White Paper

RSS—Crossing into the Mainstream

Joshua Grossnickle
Yahoo!

Todd Board
Brian Pickens
Mike Bellmont
Ipsos Insight

October 2005

Ipsos Insight

YAHOO!

Introduction

Really Simple Syndication (RSS) lets online users freely subscribe to their choice of content sources across the web. Aggregation tools (e.g., personalized start pages, RSS readers) display summaries of these subscriptions, which update automatically when new information is available. RSS reduces the need for users to visit many individual websites.

Headline

The use of RSS in web sites is becoming more common, but very few Internet users are aware of it. Recent research conducted by Ipsos Insight among the U.S. online population reveals that many use RSS unknowingly via personalized start pages and browser-based experiences.

Content aggregators and publishers are positioned to benefit from RSS. Mainstream products such as My Yahoo! and My MSN bridge the gap between RSS technology and benefits for the consumer. These products already place many essential services at the user's fingertips (e.g., search, email, local weather). Incorporating access to content from across the web further enhances the value proposition of these services.

Key Findings

- Awareness of RSS is quite low among Internet users. 12% of users are aware of RSS, and 4% have knowingly used RSS.
- 27% of Internet users consume RSS syndicated content on personalized start pages (e.g., My Yahoo!, My MSN) without knowing that RSS is the enabling technology.
- 28% of Internet users are aware of podcasting, but only 2% currently subscribe to podcasts.
- Even tech-savvy "Aware RSS Users" prefer to access RSS feeds via user-friendly, browser-based experiences (e.g., My Yahoo!, Firefox, My MSN).
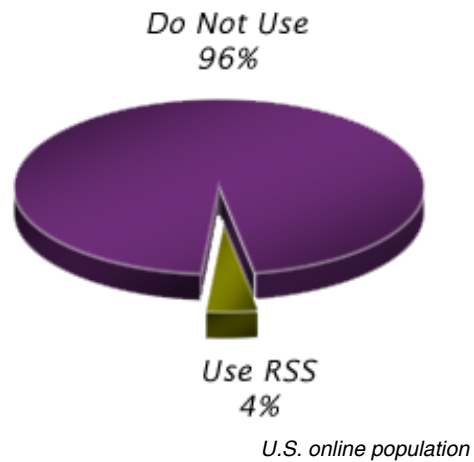- My Yahoo! has the highest awareness and use of any RSS-enabled product.

Awareness and Usage of RSS

While excitement around RSS is sweeping the online industry, awareness and active use still remain quite low among Internet users. Only 12% of users stated that they had heard the term RSS. When then presented with a detailed description of RSS, and asked if they had ever used RSS, only 4% of Internet users said they had.

Awareness of RSS

Not Aware of RSS
88%

Aware of RSS
12%

U.S. online population

Stated Usage of RSS

Do Not Use
96%
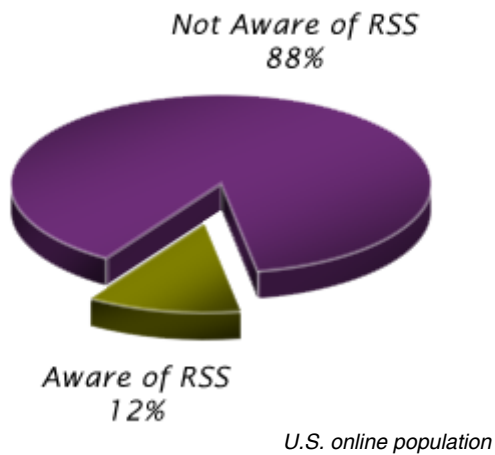
Use RSS
4%

U.S. online population

Unaware RSS Users – "The Real Story of RSS"

The real story, however, is the much larger population of "Unaware RSS users" who consume RSS syndicated content on personalized start pages (e.g., My Yahoo!, My MSN). 27% of online users consume third-party content on these pages without knowing that RSS is the enabling technology.

Total Usage of RSS

Do not use RSS
69%

Unaware RSS User
27%

Aware RSS User
4%

U.S. online population
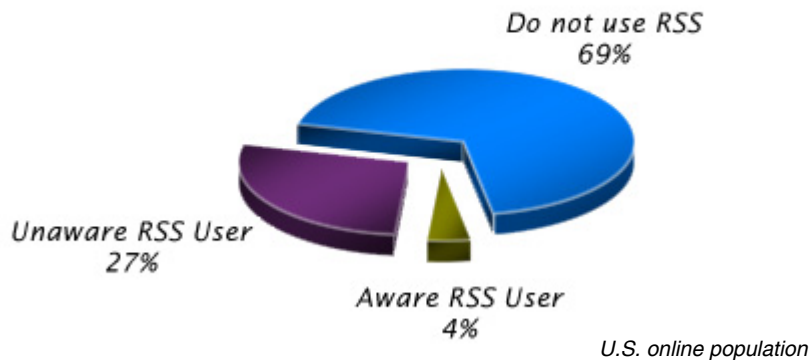
In the survey, respondents who were unaware of RSS and who use a personalized start page supporting RSS feeds were asked to select the items displayed on their page. Customers who selected known RSS content feeds were categorized as "RSS Unaware users." (More detail in the methodology section.)

Based on the high percentage of "Unaware RSS Users," it becomes clear that many Internet users are experiencing the benefit of RSS vs. the actual technology of RSS.

Demographics of RSS Users

"Aware RSS Users" have a typical tech-savvy profile (male, young, educated, and affluent) and 61% consider themselves experts when it comes to the Internet. In contrast, "Unaware RSS Users" more closely resemble the mainstream Internet population, reinforcing the potential of RSS to be a mainstream service, benefiting the non tech-motivated consumer.

|	Total Internet Users	RSS Usership		
		Aware RSS User	Unaware RSS User	Non-User
Gender				
Male	48%	71%	45%	47%
Female	52%	29%	55%	53%
Age				
18-34	37%	50%	38%	36%
35-49	32%	29%	34%	32%
50+	31%	22%	29%	33%
Education				
High school graduate or less	11%	3%	10%	11%
Some college/technical school	40%	29%	45%	39%
College graduate	28%	36%	27%	27%
Some post-graduate or Post-graduate degree	21%	31%	18%	22%
Household income				
Average Household Income	$62,655	$74,116	$59,748	$63,095

U.S. online population

Awareness and Usage of Podcasting

28% of Internet users are aware of podcasting, the distribution of original audio content such as audio blogs and radio shows that Internet users can subscribe to and download to a personal audio player on a regular basis. However, only 2% currently subscribe to podcasts.

The high awareness of podcasting reflects the volume of recent media coverage and buzz, but very few Internet users have translated this buzz into personal consumption. Similar to RSS, wider adoption of podcasting might require more consumer-oriented products to bridge the gap between the technology and the benefits of podcasting.

Awareness of Podcasting

Usage of Podcasting

Not Aware
72%

*Aware of
Podcasting
28%*

U.S. online population

Non-User
98%
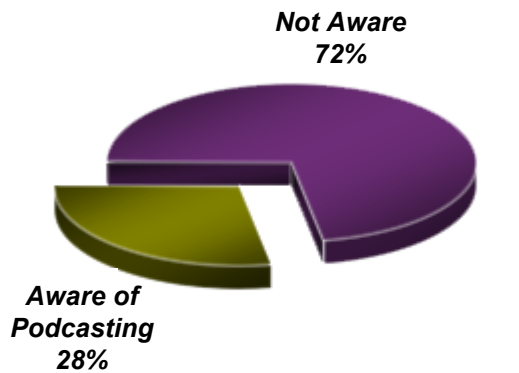
Podcasting User
2%
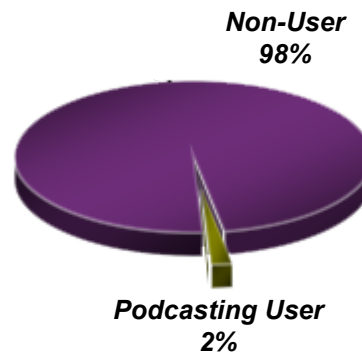
U.S. online population

Products Used by "Aware RSS Users"

Even tech-savvy "Aware RSS Users" prefer to access RSS feeds via user-friendly, browser-based products (e.g., My Yahoo!, Firefox, My MSN). My Yahoo! has the highest awareness and use of any RSS-enabled product.

	Aware of RSS Tools	Use of RSS Tools	Primary Method for reading RSS
My Yahoo!	52%	39%	32%
Firefox (livebookmarks)	47%	30%	23%
My MSN	27%	11%	8%
Apple Safari RSS	21%	12%	8%
Google Personal Start Page	18%	7%	4%
Bloglines	11%	3%	2%
NewsGator	10%	1%	1%
News Crawler	9%	1%	0%
FeedDemon	8%	0%	-
NetNewsWire	6%	1%	1%
Newsfire	4%	0%	-

Among Aware RSS Users

RSS Enabled Products Used by "Unaware RSS users"

Among the "Unaware RSS Users," My Yahoo! is the most widely used product for accessing third-party syndicated RSS feeds.

Usage of Personalized Websites

My Yahoo!	72%
My MSN	41%
Google Personalized Start Page	10%
Bloglines	2%
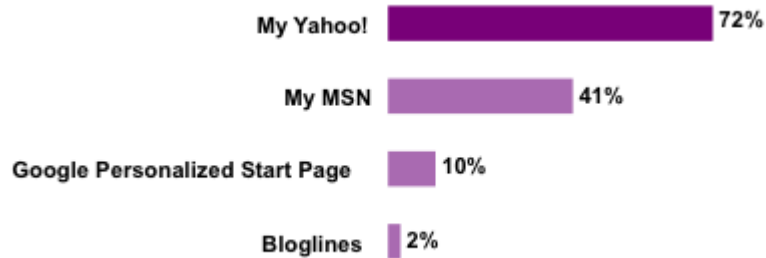
Among Unaware RSS Users

By aggregating content from across the web into a single customizable start page, portal brands are well positioned for an increasingly important role in users' media consumption habits.

Consumption Levels of RSS Feeds

On average, "Aware RSS Users" subscribe to 6.6 feeds. While users of more advanced RSS services such as News Gator and FeedDemon might be more likely to subscribe to a significant number of feeds, these users make up a smaller percentage of the population. "Aware RSS Users" also claim to spend an average of 4.1 hours per week reading the feeds that they receive. This finding calls into question the notion that most RSS users leverage the technology to monitor a vast number of media sources.
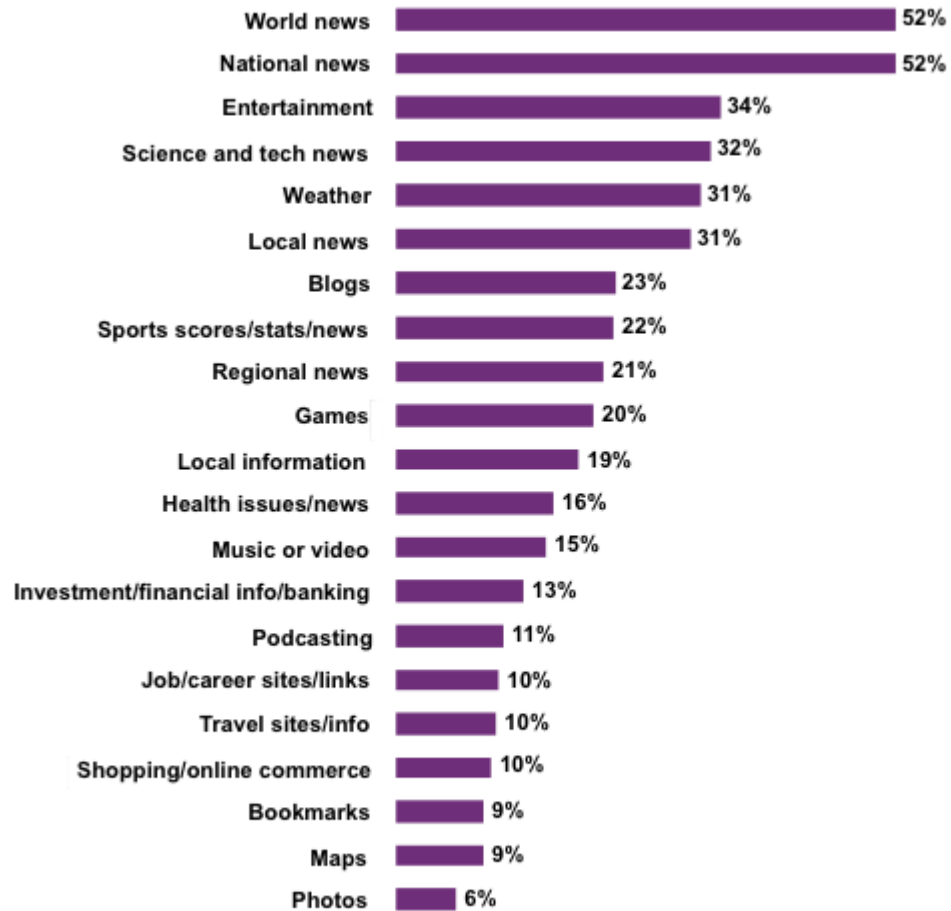
RSS feeds you currently subscribe to or access?	
Average	6.6
Hours per week you spend reading RSS feeds?	
Average	4.1

Among Aware RSS Users

Types of RSS Content Consumed (Among "Aware RSS Users")—Heads First and Tails Trail
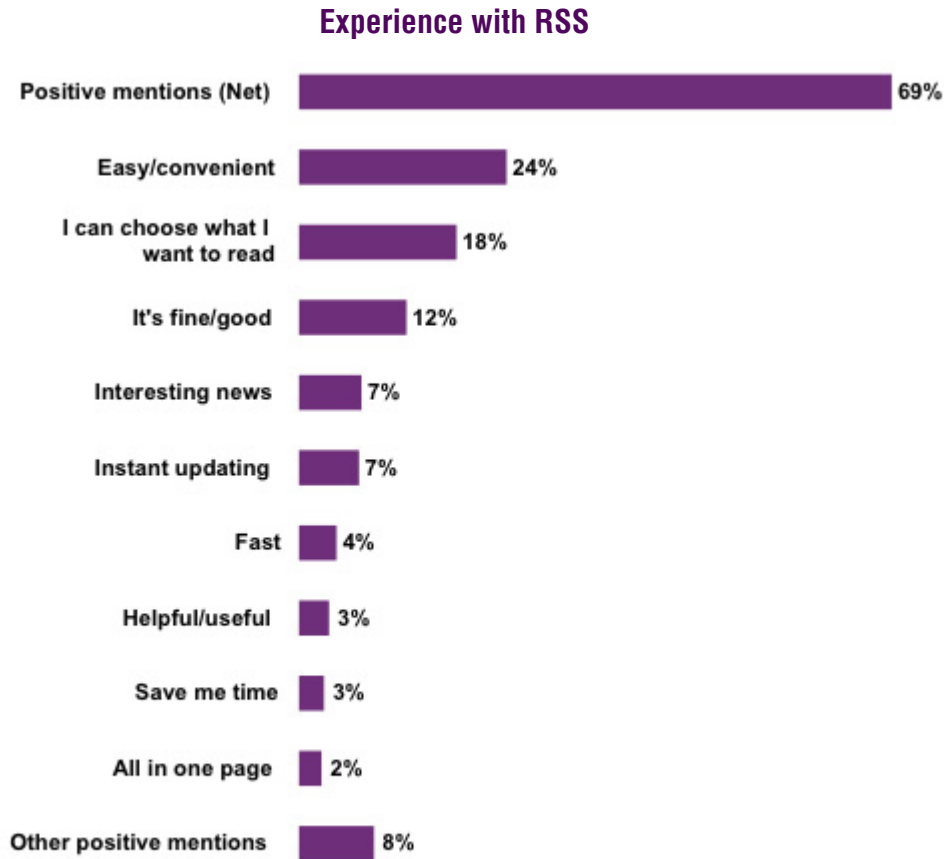
World news and national news are currently the RSS content of choice, at 52%. More specialized content such as blogs (23%) and podcasting (11%) are gaining quickly, but are still less prevalent. Mainstream media rather than niche content accounts for the majority of RSS use.

RSS Content Accessed

Content	Percentage
World news	52%
National news	52%
Entertainment	34%
Science and tech news	32%
Weather	31%
Local news	31%
Blogs	23%
Sports scores/stats/news	22%
Regional news	21%
Games	20%
Local information	19%
Health issues/news	16%
Music or video	15%
Investment/financial info/banking	13%
Podcasting	11%
Job/career sites/links	10%
Travel sites/info	10%
Shopping/online commerce	10%
Bookmarks	9%
Maps	9%
Photos	6%

Among Aware RSS Users

When asked to describe what they thought about RSS in their own words, 24% of "Aware RSS Users" mentioned "ease" or "convenience" as the leading benefit. In addition, 18% claim they value the ability to choose what they want to read. Intriguingly, only 7% mentioned the continuous updating of RSS feeds. These findings suggest that the primary benefit of RSS is efficient access to media sources.

Experience with RSS

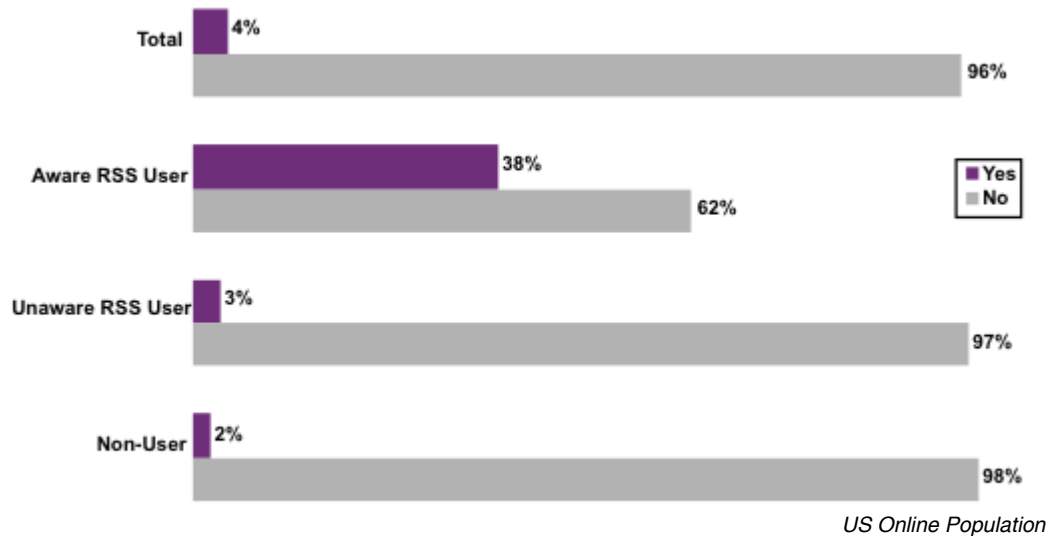| Category	Percentage
Positive mentions (Net)	69%
Easy/convenient	24%
I can choose what I want to read	18%
It's fine/good	12%
Interesting news	7%
Instant updating	7%
Fast	4%
Helpful/useful	3%
Save me time	3%
All in one page	2%
Other positive mentions	8%

Among Aware RSS Users
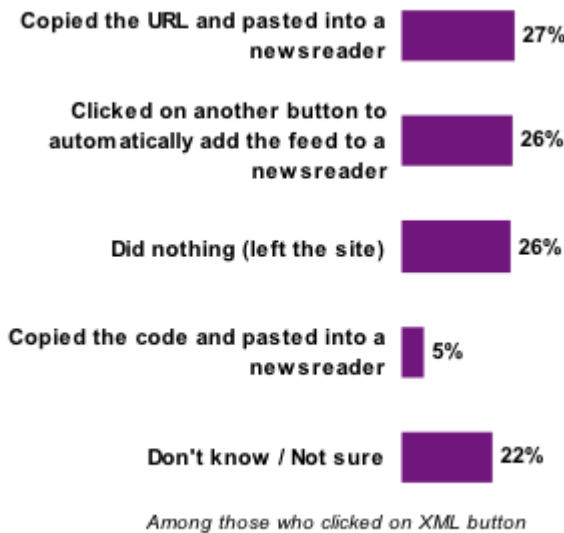
Awareness and Usage of the XML Button `XML`

The XML button appears on many popular websites, providing the ability to add that website as an RSS feed. 17% of Internet users claim to have seen the XML button, and only 4% have ever clicked it. Even among "Aware RSS Users," only 38% have actually clicked the button, suggesting that they find other means to acquire their RSS feeds.

Usage of XML Button

Category	Yes	No
Total	4%	96%
Aware RSS User	38%	62%
Unaware RSS User	3%	97%
Non-User	2%	98%

US Online Population

After clicking the XML button, almost half of the respondents either left the site or don't remember exactly what they did next. The tech-centric XML button confuses many Internet users, and may not be the ideal way to distribute RSS feeds.
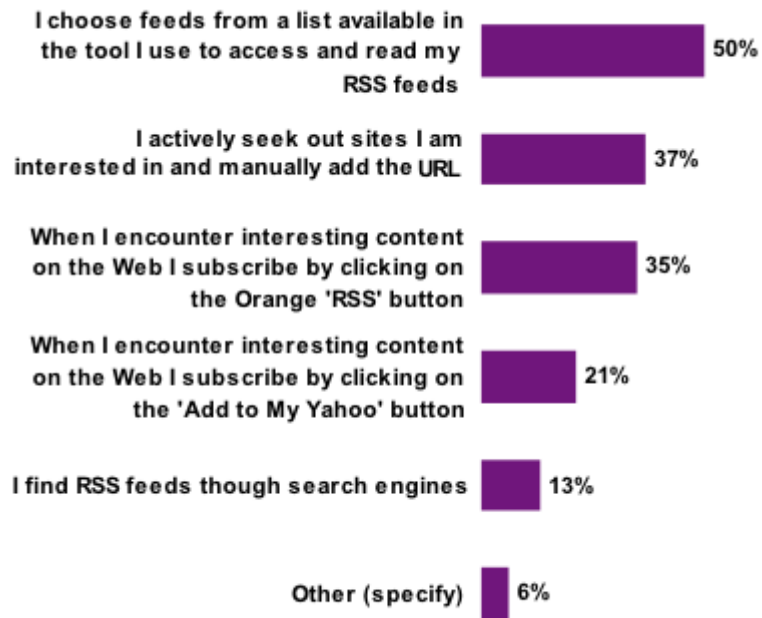
Action Taken After Clicking XML Button

Action	Percent
Copied the URL and pasted into a newsreader	27%
Clicked on another button to automatically add the feed to a newsreader	26%
Did nothing (left the site)	26%
Copied the code and pasted into a newsreader	5%
Don't know / Not sure	22%

Among those who clicked on XML button

Set-Up of RSS Feeds (among "Aware RSS Users")

"Aware RSS Users" employ various methods to add RSS feeds. Some manually add feeds while others choose from lists of feeds available in the RSS reader. The average user employs 1.6 methods for adding RSS feeds. Publishers striving to syndicate their content via RSS should pay attention to how their feeds are listed within popular RSS readers. They should also provide easy and prominent means for users to add RSS feeds on every article page.

How RSS Feeds are Set-up

Method	Percentage
I choose feeds from a list available in the tool I use to access and read my RSS feeds	50%
I actively seek out sites I am interested in and manually add the URL	37%
When I encounter interesting content on the Web I subscribe by clicking on the Orange 'RSS' button	35%
When I encounter interesting content on the Web I subscribe by clicking on the 'Add to My Yahoo' button	21%
I find RSS feeds though search engines	13%
Other (specify)	6%

Among Aware RSS Users

Conclusion

A common thread throughout this study is the appeal of RSS to the average mainstream Internet user - with or without user awareness. While very few users (4%) knowingly use RSS, over one quarter of Internet users (27%) enjoy the benefits of RSS without knowing it. These "Unaware RSS Users" are similar demographically to the average Internet user, suggesting that RSS is not just for the tech-savvy few.

While more research is needed this study suggests that even among "RSS Aware users" who tend to be tech-savvy, heavy media consumers, access to a few mainstream media sources in a single convenient location is driving RSS adoption. While it is likely that customers value access to specialized news and information sources, and that RSS has increased the number of content sources users consume, the data in this study questions the degree to which any technology can dramatically impact the amount of content users consume in their daily lives.

To position RSS among mainstream Internet users, it is essential to effectively communicate the benefits of RSS (ease, convenience, access to information of interest). Internet users do not understand how to use the XML button, how to actively seek out RSS feeds, or even what the term RSS means. Instead, they need a simple interface where they can choose the information and content that interests them. This is where personalized start pages and browser-based experiences can help move RSS into the mainstream.

About Ipsos Insight

Ipsos Insight, the flagship marketing research division of Ipsos in the U.S., has industry specialists serving companies in the following categories: agrifood; cable, media, and entertainment; consumer packaged goods; energy and utilities; financial services; health and pharmaceutical; lottery and gaming; retail; and technology and communications.

Ipsos Insight provides custom and tracking research services to domestic clients, as well as U.S.-based multinational clients. Ipsos Insight offers concept and product testing, package testing, attitude and use studies, omnibuses, tracking systems, brand equity, price optimization and segmentation, marketing models, advanced analytics, and global research. Ipsos Insight is an Ipsos company, a leading global survey-based market research group. To learn more, please visit www.ipsos-insight.com.

Methodology

Data for this study was collected through an Internet-based methodology using the Ipsos U.S. Internet Panel, and accurately reflects the online population (18 years and older).

A total of 4,038 respondents completed the online questionnaire between August 10 and August 22, 2005. The total sample size was n= 4,038 respondents. The results are accurate to within +/- 1.54% points with a 95% confidence level. Charts and Graphs may not total 100% due to rounding errors.

Unaware RSS Users were calculated by asking respondents unaware of RSS if they used personalized web pages:

Do you use any of the following personalized web pages? Personalized web pages are available from major Internet portals like Yahoo!, MSN, or Google. The design, layout, or content of these pages changes based on your selections. Select all that apply.

- *My Yahoo!*
- *My MSN*
- *Google Personalized Start Page*
- *Bloglines*
- *Do not access any of these*

If any of these web pages were used, then they were asked two questions to determine if they received third-party information:

Do you receive any third-party information at [website used at previous question]? Third-party information includes news, information, or services that are not produced by [website]. Third-party information is pulled in from other sites across the Internet and displayed on your [website] page.

- *Yes*
- *No*
- *Don't know*

Do you receive any of the following types of third-party information at [website]? Select all that apply.

- ***Branded news sources:** Headlines from newspapers such as The New York Times, Fox News, or The Wall Street Journal. Headlines NOT considered third-party content are Reuters and Associated Press (AP).*
- ***Specialized news sources:** Headlines from specialized news sources are smaller providers of news, news commentary, or opinion pieces. Examples include your Local Newspaper, CNET news, and The Onion.*
- ***Popular blogs:** Headlines from web journals written by individuals for a large audience (e.g., political commentary, industry experts, professors, entertainment). Examples include boingboing, Meta Filter, and Slash Dot.*
- ***Magazines and hobby publications:** Updates from popular magazines or hobby sites you enjoy.*
- ***Newsletters:** Updates from organizations you're interested in (e.g., environmental groups, school groups, clubs).*
- *None of the Above*

If respondents had used personalized web pages and received third-party information from either of the above questions, they were classified as Unaware RSS Users, representing 27% of the online population.