

» First Steps Beginner-level tutorials for users dipping their toes into Linux

First Steps with

Change the way you consume blogs, news sources and loads of other stuff with the best technology you've never heard of, says **Andy Channelle**...



Our expert

Andy Channelle

Andy has been taking his first steps in Linux software for the past six years and has been interested in technology since the advent of the Dragon 32.



RSS (Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication depending upon whom you believe) is one of those technologies that could have a dramatic impact on the browsing habits of millions of users – if only they knew it existed. Basically, it's a more effective way of using the Internet; making the content you're interested in come to you rather than having to go out and find it, or refind it, every time you want an update. In this tutorial we'll look at setting up an RSS client in both Gnome and KDE before turning our attention to more integrated solutions that will put RSS feeds into your browser or mail client – the place where many people feel they belong. We'll also look at a couple of online solutions that can be used to manage your information on any network connected computer.

But first, what is RSS? Simply put, RSS is an XML data format that allows content producers to package up their work – blogs, news stories, features – in a way that can then be 'subscribed' to by readers in their web browsers, email clients or a dedicated RSS reader. This piece of software will then 'poll' the website where the subscription is held – well, a specific page within the site – and if there has been an update, the new content will be downloaded into the reader and will appear as unread, just like a new email does. The user can then click on the link to see either a summary of the story or the entire text. In either case, there will be a link to take the user through to the originating site.

As an example, we could visit the BBC's news website, navigate to the Technology section (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/>

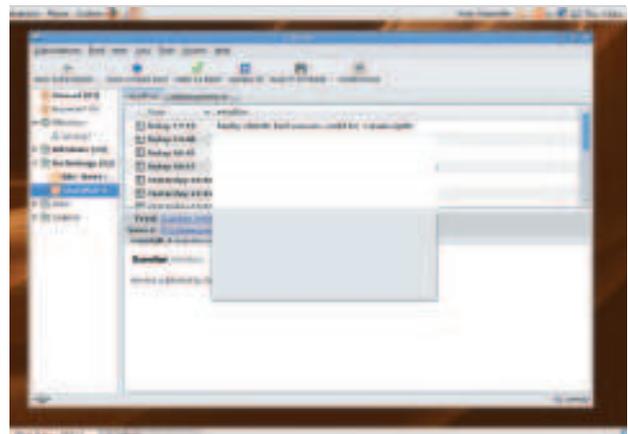
[technology/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/default.stm)), find the RSS icon – a small orange square with a broadcasting-esque symbol and subscribe to the feed. Every few minutes, our software will check the RSS feed from the Beeb (the page itself is at http://newsrss.bbc.co.uk/rss/newsonline_uk_edition/technology/rss.xml) and if anything has been added, it will be downloaded to the reader. And so we don't have to go to this site to check whether anything has been added, we'll know through the magic of RSS. Smart.

And while we're using text in our examples below, RSS is sophisticated enough to cope with other content formats including audio (podcasting), pictures (photocasting) and even video (vodcasting?!), so these instructions could be repurposed quite easily for a range of different tasks.

Setting up Liferea

As you may expect there are many RSS readers available for Linux and for the main desktops. On Gnome, the 'standard' reader is *Liferea*, an application with a clumsy name (an abbreviation for Linux FEed READER), but nonetheless has a powerful and intuitive featureset that is equally at home on a KDE desktop. The latest version of *Liferea* is 1.4.9 and is available from <http://liferea.sourceforge.net>. Source and binaries are available for a range of distributions and we grabbed the latest Ubuntu-specific package via the desktop's Applications > Add/Remove menu. Once installed, the application will appear under the Internet portion of the Applications menu, and by default it ships with a wide selection of feeds from sites such as Slashdot, Groklaw and Planet Debian – not exactly light reading for the avid desktop user. We'll get rid of those in a minute.

The user interface is divided into three panes, a narrow one on the left where your feed source tree is, a large top pane to show the contents of the feed and a large bottom pane showing the



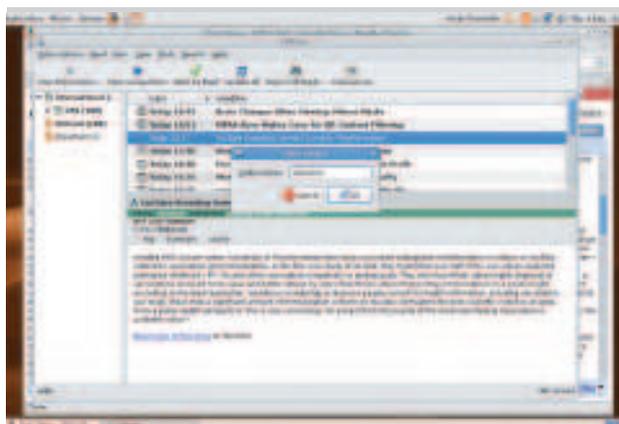
» *Liferea* is a cool standalone Gnome RSS reader that is equally at home in KDE.

» **Last month** How to migrate all your system settings from Windows to Linux.

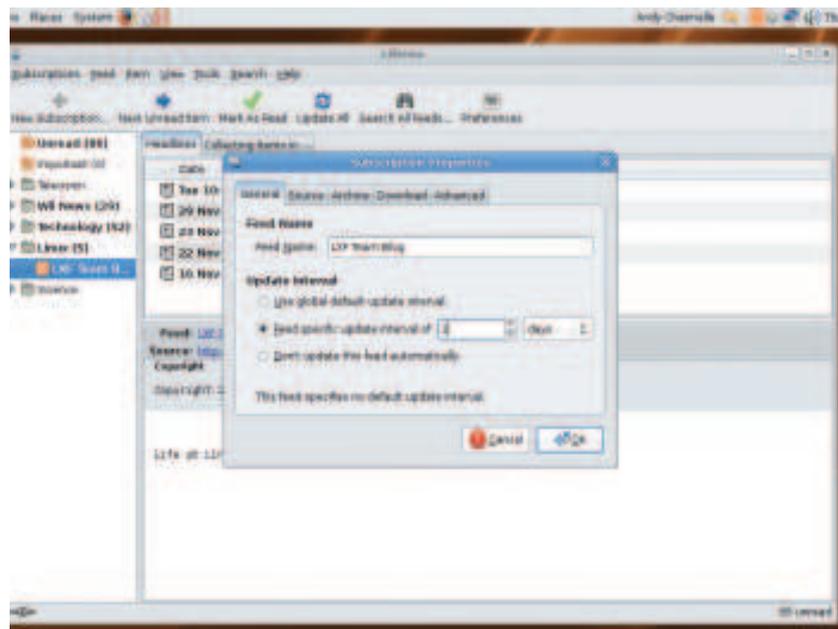
RSS

content of individual stories, or more likely a summary. To show the feed you select it from the source tree, to show the content, you select from the articles list and to see the whole story you click the headline in the summary. Simple. And when a story has been clicked on it will lose its bold designation so you know it's been read.

We want to customise *Liferea* to reflect **LXF**'s tastes, so first we're going to set a few folders to collect individual feeds. To do this, right-click anywhere within the feed source tree pane and select New Folder. Give this folder a name such as **Television**, and then repeat for every other category you want to define. If you accidentally create a folder in the wrong place it can be dragged and dropped to a new location within the list. Unusually, *Liferea* respects your choices and won't try to reorder your folders on an alphabetical basis, so if you decide you want TV ahead of Linux, then you can drag and drop safe in the knowledge that things will be exactly the same next time you boot up the software. Now we're satisfied with the list of folders we can begin adding feeds. Fire up *Firefox* and navigate to the source of your desired feed. In the *Firefox* address bar, click on the RSS icon and then click the drop-down menu labelled Live Bookmarks and select Choose Application... This will launch a standard file browser where you can locate the *Liferea* application. On our Ubuntu system it was at `/usr/bin/liferea-add-feed`. If you remember to check the Always Subscribe With... button, before hitting the final Subscribe button, you're next subscription will automatically be added to the application. The software tries to be a bit clever – a BBC subscription was automatically added to our Television folder (even though it was from the technology section of the site) but a Guardian Technology subscription was added to the **Technology** folder. If *Liferea* can judge our intentions well, it could make managing subscriptions much easier. If, however, it dumps a feed



› The application attempts to add feeds to the appropriate folder based on its content – it's usually pretty good.



into the wrong place it can just be dragged and dropped into the right location with no problem.

Opening up a feed means simply opening its folder and then clicking the required subscription. Handily, each feed will have a number next to it in brackets: this indicates the number of unread entries in the feed. Similarly, when you close a folder you'll get an aggregate number of the unread parts of each feed within the folder and, of course, at the top of the list is the Unread icon which tells you how much overall you're missing out on – which can

› Set a sensible interval for getting updates or between us, we could kill the internet!

“Liferea handles the saving of your chosen stories in an elegant fashion.”

sometimes look a little overwhelming. However, if it all starts to get a little too much you can right-click a feed or folder and select Mark All as Read.

By default *Liferea* will cache 100 entries from each feed and the rest will slowly disappear from the bottom of the feed into the ether. You can change this number by doing Tools > Preferences and then look under the Feeds tab. This is also where you can set the automatic refresh option for your feeds. It can be tempting to set everything to update every 10 minutes, but if everyone did this the internet would grind to a halt; instead choose to update every one or two hours and then, if you really do need a more (or less) frequent update from a specific feed you can set these individually by right-clicking a feed, selecting the Properties box and then setting the refresh rate in minutes, hours or days.

For posterity

While old news slipping from the bottom of your feed is usually a blessing, sometime you want to keep a story beyond its natural life – perhaps for university research or work purposes. *Liferea* tackles this problem really elegantly with a feature called News Bins. These are kind of virtual folders where you can drag and drop a story to keep for later consumption. Creating a News Bin is, once again, a case of right-clicking within the feed source tree pane and selecting the appropriate entry from the menu. Now simply right-click on a headline, select Copy to News Bin and select the newly



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» created bin from the list. This story will now stay within that folder even if you – or time – deletes the original feed story.

Even more powerful is the Search Folders feature – a new search folder can be added in the same way as a normal folder or news bin – which can be set to filter the contents of your feeds based on specific key words. So, for example, if you particularly interested in stem cell research, you could subscribe to a ton of medical or ethical news sources, set up a Smart folder to grab just stories that contain the phrase Stem Cell and then ignore the original feeds unless something that matches your criterion is published. This story will appear as a story within your named Smart Folder; stories already cached as part of a feed will also be added to the folder, but they will disappear as the cache gets cleared – unless you save them to a news bin. The system is capable of taking multiple arguments, so you could, for example, filter stories that *do* contain the phrase 'Stem Cell' but *not* the phrase 'George W Bush'.

Finally, the application also has a standard search facility which provides for the searching of keywords in all feeds. Unfortunately it's not possible to restrict searches to individual feeds, but you can't have everything.

Liferea is a well-rounded package that can manage feeds well and also integrates with a selection of online services such as Bloglines or Google Reader (see the box, *below*) to provide both



» **Firefox's subscription page allows you to choose your weapon (well, reader) of choice**

online (computer-neutral) access to your feeds as well as local access. To add a remote set of subscriptions to the application, right-click in the feeds list and, from the context sensitive menu, choose Subscriptions > New Source. Choose the source type from the three available options. The first is OPML, Planet or Blogroll, and if you choose this you'll simply need to add the URL for the subscription to have the content arrive in your reader. The second and third options – Bloglines and Google Reader respectively – will require you to input your username and password for the account before the subscription can be downloaded to your machine.

However, *Liferea* won't be able to synchronise the read state of your account with either Bloglines or Reader, so if you read something offline, this state won't be shown in the online version – and *vice versa*.

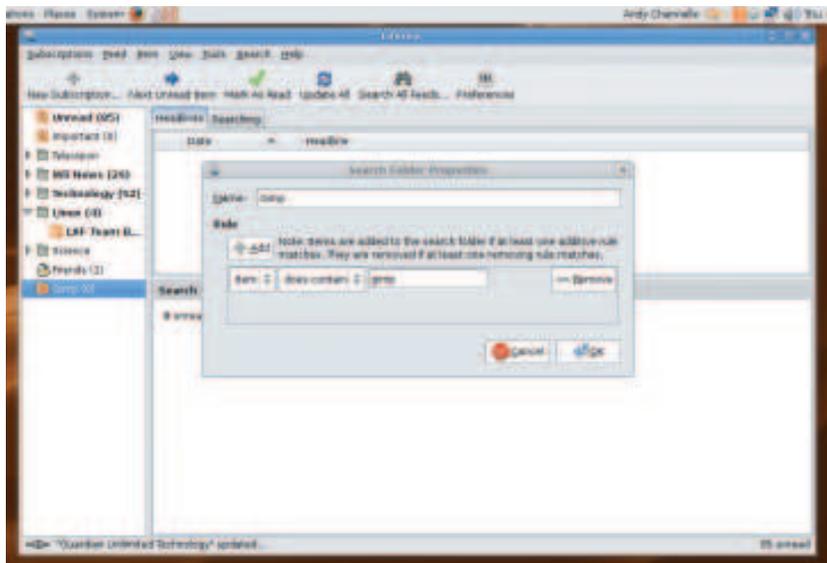
RSS in your browser

For many users, RSS is most at home in the web browser. This seems to tally with the thoughts of the *Firefox* developers because the technology is tightly integrated into the browser's bookmarks system. It's also incredibly simple to use.

To add an RSS bookmark, navigate to a site with an active feed. *Firefox* will display an RSS icon within its address bar if a site actually has a feed. Click on this to be taken off to the subscription page. The first time you do this, *Firefox* will offer to save the feed using Live Bookmarks (which is what we want at the moment), but there are also a few other options, including one to set any external application – see above – to handle the feeds. If you're happy with Live Bookmarks, click the option to 'Always use Live Bookmarks to subscribe to feeds' and then hit the Subscribe button. As with any bookmark you'll have the option of setting a location for the bookmark, and once that's done you can find it under the Bookmarks menu. A Live Bookmark will display the ubiquitous RSS icon, and selecting it will cause a new menu to fly out with the latest entries from your subscribed feed. Clicking any of these options will take you straight to the appropriate content.

You can, of course, do anything with these bookmarks as you could with any other type of bookmark. So if you go into Bookmarks > Organise Bookmarks... you could set up a New Folder, label it Feeds and then add your Live Bookmarks to that folder. If you then move this folder to the Bookmarks Toolbar folder and then, back in *Firefox*, select View > Toolbars > Bookmarks Toolbar, you'll never be more than two clicks away from the latest news.

If your needs are not extensive, Live Bookmarks will probably be enough to scratch your feed itch, but it's not the only way to integrate feeds into the browser. It's also possible to add an RSS plugin to *Firefox* and then view your feeds in a sidebar, which is great for those who have larger monitors or like viewing narrow



» **Smart Folders will ensure you only see the stories you need.**

No Client...

There are those who don't believe that you should bother with an RSS client and just use one of the many tools available on the internet. Probably the best online RSS tool is Google Reader, which benefits from a very close relationship with other Google services such as Blogger, Feedburner and the iGoogle Personal Homepage.

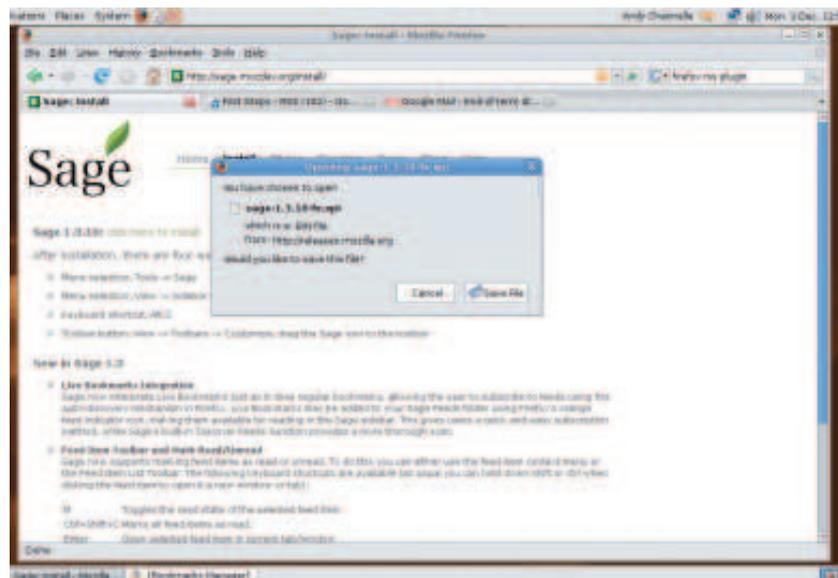
If you already use one Google service, you can use your username to log in to Google Reader at www.google.co.uk/reader. To add a feed to the service, you can navigate to the feed host, click on the RSS icon in the address bar and then copy (Ctrl+C) the URL from the address bar. In Google Reader, click on Add Subscription and then paste (Ctrl+V) the URL into the

appropriate space. You can also hit the Discover link to see feeds that *Big Brother*, sorry Google, thinks you might be interested in, based on your search habits and the feeds you've already subscribed to. Like *Sage*, Google Reader is completely styled by Cascading Style Sheets, and you can skin the entire application using the *Firefox* plugin *Stylish* which is available from <http://userstyles.org/stylish/>. This extension, and some of the available styles, can give Google Reader the look and feel of a native Linux, Windows or Mac desktop application.

Reader also integrates well with Google Gears, so you can download content for offline reading fairly easily.

websites. The pre-eminent RSS plugin for *Firefox* is *Sage*, which can be obtained from <http://sage.mozdev.org/>. It installs, as other plugins do, through a downloadable XPI file. If – as happened to us – the file doesn't install automatically, you can do File > Open File in *Firefox*, navigate and select the XPI and then hit OK. You'll need to restart the browser to fully install the plugin. *Sage* is very cool if you've collected lots of Live Bookmarks as it integrates that system automatically, which also means you won't have to change your method of adding feeds to the browser.

Once the browser has restarted, do View > Sidebar > Sage to open the sidebar, or click the *Sage* icon which may appear in your *Firefox* toolbar. It will be populated with a couple of feeds and clicking on any of these will do two things. Firstly it will display a long list of stories in this lower part of the sidebar. This is the headline feed. Secondly, it will display a formatted feed in the main pane of the browser in a new tab. This latter facet can be quite useful, but after a period you may find it's a bit annoying. Fortunately we can switch it off. In the *Sage* sidebar, select the Options drop-down from the toolbar and choose Settings... A new dialogue box will open up from which you can deselect Render Feeds in Content Area. Hit OK and now when you click on a feed in the top part of the side bar, you'll only see the list of headlines and your content area will stay untouched. To see a summary of the



need to look at Slashdot's green overload again. These style files are so simple, that it's quite easy to change colours, fonts, sized etc to create something completely unique – but that's something for another tutorial.

➤ **Sage is currently the best RSS reader for Firefox.**

If you spend any time on the internet – especially if you find yourself visiting a regular series of websites – a decent RSS reader can make your online life so much easier. *Liferea*'s powerful search folders offers the ideal combination of serendipitous discovery through feeds and the ability to filter masses of information into easy to manage streams of relevant data. Start using it – or one of the other systems mentioned here – and you may find it impossible to go back to plain old vanilla browsing again. **LXF**

➤ **It's possible to redesign Sage feeds quite easily with a little CSS.**

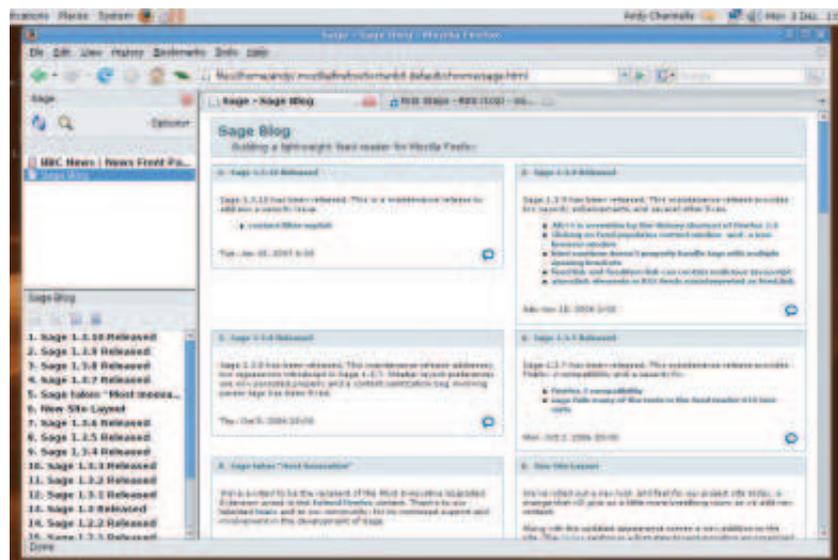
“Managing feeds within Sage: the same principles as most file managers.”

story in the sidebar, hold your mouse over the headline and wait, a *précis* will appear in a tooltip. Click the headline to whiz off to the original story.

Adding a new feed is the same as adding a Live Bookmark. Click the icon in *Firefox*'s address bar, select Live Feeds in the feed page, but then choose Sage Feeds as the destination. Your feed will now appear in the *Sage* sidebar ready to be viewed. By default, *Sage* will display a feed's unread entries in bold, and read feeds will be shown in normal text. As we're not necessarily interested in every story in a feed, this can mean that, after a short while, there are thousands of 'unread' entries on any given feed, so judicious use of the Mark All as Read button, which appears just above the feed itself, can be quite good.

Managing feeds you've already subscribed to within *Sage* follows the same principles as most file managers. Right-click a feed, for example, to see a context-sensitive menu where you can view the feed properties, delete or reload a feed. There are also a few space management tools here such as options to create new folders, separators and to reorder feeds.

Finally, if you prefer to read the read in the content area, but don't appreciate the *Sage* developers' blue theme, it's entirely possible to download a variety of different styles from the project's website or, if you're feeling a little ambitious, to create your own, as the content area is fashioned using fairly simple CSS code. To add a new theme, go to <http://sage.mozdev.org/styles/> and find a style you like. You'll get a live preview. Then scroll down the page to the Source Frame, right-click and do This Frame > Save Frame As... and save the file to a sensible location. Now, back in the Sage Options, click on Use Custom Stylesheet and then browse to the location of the file you just saved. Next time you view a feed in the content area (which we switched off earlier) it will be rendered in the style of the stylesheet you just downloaded. And you'll never



Who uses RSS?

Almost every news organisation in the world throws out some sort of RSS content. In fact, where it used to be odd to find a live feed on a news web page, it's now extremely strange not to see one. And if you use one of the main blogging

services such as Blogger, LiveJournal or WordPress, your musings will usually be made available to the reader-toting masses by default. Even Flickr, Facebook and *Linux Format* offer feeds. Just look out for the little orange icon and start reading...

» **Next month** Do exciting and interesting things with your own RSS feed.