

Recipe: Receiving Journal Table of Contents Automatically

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Problem

You want to regularly go through the papers published in the most important journals in your research field.

Solution

Subscribe to the journal table of contents (TOC) RSS feed. Almost all journals now provide their TOC as RSS feed that is updated with every new issue. RSS is a standard web format used to publish frequently updated works. A journal article RSS feed usually contains one item for every article, each with title, authors, abstract and link to the fulltext article. To subscribe to the RSS feed of the journal TOC, look out for the RSS icon

at the table of contents page. Links to the RSS feeds of some popular scientific journals are:

- Nature
- Science
- Cell
- Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences

Although most web browsers (e.g. Internet Explorer 7, Firefox or Safari) will understand RSS feeds (so you can just click on the links provided above), you should use a dedicated RSS reader if you subscribe to more than a few RSS feeds. There are web-based RSS readers (Google Reader and Bloglines are popular choices) and dedicated programs for every platform (e.g. FeedDemon for Windows or NetNewsWire for Macintosh).

Dedicated RSS readers have two important features: they keep track of the journal articles you have already read, and they allow you to mark interesting articles for later use: reading the full-text article (online or after printing the PDF), and storing the article in your reference manager of choice.

RSS readers are also available for mobile devices such as the iPhone and are great for quickly going through a journal table of contents on the way to work.

Discussion

Regular reading of journal table of contents in your field (browsing) is still an important way to keep up with the literature, even though the use of online databases to find specific articles (searching) has become more common in recent years.

Some people prefer to regularly flip through the printed journal when the latest issue arrives. But not only is there a delay between electronic publication and arrival of the printed journal, but most individuals can't afford to personally subscribe to more than a few journals at most. And looking at the printed copy subscribed to by the department or library is often no longer practical to do on a regular basis.

Receiving the journal TOC by email is a popular alternative, but has several disadvantages:

- Receiving the TOC by email requires a few extra steps, including providing your email address, and often signing up for a (free) account with the journal
- Organizing the TOC emails with your email program (e.g. moving to appropriate subfolders) requires extra work
- Marking an interesting article for later reading requires extra work, because the TOC is sent in one big email message
- Sharing the TOC with coworkers is more difficult than with RSS feeds

Because RSS is a universal computer-readable format, receiving the journal TOC can easily be extended. One example would be the integration of the journal RSS feeds into reference managers. CiteULike has this feature (e.g. the most recent issue of *Nature*), but I hope that more reference managers will do the same in the future.

Although almost all journals now provide RSS feeds to their TOC, how they do it might differ. Not every journal RSS feed uses the DOI – now the preferred way to link to a journal article. There are also small differences in what information is provided in the RSS feed.

This blog post was inspired by a recent discussion about the digital divide among scientists.

References

Hammond, T., Hannay, T., & Lund, B. (2004). The Role of RSS in Science Publishing. *D-Lib Magazine*, 10(12). <https://doi.org/10.1045/december2004-hammond>