

8 Part Guide to Using Social Media

Using the Whole Web as Your Canvas

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1. Introduction

In late 2008, and early 2009, I embarked on a social media training roadshow (for [Headshift](#)) that took me to the far corners of England, Scotland and Wales. My purpose was to show each of the finalist communities taking part in NESTA's Big Green Challenge (<http://www.biggreenchallenge.org.uk>), a million pound environmental competition now nearing it's end, how social tools could help them communicate more effectively both within their groups as well as with stakeholders and other external audiences.

Alongside the training, which was provided on-site in villages, towns and cities - and on one island - I wrote a series of eight blog posts, totally 6500 words, aimed at introducing a wider audience to the use of social media services, social networking sites and content sharing platforms. The original posts can still be found, for now, on the [Big Green Challenge Blog](#) but I have compiled this document, which contains all eight posts, for those who might wish to download, print or otherwise share the content.

2. About the Big Green Challenge

In early 2008, 355 groups came forward with a wide range of imaginative and practical ideas for reducing CO₂ emissions in their communities. NESTA selected 100 of the most promising groups, who received support from the Big Green Challenge team to develop their ideas into detailed plans. From this group, NESTA shortlisted 10 Finalists who are now putting their ideas into practice to compete for the £1 million prize.

More information can be found at <http://www.biggreenchallenge.org.uk>

3. About the Author

Robin Hamman heads the Social Media team at Headshift, Europe's Leading Social Business Consultancy. Prior to joining Headshift, Robin was the Head of Blogging at the BBC where, in a seven year career there, he taught hundreds, if not thousands, of his colleagues how to reach out to and engage with audiences through the use of message boards, web based chat, mobile phones, blogs, social networking platforms and other social tools. Robin has also worked as an Executive Producer for Granada (now ITV) and a wireless start-up at the wrong end of the dotcom boom.

Robin has published numerous academic studies of online communities and life online. He holds an BA in Education, MA Sociology, MPhil in Communication Studies and PgDip in Law. He is currently a Visiting Journalism Fellow at City University, London and was previously a Non-Residential Fellow at Stafford University's CyberLaw Department.

Robin's personal blog, named one of the most influential "journo blogs" by the Press Gazette in 2008, can be found at <http://www.cybersoc.com> and his hyper-local blog about St. Albans, where he lives, is at <http://www.stalbansblog.co.uk>

4. The Guide to Using Social Media

Part One: Introducing social media and the whole web as your canvas

Social media, as Vicki Costello [pointed out](#) in her post here last week, has lots of potential to help individuals, groups and communities to communicate more effectively. This is primarily because social media - a melting pot of social connectivity, conversations and content sharing - allows people not only to create and disseminate their messages in their own way and on their own terms, but also creates opportunities for:

- direct channels of engagement with and between stakeholders
- enhanced transparency of purpose and action
- increased opportunities for communities to form and grow around ideas
- keep members of those communities better informed and involved
- increase the visibility of the collective knowledge and creativity within the community
- reach out to new audiences of potential supporters

It's pretty powerful stuff so, over the next six to eight weeks, I'll be writing a series of posts - this one theoretical, the rest practical - here to help you learn how to get the best out of emerging social media tools and techniques. This week, in what is likely to be the most theoretical post of the bunch, I'll set the scene by defining social media for those who are a bit unsure what we're on about and will talk about what I see as the key to success on the web today: the ability to use the whole web as your canvas. Over the coming weeks my posts will offer more practical advice on how to actually get started using some of the services and tools mentioned here today.

As I started writing this post, I realised that I didn't really have a one line definition of social media, so I used a social networking tool called twitter to send a short message to my followers, essentially friends and contacts who subscribe to my messages, or tweets as they are called on twitter, asking if they might help. Within a few minutes I had half a dozen thoughtful responses including:

"Social media is a new form of technology based communication. It fosters dialogue, transparency and collaboration." - [Stefan](#)

"like real life, just electric?" - [Dominic](#)

"Not media, but using technology for a conversation that connects, enables and leads to action, either online or offline." - [Jason](#)

"Making things, sharing them, seeing what other people have made, commenting on those things and adding to them." - [Chris](#)

My [favourite response](#) came from [Howard Rheingold](#), a widely respected author, University Professor, past speaker [at NESTA events](#) and a longtime friend who I credit with helping me land my first real job helping build online communities back in 1998, who wrote:

"Many to many media that gains value as more people participate, and which enabled people to connect with each other."

There are hundreds of services and tools which could justifiably fall within the definition of social media - below are just a few that spring to mind:

- Social networking services such as [Facebook](#), [Bebo](#) and [Myspace](#)
- Content sharing sites including [flickr](#) and [YouTube](#)
- Online discussion spaces such as message boards, forums and chat rooms
- Blogging platforms which allow easy publishing and more, including [Wordpress](#), [Blogger](#), [Typepad](#) and others
- Micro-blogging services including [Twitter](#), which is mentioned above
- Collaboration platforms, such as wiki's

The important thing to understand about each of these services is that that they tend to do one thing very well indeed, but are less good at other things. Social media is no exception to the cliché, which often rings true, that you've got to have the right tools to do the job. So, for example, if you want to post photographs and have discussions with other keen photographers, you'd be hard pressed to find a better place than flickr to do that but you probably wouldn't want to use flickr for collaborative working.

This is where we start talking about using the whole web as your canvas (with much owed to [Tom Loosemore](#), who did much to bring this idea to life for me) - an idea which has, at its root, the idea that the internet is a vast network of interlinking conversations.

In the past, many people and organisations cared only about the growth of their own website. This is a bit like trying to plant a single apple tree at the end of a fenced garden. It might blossom, and bare a few apples, but it's unlikely to flourish without other apples trees in the close vicinity with which to cross-pollinate. Uploading an image or video straight to your website or blog does exactly this - it services the audience already inside the fence but its impact is confined, and thus smaller.

When you think of the whole web as your canvas, you use links to send your visitors to other places on the web to bring visitors back to you. You distribute content all over the web - photos on flickr, posts on your blog, short messages from out in the field to twitter, podcasts to odeo - each time reaching out to different, and potentially new, audiences. You participate widely, and wider participation takes place around you. It's like planting a whole bunch of trees in an orchard, and watching them each gain from, and contribute to, the success of all the other trees.

The most effective way to grow audiences online is becoming less about having a single destination for people to visit and more about having multiple destinations, a sort of distributed web presence, scattered all over the web. But before you dive right in, make sure you

- Seek out and find the places online where people might be interested in your content and your message
- Learn about how people participate in those spaces
- Make sure that your contributions would be welcome
- Be transparent about who you are and what you're trying to achieve

Before you know it, you'll be growing audiences all over the web. Some of them may very well never visit your website but does that really matter if, regardless of where they're doing it, more and more people are able to learn about, and engage with, what you're trying do?

This post is part of series on using social media to get your message out and, as I'm sure you're gathered from this post, do a whole lot more than just that. In the posts which follow, I'll be providing more practical, hands-on advice, how-to's and inspiring examples to help you get the most out of social media. Please do feel encouraged to follow or join in the conversation.

Part Two: Reaching new audiences with photos online

In this post, the second in a series about getting the most out of [using social media](#), I'll discuss a few of the different ways the [Big Green Challengers](#), [Finalists](#) and other groups can use photographs to tell their story and reach out to new audiences.

Most people building a website would upload their pages and images directly to their web host. When people visit those pages, the images, along with text and any other content, is displayed. The problem with this approach is that the only people who will see those images are those who already know about the website, probably because they are familiar with the organisation or individual behind it. There is another way which, through the clever use of social media, can help you gain more from posting your images online.

Photo sharing websites such as [flickr](#), [picasa](#), [photobucket](#) and [smugmug](#) (to name a few) allow people to upload, store, share, describe, discuss and sometimes print digital images. Each of these services has large audiences of people actively seeking out photographs for information, fun, or personal or professional re-use. By posting your images here, then embedding them in your own website, you're potentially getting your image - and through it your ideas, message or organisation - in front of a whole new audience.

So here's the technique:

1. choose and register for a photo-sharing website
2. upload your photograph to that site
3. describe your images properly using titles, descriptions and tags (tags are words or phrases that tell other people what subjects or themes your content relates to)
4. make sure you put a link back to the related content page on your website
5. copy the embed code, which you'll usually find next to or below the image on most photo-sharing websites (although on flickr you need to go to the All Sizes tab above the photo), and paste it into the html source code of your blog post or web page

Last weekend, I was in Brecon Beacons running a social media workshop with the Big Green Challenge Finalists [there](#).

The photo above was taken outside the training venue. I've used the instructions provided here to upload, tag and link from that photo to this blog. Here's [how it looks on flickr](#).

With any luck, at least a few of the people who search for photos of Brecon Beacons, Wales or any of the other tags I've used to describe the photo on flickr, will stumble across my photo, want to know more, and click the link. If just one of those visitors - people who are unlikely to have any previous contact with me or the Big Green Challenge - decides they like what they see here, is encouraged to learn more, and perhaps even joins the efforts of the communities, then the very minimal additional effort required to go about posting images in this way will have been well spent.

In the coming weeks, I'll be offering further advice and step-by-step instructions to help you make the most of social media tools and services to tell your story, share knowledge, engage with stakeholders, and reach out to new supporters. In the next post, the third in this series, I'll show you how to build google maps and geo-tag your photos and other content.

Part Three: Getting Started Making Google Maps

Many of the [Big Green Challenge](#) communities are reaching out, and creating a greater impact, by working with people and organisations across their areas or regions. Maps give those communities a way to visually documenting this.

There are quite a few ways to create and share a map online. The easiest method I've come across is to use [google maps](#) which offers a straight-forward, drag and drop interface. More advanced tools, such as [MapBuilder](#), can be used to create richer, but more complex, map [mash-ups](#) where data or other content is plotted on a map, sometimes automatically, as can be seen on the now famous [Chicago Crime Map](#).

I am often surprised how many people use the maps I've created. My [St. Albans wi-fi map](#), for example, has been viewed nearly 78,000 times in less than six months and at least two or three visitors a day follow the link from my google map to my blog.

Below is a map I created to display the location of each of the 10 Big Green Challenge finalist communities:

[View Larger Map](#)

Here's how you can make your own:

1. Create a google account
2. [Go to Google Maps](#)
3. Click "My Maps"
4. Click Create Map
5. Name your map and give it a description (don't forget to link to your website if you have one)
6. Add points to your map by dragging and dropping the pin to the correct location
7. Save your map
8. Click on the link icon at the top right corner of your map and get the embed code
9. Embed the html code for your map into your blog or website

That's all you need to do to get started making basic google maps which, despite their simplicity, are often a powerful and compelling way to tell the story of what you or your organisation is achieving in the real world.

This post is part of a series of guests posts about using social media to create a distributed web presence. My previous posts have discussed the benefits of using [the whole web as your canvas](#) and [putting photos online](#). In next week's post I'll show you how to put video online.

Part Four: Sharing Videos Online

This is the fourth in a series guest posts I'm making here to help groups and individuals spread their ideas and information more widely [using social media](#). Previous posts in the series have discussed [photo sharing](#) and [making google maps](#). In this post I'll introduce video sharing.

If you're looking for a post that covers advanced video editing then this probably isn't the post for you as it's more about sharing videos online than it is about shooting and editing videos. Most of the numerous videos I've published online over the years have been unedited, single take clips recorded on a camera phone or ordinary digital stills camera.

Don't get me wrong - a proper, dedicated digital video camera will almost always help you achieve better audio and video quality but I tend only to use mine to capture longer videos of

important moments, such as birthdays and other events, with the intention of eventually getting around to editing them complete with titles, transitions, etc. For anything else, the camera in my pocket is the camera I end up using the most and, for me, that's historically been [a mobile phone](#). It's probably worth noting that the gap between the quality of a dedicated video camera and the portability of a mobile device has been bridged by the tiny, hard-drive based [flip camera](#) which some of the Big Green Challenge finalists are using.

YouTube is probably the place where most people have their first encounter with video sharing online. Registration is free and it's simple to upload and share a video, particularly as YouTube has created a section for [user created how-to's](#) and help videos should you find any part of the process unclear.

There are, of course, other video sharing services. These include [Vimeo](#), which has a really slick interface allowing people to leave comments at points within a video rather than just beneath it, [Blip.tv](#), [Viddler](#) and others. [Flickr](#), most well known for photosharing and appearing in my post here on that topic, also allows the upload of short video clips. [NowPublic](#), which describes itself as a news site created by it's users, would be a good choice for anyone with content which could be described as "newsy" - including activism - because it draws an audience that would engage with that sort of content.

All the services above are free and work in basically the same way - anyone can view videos (and other content) but to post comment users usually have to register. Once registered, users can begin uploading, describing (using titles or tags), then sharing their content. Some might be surprised that I'm not going to give this process the step by step treatment here but most of the services I've listed provide their own easy to follow video tutorials which I'm unlikely to be able to match.

So what is the key to successful video sharing online?

1. Choose the right service to reach your target audience - YouTube has mass appeal but Vimeo, NowPublic and others are more likely to reach certain niche audiences.
2. Consider publishing your video under a [creative commons license](#) which allows others to use your video for their own purposes.
3. Make sure you allow others to use the embed code to display your video on their blogs, myspace pages, facebook profiles, etc
4. Always link from the videos you post online back to your website so that people who stumble across your video content can follow the link back to find out more about you.

I hope that, by following the tips above, that you gain a lot more from creating and posting video online.

This post is part of a series of guest posts about social media I'm publishing here on the Big Green Challenge Blog. The next post, which will follow in a few days, will be about using mobile phones to document and publish your story using mobile enabled services such as qik, twitter and wordpress.

Part Five: Taking the Internet Everywhere

This post is part of a series of guest posts I've been writing here on the Big Green Challenge blog to help individuals and organisations get more out of using the internet, in particular [social media](#) tools and services, to create and share content and ideas with a wider audience. Previous posts in the series have discussed [photo sharing](#), [making google maps](#) and [video sharing](#).

Not so long ago, if someone wanted to use the internet they'd have to physically plug an ethernet cable into a router or dial in over a phoneline. Nowadays, many people have wifi in their offices or homes - and, increasingly, wifi access is being offered at a small charge or free by businesses and in public places - enabling them to move around, untethered, from room to room whilst using the internet.

The next big thing, and the topic of this post, is the ability to access and share content on the go, wherever you happen to be and whenever you want, using mobile broadband.

Mobile broadband comes in several flavours, one of which is a [3G](#) dongle. I recently purchased one of these small devices that plugs into my laptop's USB port and gives me high speed access to the internet, and have found it particularly useful when I want to do some work on the train. Most of the Big Green Challenge Finalists have projects that involve getting out and doing things within their community and a laptop giving them internet access wherever they are could almost certainly come in handy. You might be surprised that mobile broadband has really come down in price - I bought my dongle for £30 and it's pay as you go tariff starts at £2 a day.

If you're interested in learning more, a friend of mine, journalist Adam Tinworth, recently wrote a [helpful review](#) of his experience of installing and using a 3g dongle.

The other type of mobile broadband is to use a mobile phone to access the internet. Some will remember the introduction many years ago of WAP which allowed stripped down, text only versions of websites to be viewed on a mobile phone screen. Things have moved on a lot since then, with some current mobiles providing a browser based internet experience that looks and acts just like that on a desktop or laptop computer. So anything you might be able to accomplish on the web - searching for content, booking a train ticket, sending an email - is now possible using just a mobile phone with a data connection.

Many current mobile phones also allow users to install applications, just like on a computer, that make it possible to capture and share content online including text, blog posts, geo-location, photos and videos. In fact, it's now possible to actually stream live video from some mobile phones to the web - effectively giving individuals much of the live broadcasting capability previously enjoyed only by major news organisations.

In my next guest post here, I'll discuss some of the applications and services that turn mobile phones into powerful tools for capturing moments and creating and sharing content online.

Part Six: Live and Direct With Your Mobile

In this week's guest post about using social media I'll be discussing how mobile phones can be used as powerful tools for capturing moments and for creating and sharing content online.

Most current mobile phones come with a reasonable quality camera built in and the ability to add and run applications over the phone network. Because I carry my phone with my wherever I go, I often find myself capturing moments, places, people and things that I never would have previously - and because my phone is connected to the internet using a standard called 3g, I can instantly upload and share my photos and videos online without needing to connect to my computer.

There are many different mobile phones, networks and mobile enabled services to choose from and the ones I mention here might not be, for you, the best or least expensive so do look around. It's also worth noting that, unless you have an unlimited data plan, uploading or streaming from your mobile can be very expensive and there are horror stories about people who have used data intensive mobile applications whilst abroad - it's best to check with your network provider before getting started.

In January, a passenger on a ferry across the Hudson River in New York used his mobile phone to take a now iconic photo of a [partially submerged plane](#) in the water and upload it to TwitPic, [alerting his friends](#) on Twitter in the process. The now iconic image of a partially submerged plane in the Hudson River, taken by a passenger on the iPhone and uploaded using TwitPic, is a great example of the utility of having a network enabled camera with you at all times.

As I've traveled to meet each of the Big Green Challenge finalists, I've used twitter and twitpic to update my friends as to my movements and, through doing so, have picked up all sorts of local knowledge that's either smoothed my way on public transportation or helped me locate free wifi access, a few good coffees and to avoid at least one bad meal. That's genuinely useful.

Another service I've used widely is [Zonetag](#), a photo uploader created by Yahoo Research Labs, which uploads [geo-tagged](#) photographs to Flickr, the photo-sharing service I discussed [in an earlier post](#) here. There are other uploaders out there - [shozu](#) is a popular one - so it's worth trying a few to see which works best for your needs.

You can also shoot and stream live video from a mobile handset using services such as [Qik](#) and [Flixwagon](#). I personally use the former but, as far as I can see, both offer pretty much the same core functionality - to stream video live and to see comments from people who are watching remotely. Although consumer services, news organisations, including the BBC, have started using these services.

Last year, I used a mobile phone to capture and [live stream](#) BBC News Technology correspondent, Rory Cellan-Jones, streaming a mobile interview with Jim Buckmaster, the CEO of online listings service [Craigslist](#).

In addition to services that allow users to create and upload images and videos, most major blogging and social networking platforms have created applications that work on a range of mobile phones and - better still - most of these applications are free or very inexpensive.

I hope you found this quick overview of mobile services interesting and useful. Please do leave a comment if you've worked one of these tools into what you're doing online or as an organisation.

In next week's blog post on social media I'll be talking about blogging, both as a type of service or tool and as a technique.

Part Seven: Key Techniques for Successful Blogging

Over the past few weeks, I've published a number of posts here to help organisations and individuals to get started using social media tools and services to inform and engage. This post will discuss blogs, both as a tool and a technique, for pulling it all together.

My previous posts discussed various ways of creating and publishing content of various types, and making it available on services where audiences are pro-actively seeking out and consuming that type of content - so, for example, using the photo-sharing service [Flickr](#) for photos and the video-sharing service [YouTube](#) for video. Here's an index to those posts:

1. [Introduction: social media and the whole web as your canvas](#)
2. [Reaching new audiences with photo-sharing](#)
3. [Sharing your videos online](#)
4. [Getting started making google maps](#)
5. [Taking the internet everywhere](#)
6. [Live and direct with your mobile](#)

The approach I've suggested, using the whole web as your canvas, is a clever way of getting your ideas in front of new audiences. My view is that it's more important that people consume and interact with my content, wherever that content is, than to put all my eggs in one basket by creating a single, destination website that is viewed only by those who are already engaged.

A blog, which is essentially an easy to use, template based content management system where posts, sometimes called entries, are typically arranged in reverse chronological order. Because they allow content to be pulled in or embedded from elsewhere, including many of the services I've previously discussed in this series of posts, blogs can be used to pull all your web based content together in one place so that, once people do find a photo or video or other piece of content out on the web, you have a central place to link them into should they wish to know more.

In my previous role as [Head of Blogging at the BBC](#), I used to run one day workshops to help bloggers and other editorial and production staff learn how to use their blog. Almost the entire day was taken up with discussion of technique and creating content rather than step by step instructions on how to actually create a blog or post an entry. I continue to believe that understanding blogging as a technique, rather than as a tool, is the best way to approach blog training. None of it's hard, but getting the technique right is by far more important.

There are a number of free or low cost tools which can be used to create a blog including [Wordpress](#), which is the platform used by this blog, [Blogger](#) and [Typepad](#). Once registered, users can very easily create a new blog. All that's normally required is a name for the blog and, once that's been decided, there are usually a number of predefined design templates to choose from. Look and feel is controlled independently of content so, in most instances, the design can be changed at the click of the button at any time without affecting the actual content of the blog.

Once you've set up a blog, you'll probably want to create your "about" page where you tell readers who you are and what you're aiming to achieve. You might also want to add contact details.

Next, you may want to add links to other websites or blogs - your organisation, your pages on other social media services, other people or groups saying interesting things, etc. In Wordpress, you do this by going into the dashboard and adding a links widget. In blogger this functionality is called a blogroll and in typepad is called a typelist. Linking is one of the most important things a blogger can do. Not only does it introduce your readers to other sites they might be interested in, but it also alerts - because most bloggers look at statistics showing how many visitors they've had and where those visitors have come from - other bloggers to your existence of your blog. I refer to a link tap because it's a bit like tapping someone on the shoulder to let them know you're there.

Once you've added an about page and links, you will probably want to create your first blog post. A lot of people find it difficult to get started but there is an easy way to do so. Rather than creating an entire post from scratch, you might want to start off by writing "link wrap" posts that describe something you've read elsewhere online, quote a small section of that text, and point out why you think it's interesting. You'll also want to make sure you link to the source. The value you add in doing this is two-fold. Firstly, you're introducing your audience to content you think they might be interested in and, secondly, by summarising or pointing to interesting sections of that content, you're editorialising that link. The person or organisation who created the content originally will also benefit because users will click through to view the source. Also, because the algorithm used by google and other search sites often gives pages with more links greater authority, your link directly impacts the findability of that page for people who search for it later.

Most blogs allow users to comment on posts. There are pros and cons to the different methods of comment moderation. I'm not a solicitor, but have published a post elsewhere [introducing some](#) of the issues. If you do allow comments, you might want to create and publish details of your moderation policy, including your rules, so that users know exactly what's expected of them.

A lot of bloggers talk about the importance of joining the conversation. You can do this by using the comments that come into your blog as points of discussion in subsequent posts. You may also want to post comments on posts on other blogs, particularly if you link to and discuss those posts. There's no reason why you shouldn't include a link to your own post, so long as it's relevant, in your comments elsewhere but do make sure you're linking to something that genuinely adds to the conversation rather than spamming the blog with irrelevant, and probably unwanted, links in a bid just to get some traffic.

Another way of participating in the conversation is to link prolifically from your own posts as a way of illustrating points and to alert the bloggers who created the content you link to of the existence of your posts. Because you'll want to stay abreast of the conversation - the linking, quoting, and commenting across a number of topical blogs - you'll need to use tools such as an RSS reader, which will be discussed in my next post here, and "buzz tracking" tools such as [technorati](#) to find and keep track of what people are saying within your niche and about your posts.

Technorati is a blog search tools. It usually picks up new posts faster than google or other traditional search engines because most blog platforms send technorati a notification, called a "ping", each time an update is made. Technorati is useful for finding, based on keyword searches, blogs and posts about specific topics but the reason it's used by most serious bloggers is because, if you input the URL of your blog, you can instantly see all the blog posts that link to your blog. Armed with this knowledge, you can go out and see what others have posted, and participate in the conversation your blog is part of wherever it's taking place.

When you create a blog post, you'll usually want to give it a title, create the body of the post, and then categorise or tag it so that readers can more easily find what they are looking for. When you name your blog and title your posts, as well as when you use categories and tags, you'll want to think very carefully about the words you use, and ensure that they are terms people are likely to search for. One of my blogs, about [St. Albans](#) where I live, actually appears higher in the google results for St. Albans than one of the two local newspapers, precisely because I've used St. Albans in the name of the blog, in the title of most posts, and in each of the categories I use. It also helps that I link out to all the other St. Albans based bloggers I could find and many of them have reciprocated with links back to me, again reinforcing within the google algorithm the understanding that my blog is not only about St. Albans but is highly regarded as a source of good information by other websites.

Actually using the blogging tool you choose is the easy part. Find a blogging platform you like and play around a bit, learning to use the various options and tools, before you start heavily promoting it. You're bound to make a few mistakes early on, but get your technique right and you'll be 3/4 of the way towards successful blogging.

This post is part of a series of guests post I'm making here to introduce some of the social media tools and techniques people and organisations can use to inform and connect with audiences and stakeholders. In my next post, I'll discuss using RSS to help find and keep track of interesting content that you can quote from, link to, and build upon.

Part Eight: Using RSS to Keep Track of the Conversation

If you are interested in regularly consuming content from a particular website, or want keep track of keyword searches without having to input them time and time again, the topic of my guest post this week, [RSS](#) (Really Simple Syndication), may very well be of interest to you.

Most people view web based content through a browser such as Firefox or Internet Explorer. If readers don't want to miss newly published content, they have to remember to frequently check each site they want to follow. Sometimes there is new content, other times there isn't - [a colleague](#) of mine likens it to chickens walking around in circles pecking at whatever is on the ground in front of them, an analogy he makes to point out that this is almost certainly not the most efficient or affective way of finding, keeping track of and consuming new content.

A more efficient way is to put yourself at the centre of the flow of information by subscribing to RSS feeds, sometimes called "web feeds", of the websites and other content sources you're interested in monitoring. An RSS feed looks like a stripped down version of a website - the design and formatting isn't normally visible in the feed, only the text, images and other content elements. As an example, here's what [the RSS feed](#) (will open in a new window) for this, the Big Green Challenge Blog, looks like.

Many times, where content is available as an RSS feed, a distinctive orange button (as seen to left) can be found on the page. Other times, an RSS logo appears next to the URL in the address bar at the top of a browser.

Subscribing to an RSS feed is like ordering a subscription to a magazine or newspaper although, in the case of RSS, it's nearly always free. Everytime new content is published, a copy is sent out to all subscribers, meaning those with a subscription needn't ever miss anything.

In order to subscribe to an RSS feed, you'll first need to sign up for an RSS reader. The two web based readers I'm most familiar with, [Bloglines](#) and [Google Reader](#), are both free and easy to use.

To subscribe to an RSS feed, users can click on the RSS button found on a page or in their browser's address window, which should open a new page showing the address of the RSS feed to be subscribed to and, often, a pull down menu of different RSS readers so that the subscription can be made with just one click. The other way to subscribe to an RSS feed is to copy the URL of the page or feed you want to subscribe to and paste it into the "add feed" form within your chosen RSS reader.

Once subscribed to a feed, each time there is new content it will appear in your reader. Most readers also allow users to mark content as read or unread, to share content with others, and to bookmark any content they might want to return to later.

It's not just content sites that offer RSS feeds - many social media and search sites also do. So, for example, if you're interested in getting an alert every time a user on twitter mentions

the name of your organisation, you simply [input that search](#) once and subscribe to the feed. You can also subscribe to feeds from, to mention just a few, [flickr tags](#) and [technorati](#) blog searches - meaning that everytime posts a photo or blog post about the topic you've defined in your original search, you're alerted to that content.

If you'd like to [learn more about RSS](#), there's an excellent, easy to follow video on the Common Craft Show that's well worth viewing.

RSS isn't just useful for subscribing to web feeds, it's also the delivery mechanism used by many social tools and social networks to share content. So, for example, when I author a [blog post](#) on one of my own blogs, it uses RSS to alert a service called [twitterfeed](#) that I've done so. Twitterfeed then fires out a twitter tweet with the title and link of that post. The RSS feed of my blog also feeds into [facebook](#) and [linked-in](#) so that my contacts on those services can see what I've written. I also used to use another service, [talkr](#), which took my RSS feed and created a computer generated audio file of the content. This made it possible for me to offer a podcast of my blog on [Apple's iTunes Store](#) without ever having to actually record a thing myself.

It's also possible to aggregate and remix RSS feeds using services such as [xfruits](#) and [Yahoo Pipes](#) to create custom feeds of content, for example all news stories from ten different UK based news sources which mention "Big Green Challenge" or any other keyword you define.

RSS is a really powerful tool in that it helps users to better organise the flow of content around them and, for those creating content, offers an extremely flexible stream of content for use by other people and services.

Why mention it here, in a series of guest posts about social media? Because not only do most blogs and social tools offer RSS output, it's also - in my books at least - an indispensable tool for helping bloggers to keep track of the conversations their contributions are part of. Finding, subscribing and reading what others are saying is the first step towards making successful contributions yourself. Quoting and linking to that content is the next step and, once you've gained confidence and understanding, you can begin to add value by contextualising those quotes and links, or voicing an opinion about them. Joining into an already active conversation by listening and contributing, at least initially, with gestures such as a smile or nod is, in most instances, far more socially acceptable than bursting into the conversation by interrupting with strong views of your own. And this is exactly how you can use RSS - to listen, to inform yourself, to help you keep track of the views and contributions of others, to provide material to link to and to, later, contextualise or comment upon.

This is the eighth post in a series I've been publishing here on the Big Green Challenge Blog. Other posts have looked at a range of social tools and techniques for telling stories, finding new audiences and engaging with stakeholders. You'll find an index on last week's post, which provided an [indepth guide to blogging](#).