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# E-mail Alerts and RSS Feeds for Distance Learning Administrators

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## Introduction

A distance learning administrator's need for an executive survey of breaking developments is not unique—especially when so much information is now available. One author used the following comparison to describe the information age in which distance learning administrators now live and work: “A weekday edition of the *New York Times* contains more information than the average person was likely to come across in a lifetime in seventeenth-century England” (Wurman, 1989, p. 32). This same author also stated, now almost 20 years ago, that “more new information has been produced in the last 30 years than in the previous 5,000 . . . and the total of all printed knowledge doubles every eight years” (Wurman, 1989, p. 35). It is no wonder that “seven out of 10 office workers in the United States feel overwhelmed by information in the workplace, and more than two in five say they are headed for a data ‘breaking point,’ according to a recently released Workplace Productivity Survey, . . .” (Tahmincioglu, 2008). Some distance education administrators fear that they might not be keeping up with critical developments in their field because there is just too much information to sort through; or that they are not receiving the best information available; or they just don't have enough time to get through it all, so why try. One author captured this current-day information overload with these words:

Can we really expect to keep up with everything that's new and interesting? Once upon a time, we probably could, but the pace and breadth of innovation and development are now dauntingly swift and there are good reasons to be judicious . . . in what we choose to follow. . . . But neither can we afford to let important ideas pass us by” (Janes, 2008, p. 33).

Two tools that help “push” information to users in small, digestible chunks are e-mail *Alerts* and RSS *feeds*. Both of these tools deliver customized information for distance learning administrators to quickly survey the day's (or week's or month's) literature, research, and news. The purpose of this article is to introduce these tools to busy distance learning administrators most in need of efficient ways to stay current in their field; it may also help those already using these tools to validate their own choice of *alerts* or *feeds* on distance education information against those identified and screened by the authors.

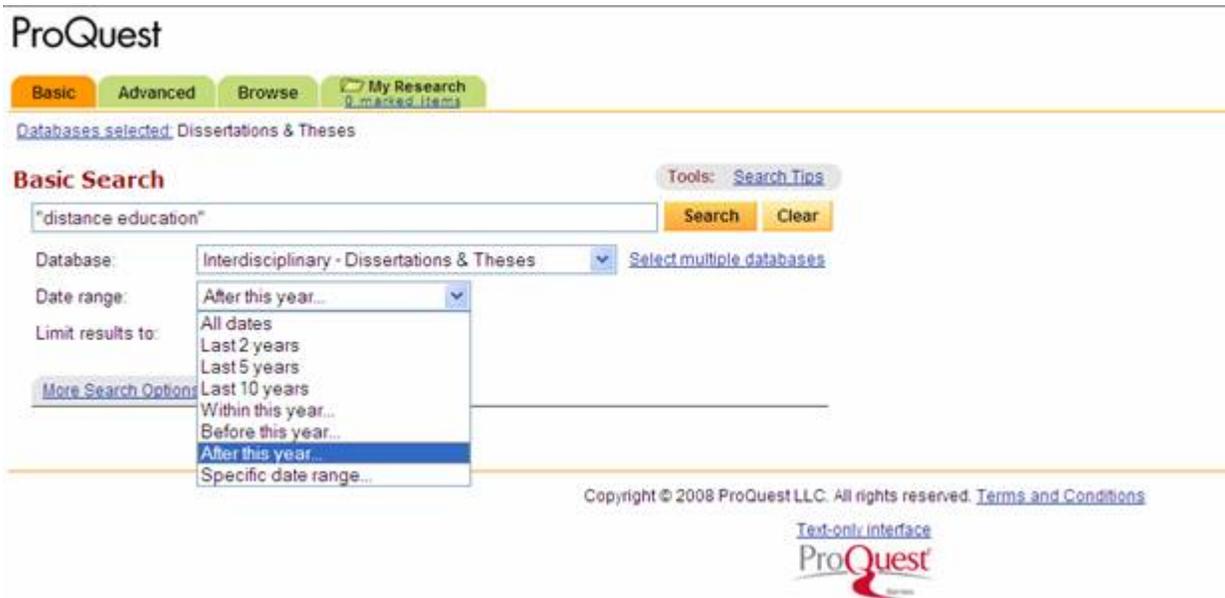
## Discussion

### *Alerts*

*Journal alerts* are e-mail notices sent by journals, or other information databases, at a user's request. A journal *alert* automatically notifies the subscriber each time a new issue of a selected journal is available by sending through e-mail the journal's table of contents, with titles hyperlinked to the abstract and the article itself for further reading.

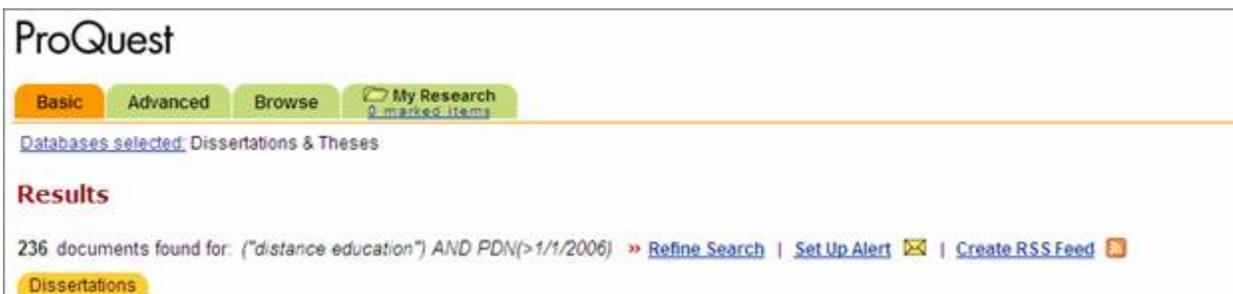
*Search alerts* are e-mail notices that provide users with the results of a search over an entire database, rather than just a specific journal. Databases are mined for keywords such as “distance education;” the results are sent to the user at predetermined time intervals, e.g., daily, weekly, monthly, etc. For example, a busy distance learning administrator may choose to receive weekly search *alerts* from the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses (PQDT) database licensed by the university using the phrase “distance education.” The steps an administrator has taken to establish this kind of e-mail *alert* are shown in Figures 1–4. In Figure 1, the ProQuest database “dissertations and theses,” the keyword phrase “distance education,” and the time period “after 2006” are selected.

Figure 1\*. Basic search of the PQDT database using keywords “distance education.”



The search results depicted in Figure 2 identified 236 dissertations or theses that met the initial search criteria. After this search presented its results it offered the administrator the option to “set up *alerts*” using the same search criteria for future additions to the database (see top right hand of Figure 2).

Figure 2\*. Search alert option for future additions to the database.



After selecting this option, “set up *alerts*,” another Web page appeared (see Figure 3) with frequency (daily, weekly, monthly, or every 3 months) and duration (2 weeks, 1 month, 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, or 1 year) options for future e-mail *alerts*, leaving the administrator in control of when and how long *alerts* would be sent.

Figure 3\*. Schedule and duration of database searches and e-mail alerts.

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# ProQuest

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## Set up Your Search Alert

As new documents matching your search are added to our database, ProQuest will automatically send new results to the email address you provide below.

**Search:** ("distance education") AND PDN(>1/1/2006)  
Database: Dissertations & Theses  
Look for terms in: Citation and abstract  
Publication type: All publication types

**Schedule:** send this alert : Weekly   
 Send message when there are no new results.

**Stop after:** 1 year  (alerts can be renewed.)

**Email address:**   
(Enter a single email address)

**Subject:**

**Message:**   
(optional - enter a note to be included with your results)

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This service is not intended for use by persons under the age of 13. If you are under the age of 13, [click here](#) to exit.

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An example of an actual search *alert* sent by e-mail to one of the coauthors is shown in Figure 4. The notice was sent at 5:36 a.m. on Monday morning—about the same time each week that subsequent *alerts* were sent by ProQuest to this administrator.

Figure 4\*. E-mail search alert sent to coauthor Scott Howell.



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While journal and search *alerts* provide the more familiar way to keep current using e-mail messages, the relatively new innovation known as *RSS feeds* is quickly becoming ubiquitous and will likely become the *alert* service of the future. The *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration (OJDLA)* is a good example of a journal that now provides this service. According to the former managing editor of *OJDLA*, the editorial team first enabled the journal's *RSS feed* in December 2006 (S. Rowland, personal communication, May 8, 2008).

### *RSS feeds*

This next section about *RSS feeds* will give the administrator a greater awareness of the presence and increasing availability of this *feeding* functionality and also show administrators how to establish their own customized *feeds*. An *RSS feed* is simply *feeding* new and just-updated information from a Web site (or a blog or podcast) to a user's reader, and now e-mail, in real time. The acronym *RSS* has different words associated with its letters (i.e., Rich Site Summary, Really Simple Syndication, or RDF Site Summary), but it is the symbol  and acronym *RSS* itself that communicate meaning to the user. (Some other symbols that suggest similar *feeding* capability are  and .)

With the recent inclusion of *RSS feeds*  in the latest version of Microsoft® Outlook® 7, Mozilla's Thunderbird™ 2, and other e-mail applications, this technology promises to become even more commonplace, since, up until this time, *RSS feeds* were directed to separate readers, e.g., GoogleReader or Bloglines. The ability for e-mail applications to now act as readers or aggregators for real-time updates is so convenient that the authors predict rapid migration toward *RSS feeds* from e-mail *alerts*, since an *RSS feed* can do everything an *alert* can do, only better. One of the co-authors has already shifted away from using GoogleReader to the Outlook® 7 reader, since accessing *RSS feeds* with one's e-mail is more convenient because it eliminates the need to access another reader.

To receive RSS *feeds* in a reader of choice, go to the Web site of the academic journal, database, blog, or news site from which you would like to receive *feeds*. After identifying one of the symbols, usually , place a cursor over the symbol, right-click it, select open from the drop-down menu, and watch as the RSS *feed* address comes up—then copy and paste the address directly into a reader. The reader will then update quickly with backlogged *feeds* and begin *feeding* new updates in real-time. The new *feeds* are emphasized in **boldface**; the earlier, already-read *feeds* are de-emphasized.

This real-time or synchronous download of RSS *feeds* is the primary advantage of the *feed* over the e-mail *alert*, which is primarily asynchronous and runs only when told to do so by a computer script at predetermined intervals. However, it is important to become familiar with both tools, since many information sources still do not accommodate RSS *feeds* but they do support e-mail *alerts*. Most importantly, in both instances, the user still decides when to look at *feeds* or *alerts* sent to their e-mail application or separate reader; the user remains in complete control.

Many library catalogs now provide RSS *feeds* to inform patrons about newly acquired books of possible interest to the reader, and some general Web sites even offer an RSS *feed* to inform subscribers whenever a change is made to the site. While RSS *feeds* are typically text-based, they may also deliver audio, video, or digital picture files. More detailed easy-to-understand information about RSS *feeds* is available from the “In Plain English” video series available at CommonCraft ([http://www.commoncraft.com/rss\\_plain\\_english](http://www.commoncraft.com/rss_plain_english)) and by looking through question and answer sections provided at Web sites associated with this journal (<http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdl/rss/index.php>) and the *International Review of Research in Open Distance Learning (IRRODL)* (<http://www.irrodl.org/miscfiles/rss.html>), which both now feature these RSS *feeds*. To learn 14 other ways to use RSS *feeds*, e.g., aggregating *feeds* into a printable “newspaper style” document, converting *feeds* into audio files that can be subscribed to as podcasts, or sending *feeds* to an e-mail or cell phone, go to: <http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/14-other-ways-to-use-rss-feeds/>.

*Which distance education journals, newsletters, blogs, and databases have alerts and feeds?*

Which academic journals, blogs, and news sources actually support *alerts* and *feeds*? In Table 1, four paper-based distance education journals, and the three commercial library databases (and the specific library products from these companies) that electronically archive them are featured; indication is also given as to the availability of e-mail *journal alerts* and RSS *feeds* for each of the journals.

Table 1. *Alerts and RSS feeds available for print-based distance education journals in North America.*

Print-based Journals (Subscription Only)	Digitized by Database Companies (company products listed below)			Journal Alerts and RSS Feeds
	EBSCO	GALE	Pro Quest	
AJDE* <i>American Journal of Distance Education</i>	Academic Search Premier	No	No	Alerts: Yes Feed: Yes
JCHE <i>Journal of Continuing Higher Education</i>	Education Research Complete	No	No	Alerts: No Feed: No
QRDE <i>Quarterly Review of Distance Education</i>	Academic Search Premier	Academic OneFile	No	Alerts: Yes Feed: Yes
<i>Distance Learn Magazine . . . for leaders</i>	No	No	Research Library	Alerts: Yes Feed: Yes

\*Also available through a library's subscription with the database: **informaworld™**

The three commercial library databases identified in Table 1 also support *search alerts* using keywords, e.g., “distance education,” that provide an invaluable source of current research and news to the busy distance learning administrators. EBSCO indexes and abstracts about 3,000 multidisciplinary journals and provides full text for 1,250 of them back to 1990. Over half of the journals are peer-reviewed; the database is updated daily. Individual databases relevant to distance education include Academic Search Premier, ERIC, and the Professional Development Collection. ProQuest's Research Library is also an aggregation of multidisciplinary journals and newspapers; it indexes and abstracts over 1,800 popular and scholarly periodicals and selected newspapers. Of particular interest in ProQuest is their index of over 2 million digital dissertations and theses with coverage from 1861 to the present. Entries after 1980 have abstracts; over 600,000 are available for immediate download and the others may be purchased. GaleGroup's Academic OneFile indexes and abstracts daily over 10,000 journals in most disciplines, as well as full-text content of the *New York Times* from 1995 to the present.

In Table 2 the availability of RSS *feeds* and e-mail *alerts* for four online, open-access journals, including this journal, are reported; in Table 3 those sites and blogs that support RSS *feeds* and *alerts* are identified.

Table 2. *Alerts and RSS feeds available for online distance education journals in North America.*

Online Journals	Alerts	RSS Feeds
<i>IRRODL</i>	Not Available	<a href="http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/feed/rss2">http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/feed/rss2</a>
<i>Journal of Distance Education (Canada)</i>	Not Available	<a href="http://www.jofde.ca/index.php/jde/feed/rss2#">http://www.jofde.ca/index.php/jde/feed/rss2#</a>
<i>Journal of Instructional Technology &amp; Distance Learning</i>	Not Available	Not available
<i>OJDLA</i>	Not Available	<a href="http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdlarss/newsfeed.xml">http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdlarss/newsfeed.xml</a>

Table 3. *Alerts and RSS feeds available for distance education news and blogs in North America.*

News and Blogs	Alerts	RSS Feeds
Distance-Educator.com Newsletter	Yes	<a href="http://www.distance-educator.com/dnews/backend.php">http://www.distance-educator.com/dnews/backend.php</a>
Distance-Educator.com Blogs	No	<a href="http://www.distance-educator.com/blog/vanessaahaakenson/?feed=rss2">http://www.distance-educator.com/blog/vanessaahaakenson/?feed=rss2</a>
E-learning and Distance Education Blog	Yes	<a href="http://feeds.feedburner.com/E-learningAndDistanceEducationBlog?format=xml">http://feeds.feedburner.com/E-learningAndDistanceEducationBlog?format=xml</a>
Terry Anderson Blog	No	<a href="http://eduspaces.net/terrya/weblog/rss/">http://eduspaces.net/terrya/weblog/rss/</a>

It is of some importance to note, that with one exception, the information sources in Tables 1–3 are new to academe: they have only been available for 20 years or less, and most for 10 years or less. Furthermore, none of these journals has recorded a journal “impact factor,” calculated and reported by Thomson Scientific, in *Journal Citation Reports* which helps authors select journals for manuscript submission and librarians select journals for their collection. It is no wonder that the distance education literature is not as well disseminated and hence, not as accessible—yet another reason to use *feeds* and *alerts*.

## Conclusion

*Alerts* and RSS *feeds* are two helpful tools that busy distance education administrators can use to help them efficiently sort through the research and news information that is now extant. These tools—and those super filters and aggregators that will most certainly emerge to help filter and aggregate the existing filters and aggregators—now make it possible for busy distance education administrators to stay current with the increasing amount of literature and news in their field. (Just as this article was being written the authors learned of two new and still-emerging tools: Yahoo Pipes and *RefAware*. Yahoo Pipes sorts and filters messages in a blog reader and makes RSS *feeds* for those Web pages that don't already have one. *RefAware*, a Web-based subscription service, allows users to create up to 10 distinct search areas, including terms, authors, and journals with *alerts* for each area and automatic integration of references into bibliographic management software programs.)

Taking a few minutes to become familiar with the *alerts* and RSS *feeds* identified in this article may be a distance learning administrator's best hope of reducing hours of inefficient searching and digesting—or not doing anything at all about—the ever-increasing information in the field. It may also be that the answer to an administrator's next distance education question or dilemma will be delivered to their e-mail box or reader by their next e-mail *alert* or RSS *feed*.

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## References

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