Scholar Work for You," see

`http://libraries.mit.edu/help/google-scholar/`

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Office 2004 for Mac OS X Has Great New Tools in Its Kit

• Esther Yanow and Bronwen Heuer

Microsoft Office Professional 2004 is the latest version of the Office productivity suite for the Macintosh (OS X). It includes Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, as well as Entourage and Virtual PC 7. IS&T supports the first three programs, but does not support Entourage or Virtual PC.

Across the Suite

Office 2004's Toolbox – with its splashy red icon – gives you access to some useful suitewide features:

- The Compatibility Report identifies and resolves issues that can occur when you share Word, Excel, or PowerPoint documents with users of other versions of Office. This report displays a list of issues (for example, font and image compatibility problems), and you can fix, ignore, or get more help about them.
- The enhanced Scrapbook (formerly the Clipboard) lets you catalog your cuts and copies. You can look at items in List, Detail, or Large Preview views, assign them keywords, and search and display them by metadata details (e.g., creation date, category).
- The Reference Tool tab takes you to the Encarta dictionary, a thesaurus, and a link to Microsoft's online Encarta encyclopedia.

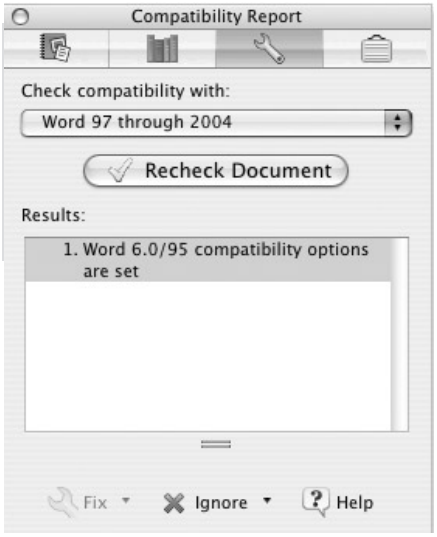
Office's Formatting Palette replicates – in one place – much of the functionality found in menus and buttons. You can move this palette around on the screen and expand and collapse its sections. "Add Objects" has been added to the palette in each of the programs. When you select a graphic object, the palette now offers a complete array of picture-formatting tools.

New Program-Specific Features

Each Office 2004 program has new tools that can increase your productivity. Here are the highlights.

Word 2004:

- Notebook Layout View facilitates note taking on its lined "paper." You can add tabs for new sections, demote or promote notes, and even attach audio recordings using your computer's built-in microphone.



The Compatibility Report resolves issues between different versions of Office.

You can also flag notes for follow-up, sort, and do keyword searches to find your place quickly.

- Track Changes now adds balloons, color-coded by reviewer, on the right-hand side of the page. These balloons show comments and deletions.
- The Navigation Pane, under the View menu, adds a pane on the left-hand side of your file, where you can choose between a thumbnail view or a document map. This is especially useful for navigating long documents.

Excel 2004:

- You can now easily change the color scheme for charts using a drop-down list in the Formatting Palette. More advanced types of formatting control include shades of colors, lines, fills, and the ability to make some elements transparent.
- The Page Layout View lets you see quickly how your document will look when printed. You can then scale your data to avoid awkward page breaks.

PowerPoint 2004:

- Presenter Tools, under the View menu, divides your computer's screen into panels that display your slides, thumbnails of the slides for quick selection, and speaker notes. Arrows let you move forward and backward, one slide at a time, and a clock helps you keep track of time. Connect your Macintosh to a projector, and Presenter Tools lets you display just your slides to the audience, while you can see the full display, including speaker notes, on the computer.
- PowerPoint 2004 offers many new animation effects and transitions, including 3D transitions that are exclusive to the Macintosh.

To learn more about new features, see Mactopia's Office 2004 Highlights at

`http://www.microsoft.com/mac/default.aspx?pid=office2004`

System Requirements

To run Office 2004 Professional at MIT, you need

- a G4 or greater that is Mac OS X compatible
- Mac OS X 10.3 or higher
- 256MB or more of RAM
- 450MB of disk space for a recommended install; 630MB for a full drag-and-drop install
- a CD-ROM drive or network connection (depending on your installation method)

How to Obtain

If your department, lab, or center is participating in the Microsoft Campus Agreement at MIT, you can obtain the media from your area's software liaison. For a list of software liaisons, go to

`http://web.mit.edu/ist/services/software/msca-liaisons.html#2`

Otherwise, you can buy Office 2004 online from GovConnection, taking advantage of MIT's Select Agreement with Microsoft. For details, see

`http://web.mit.edu/ist/services/software/msca.html`

Support

IS&T maintains a Microsoft Office 2004 Professional for Macintosh page at

`http://itinfo.mit.edu/product.php?vid=656&platform=Macintosh`

IS&T also offers Quick Starts and hands-on courses in Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. For details, go to

`http://web.mit.edu/is/topics/training/`

and click on the Training Catalog and Registration link.

If you need help using Office 2004, contact the Computing Help Desk at 253-1101 or <computing-help@mit.edu>.

Email Users: Make the Move from POP to IMAP

• Jon Hunt

Information Services and Technology (IS&T) has been recommending Internet Message Access Protocol (IMAP) for accessing email for several years and is now promoting IMAP as MIT's primary mail protocol. IMAP provides flexibility and functionality that the Post Office Protocol (POP) does not. All of MIT's recommended email applications (clients) support IMAP and some, such as Outlook, only support IMAP.

IMAP resolves problems that can occur with email clients that use POP. One of the most common problems is receiving duplicate messages: this can happen because POP was never designed to handle email retrieval from multiple machines. A kludge enables this functionality in POP, but it does not always work, and users can end up with multiple copies of the same message. With IMAP, email is stored on the central servers, and you can securely and reliably access your email from multiple machines.

IMAP also has several useful features that POP does not provide:

- You can access your email from any web browser using WebMail.
- You get 250MB of space on enterprise email servers.
- You can optimize your email client to handle large volumes of email over slow connections by downloading just the headers and then selecting messages to read. This is very useful for PDA email clients.
- You can access email from multiple machines with ease and maintain the messages status (such as read or unread) between them.
- You can easily configure and check MIT's Spamscreen, since it shows up as a folder within your IMAP inbox.

Recommended Clients

IS&T supports the following IMAP email clients:

For Windows

– Outlook 2003
– Eudora 6.2.1

For Mac OS X

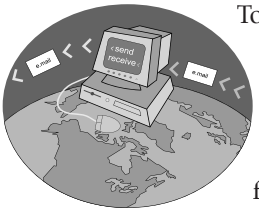
– Apple Mail
– Eudora 6.1 or later

For Linux and Athena

– Evolution 1.4.5

For Palm-based PDA devices

– SnapperMail Enterprise 2.1.1
– VersaMail 2.7 and greater



To facilitate the migration from POP to IMAP, IS&T launched email client release efforts for Eudora 6.2.1 and Apple Mail. The Eudora 6.2.1 installer will migrate current Eudora POP users to IMAP unless they opt out during the installation. IS&T has also worked to ensure that the installer functions for Group Policy deployment in win.mit.edu.

To find out more about any of the recommended email clients, go to the IS&T web site at

`http://web.mit.edu/ist/`

and type the name of the software in the search box.

Security Vulnerability in Eudora for Windows

Note that the Windows versions of Eudora 5.2 and earlier have a vulnerability that, if exploited, would enable an attacker to execute arbitrary code remotely on a machine. In order to be secure, Windows users running Eudora 5.2 (or earlier versions) should either upgrade to Eudora 6.2.1 or migrate to another IMAP email client such as Outlook 2003. The details of this vulnerability will be made public on May 2, 2005 and an exploit is more likely once the details are published.

Support

IS&T is providing documentation and support to help users migrate from Eudora to Apple Mail or Outlook. You can find the Guide to IMAP at MIT at

`http://web.mit.edu/ist/topics/email/imap.html`

You will also find some useful tips in the Tech Tips column on page 6.

If you have questions about migrating to IMAP, contact the Computing Help Desk at 253-1101 or <computing-help@mit.edu>.

This column presents announcements about IS&T-supported software. For more information about recent releases, see `http://web.mit.edu/swrt/`

IS&T Supports Adobe Reader 7.0

Adobe Reader 7.0 is the latest version of the free software from Adobe Systems that lets you open, view, search, and print Portable Document Format (PDF) files. This file format, based on PostScript, is highly portable across platforms and is often used to share files with others who don't have the same software or fonts.

This new version of Adobe Reader provides faster launch times and real-time zooming and panning. It also contains enhanced search features, a unified selection tool, and greatly improved accessibility features. To learn more about Adobe Reader 7.0, go to

`http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readermain.html`

You can download Adobe Reader from the Adobe web page above or by starting at the Adobe Reader at MIT page at

`http://itinfo.mit.edu/product.php?name=acroread`

The MIT web page also has several related links with helpful information.

Note that Adobe recently released the Reader 7.0.1 update and recommends that all users of Adobe Reader 7.0 apply this update. For details and to download the update, go to

`http://www.adobe.com/support/downloads/main.html`

If you need help installing or using Adobe Reader 7.0, contact the Computing Help Desk at 253-1101 or <computing-help@mit.edu>.

Discount Option for Adobe Software

MIT is a member of the Massachusetts Higher Education Consortium. One benefit is the option to purchase discounted licenses for Adobe products, for use on MIT-owned equipment, from TRC. For details on this (and other MIT software discounts), visit the Volume Site License page at

`http://web.mit.edu/ist/products/vsls/`

MIT's contact at TRC is Tom Kolodziej. You can reach him at (800) 517-2320, x209 or <tom@gotrc.com>.

Think Before You Send: Confidential Data and Email

• Jeff Schiller

Many members of the community work with information that should be kept private. In the course of doing their work, they may send confidential data to others via email – without being aware of the risks involved. Here's a quick look at those risks and how to minimize them.

A Trio of Risks

Email is at risk of being compromised when

- Stored on a personal computer.
- "In flight" from the sender to MIT post office servers and from MIT post office servers to the recipient.
- An MIT recipient chooses to receive email at an account outside of MIT. Outside email systems include "free" services such as Gmail from Google, Hotmail, and Yahoo! Mail.

The risk to information stored as an email message on a computer is no different than the risk to any information stored on a computer. For tips on how to protect data on your computer, see

`http://web.mit.edu/ist/topics/security/infoprotect.html`

The risk to e-mail "in flight" is limited because anyone wanting to intercept the data has to be listening at just the right time. In addition, modern email clients have the capability to encrypt email as it is being transmitted.

However, when email is sent to an outside mail system, the sender loses control of it. There is no way of knowing how email is protected on this system, nor how long it may be stored. Most systems keep copies of email even after you delete it from your mailbox. Privacy statements from outside email systems make it clear that they cannot guarantee the confidentiality of email.

When you send someone email, you have no control over where they will receive it. An email address that appears to be located at @mit.edu may in fact be forwarded off campus. You can, however, control where you receive email.

Although MIT has no explicit guidelines about where individuals choose to receive their mail, it does have a policy that people who handle sensitive data should take steps to guard that information. If you regularly receive sensitive information in your email, you may want to think twice before forwarding your mail to an off-campus email address. If you're aware that a recipient to whom you are sending confidential information routes their email to an off-campus provider, you might want to reconsider sending sensitive information to them via email.

Concerns?

If you have questions about handling confidential data in email, contact <security@mit.edu>.

SAP Update and Hardware Renewal Slated for May

• Diana Hughes

IS&T is planning an SAP hardware renewal from May 20 through May 22. It will include the following.

- Hewlett Packard (HP) Alpha machines will be replaced with Sun V490 and V890 machines.
- The operating system will move from HP tru64 to Sun Solaris 9.
- The SAP kernel, SAP application support packages, and SAP Oracle database will be updated.
- The SAP Internet Transaction Server support packages will be updated from version 14 to 17.

The hardware renewal is being done because the HP hardware is six years old. Parts availability and the lack of trained field engineers have been ongoing issues. Renewing the hardware also minimizes the impact on the SAP module implementations planned by the HR-Payroll and Environmental, Health and Safety projects for early 2006.

The Sun hardware will provide a stable SAP environment for the next several years and reduce the risk of hardware-related outages. It will also facilitate upgrading to the next SAP release, planned for 2006.

Putting IT to the Test

In preparation for the hardware renewal, integration testing will take place May 2 through May 13. The testing will focus on critical SAP business processes, as identified by business units and the IS&T Administrative Computing Team. External interfaces to SAP – such as the MIT ID Database, IXOS, Roles Database, ECAT, Data Warehouse, and Athena Print Servers – will also be tested.

The Administrative Computing Quality Assurance (QA) Team will coordinate integration testing. Administrative Computing Team members and business process owners will participate in testing exercises in the Development (SF2) and Education & Practice (SF6) environments. Testing will be done manually from written test scripts, and issues will be logged in the QA Test Issue Database. The QA Team will be responsible for resolution of all open issues.

Questions?

To contact the team working on these updates, send email to <sap-spring-renewal@mit.edu>.

Key Dates

April 18–29: SF2 (Development environment) unit testing
May 2–13: SF6 (Education & Practice environment) integration testing
May 20–22: PS1 (Production environment) application of updates
May 23: Updated SAP Production available to MIT community

This column presents tips about computing. If you have a question you would like to see answered here, send it via email to <techtips@mit.edu>.

For more information technology Q&As, check the IS&T Stock Answers database at

`http://itinfo.mit.edu/answer/`

The Network Notes column on page 4 details the advantages of switching your email client from Post Office Protocol (POP) to Internet Message Access Protocol (IMAP). Making the switch will change some aspects of your email experience; the tips that follow can help you make the transition.

Q How can I check my email quota?

A All MIT account holders have 250MB of storage on the mail servers. However, POP users rarely fill their quota, because they store their messages on their computers, rather than on the server. When you switch to IMAP, you'll need to keep an eye on your quota. You can check it at

`https://nic.mit.edu/postoffice/quota` (MIT certificate required)

Your quota is also displayed above the Inbox message listings in WebMail.

You can find tips on how to manage your email quota at

`http://web.mit.edu/ist/topics/email/manage.html`

Q How do I know which incoming mail server I'm on?

A When you configure your IMAP mail client, you'll need to specify your mail server. You can find this information at

`http://web.mit.edu/ist/topics/email/query.html`

Q How does the move from POP to IMAP affect spam filtering?

A If you use Eudora with POP and have opted for MIT's spam filtering, you probably have a filter in place that moves any incoming spam messages to a dedicated folder.

For IMAP users, IS&T recommends using a Spamscreen folder instead. If you have one, your spam messages will be delivered automatically to your Spamscreen folder on the mail server, rather than to your Inbox. Here's how to make the change:

First, you'll need a Spamscreen folder. Spamscreen folders have been created automatically on all accounts set up after October 4, 2004. If you don't already have a Spamscreen folder, you will need to create it. If you're using Eudora with IMAP, follow these steps.

On a Windows machine:

1. Go to **Tools>Mailboxes**.
2. Click on the plus sign next to **<<Dominant>>** to expand the subfolders list.
3. Right-click on the **Inbox** and choose **New...**
4. Name the new mailbox Spamscreen. Be sure to capitalize the first letter!

On a Macintosh:

1. Go to **Window>Mailboxes**.
2. Click on the arrow next to **<<Dominant>>** to expand the subfolders list, and select the **Inbox**.
3. Click on the **New Mailbox** button, the second button from the left at the bottom of the Mailboxes window. This will create a subfolder called "Untitled Folder."
4. Rename this folder Spamscreen. Be sure to capitalize the first letter!

If you're using a program other than Eudora, you can find instructions on how to create your Spamscreen folder at

`http://web.mit.edu/ist/services/email/nospam/index.html#configure`

Next, you'll need to delete your old POP-style filter in Eudora.

1. Go to **Tools>Filters** on your Windows machine, or **Window>Filters** on your Macintosh.
2. In the left-hand pane of the Filters window, locate the filter X-Spam-Flag:YES.
3. Select this filter, and click on the **Remove** button.
4. Close the Filters window, and save your changes when prompted.

Since the contents of the Spamscreen folder count towards your mail quota, be sure to empty it from time to time. An auto-purging option is available on the mail severs, which will do this automatically. You can configure Auto-purging and other spam settings at

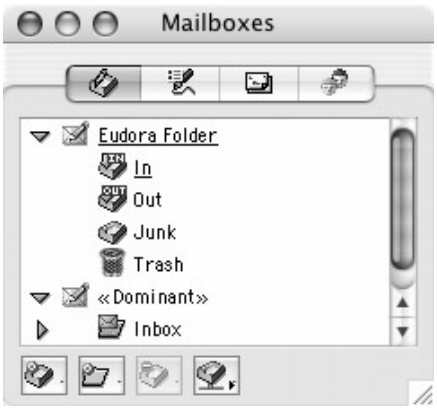
`http://web.mit.edu/ist/services/email/nospam/index.html#settings`

Q How does the migration to IMAP affect my backup scheme?

A When you use POP, your email is stored locally on your computer, and so can be backed up using TSM or another method. With IMAP, your email is stored on the mail server, so your messages won't be included in your system backups. The mail servers are backed up nightly in case of server failure, but there is no service for restoring individual messages or mailboxes. You may want to back up important messages manually, in case you accidentally delete them. You can do this by saving a copy of the messages to a local mail folder, which can be included in your TSM or other backups.

Q Help! I switched from POP to IMAP, but no mail is arriving in my In mailbox in Eudora!

A Don't worry; this is normal. The In mailbox in Eudora is a local mailbox, with messages stored on your computer. When you switch to IMAP, your mail is delivered to a folder called Inbox on the mail server. To access that folder, go to the Window menu if you're using a Macintosh, or the Tools menu on a Windows machine, and choose **Mailboxes>><<Dominant>>>Inbox** (see screenshot).



Note: If you use personalities in Eudora, you may need to choose the personality name, rather than **<<Dominant>>**.

If you don't find your new messages in the Inbox on the server, contact the Computing Help Desk at 253-1101 or <computing-help@mit.edu>.

RSS: Get the News You Want When You Want It

• Robyn Fizz

Whether you're a news junkie or just want to stay on top of the latest developments in your field, RSS can streamline your online browsing experience. RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication (or Rich Site Summary). News reader software based on RSS displays current headlines from your favorite sources (e.g., *The Boston Globe*, *Wired News*, releases from the MIT News Office). Once you select a headline, you'll generally see a short summary and a link to the full story.

You can subscribe to feeds from any publication that offers them, tailoring your choices along the way. *The New York Times* alone offers over 30 different feeds, ranging from Arts to International to Week in Review. Best of all, you can read your customized content at no charge. There are free news readers (also called news aggregators) for each platform, and there are no subscription fees for RSS feeds.

Not Just Your Standard News

While many people use RSS to tap into world or local news, there are many other types of RSS feeds. Adobe Systems, for example, offers a feed for each of its software applications. An Apple feed lists new releases from the iTunes Store. You can sign up for a daily Dilbert cartoon or keep track of your favorite web logs. If you follow an NPR feed to the full story, you can listen to an audio version – just as if you were listening to the radio.

Closer to home, MIT's Stellar course management system now offers a novel use of RSS: class web sites with feeds. Students who subscribe get the most recent announcements, class materials, and assignments, plus alerts one week before an assignment's due date. For other examples of MIT RSS feeds, including feeds from IS&T, see Surf Sites on page 8.

The Technology Score

RSS is based on Extensible Markup Language (XML). If you're visiting a web site and see a button – often orange – labeled "XML," that button links to an RSS feed. If you don't see XML buttons at a given site, try typing "RSS" in the site's search engine: it may take you to a page of feeds.

In order to subscribe to and read RSS feeds, you need news reader software. While IS&T does not currently recommend or support any newsreaders, you can find out more about RSS and available newsreaders at

`http://web.mit.edu/ist/news/rss-help.html`

RSS is not as widely used as email or web browsing, but it's likely to take off once it's incorporated into popular web browsers. It's due in the next release of Apple's Safari browser and is already built into Mozilla's Firefox, which runs on Windows, Macintosh, and Linux machines.

Getting Started

If you'd like some guidance before setting up a news reader, attend IS&T's free RSS Quick Start. Sessions will be held on May 19 and June 16 at noon in the N42 Demo Center.

Publish Dynamic Content on Your Web Site with RSS

• Sean Brown

Information Services and Technology (IS&T) has just launched a service that enables web publishers to include Really Simple Syndication (RSS) content in web pages hosted on web.mit.edu. It provides an easy way for MIT web publishers to add content to their pages that updates dynamically. The RSS Service works for both personal and organizational pages stored in Athena lockers.

From Static to Dynamic

Most web pages at MIT are written in HTML, which is essentially a static format. Changing the content of a web page normally requires manual effort using a tool like Macromedia Dreamweaver. When RSS is incorporated into HTML, web pages automatically display content changes supplied by the news feed.

How the Service Works

The RSS service provided by IS&T is based on an open-source script called Feed2JS. The service provides a web form that lets you designate the news feed of your choice and configure various display options. Submitting this form generates a small amount of HTML and JavaScript code that you place into the source code of your web pages. Once the code is added, any changes to the content of the RSS news feed will be reflected within a few minutes on your web pages.

Using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), you can customize the output of the RSS service so that it blends in with the existing look and feel of your web site. You can also set a number of feed options, including

- The number of items to display
- Whether to display item descriptions
- Length of item descriptions to show

Collaborative Efforts

IS&T's Web Communications Services (WCS) and Operations and Infrastructure Services (OIS) Teams have collaborated on the rollout of the RSS service. The project has involved customizing the Feed2JS script, running a test pilot, and setting up a server to host the service. Sites currently using the RSS service include the School of Engineering and IS&T (see Surf Sites on page 8 for these URLs and others).

Learning More

If you are interested in learning more about using RSS at MIT, attend a free IS&T Quick Start class on RSS. This presentation covers RSS basics and shows what's involved in setting up the RSS service for your web site.

Users of the RSS service are encouraged to subscribe to a low-volume email list where new features regarding the service will be announced. To join the list, send an email to <wcs-sysadmin@mit.edu>.

Getting Help

If you don't know where to get help for your computer, network, or telephone problems, dial one of the help lines listed to the right.

If you prefer to use email, you can send your questions to the corresponding email addresses on the far right. (When logged into Athena, you can also use the `olc` command to send questions to Athena's online consultants.)

You can also submit a question online via Casetracker at

`http://casetracker.mit.edu/`

For help with...	Dial...	Or send a message to...
General computing questions (Macintosh, Windows, and network/connectivity)	253-1101	computing-help@mit.edu
Academic computing	253-0115	f_l@mit.edu
Administrative applications	253-1101	computing-help@mit.edu
Athena Computing Environment	253-4435	olc@mit.edu
Computer and printer repairs	253-0815	pcservice@mit.edu
Computer presales consulting	253-7686	mcc@mit.edu
Disabilities and computing	253-7808	atic@mit.edu
Telephone and voice mail services	253-3670	telecom-csr@mit.edu
Telephone repairs	253-4357	3help@mit.edu
Unix/Linux	253-1103	unix-linux-help@mit.edu

Surf Sites: RSS at MIT

Really Simple Syndication (RSS) is gaining momentum at MIT (see page 7 for more on RSS). The sites to the right offer RSS feeds that you can subscribe to – with the exception of the School of Engineering site, which displays RSS feeds from other sources on its home page. These MIT-based RSS feeds provide summaries ranging from headlines for Windows users, to major MIT campus and research news, to alerts about videos available at MIT World.

Most of the URLs on the right take you to summary pages that provide some background as well as links to the RSS feeds themselves.

Ed Tech Times: Educational Technology News @ MIT
`http://edtech.mit.edu/times/`

MIT Information Services and Technology
`http://web.mit.edu/ist/news/rss-help.html`

MIT News Office
`http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/subscribe-rss.html`

MIT School of Engineering (RSS-based content on home page)
`http://web.mit.edu/engineering/`

MIT World
`http://mitworld.mit.edu/what_is_rss.php`

Technology Review
`http://www.technologyreview.com/newsfeed/aboutrss.asp`

IST Information Services & Technology

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