tech tips for every librarian

by donna f. ekart guest columnist for jessamyn west

Putting Your Knowledge Out There

It seems the longer I stay in libraries, the less my job comes to resemble a "normal" library job. Now I do mostly communications work, finding new ways to talk about the various and sundry library initiatives on our campus. I've been asked, more than once, if I "had" to go to library school for all this, and people tend to assume I'm not actually a librarian at all.

But I am a librarian, and whether I "had" to go to library school or not, I'm glad I did, and I see a very "librarianly" thread that runs through each of my successive endeavors. I've always needed to move information from the place it was into a place that people were.

This brings me to today's topic—a simple idea to move the knowledge you have to where people are when they visit your library. This is, increasingly, at a computer screen. We'll be talking about code today, but don't worry: I'm no programmer, and you need not be one either. Mostly, if you can copy and paste, you can make some magic happen.

An Unlikely Place to Start—Active Desktop

We're going to utilize a built-in feature of Windows-based computers called Active Desktop. Active Desktop was created to display web content without opening a browser. The idea was that people would use it to embed webpages on their desktops, so they could have "always on" content. The problem with it was that it was just as simple to open a browser. Since browsers had more features, people opened them, and Active Desktop never really caught on much. However, you can use the functionality to display HTML content that doesn't necessarily live on a webpage anywhere, and that's what we're doing today.

They're Looking at It Anyway

When people sit down at one of your public access computers, they're looking at the desktop. It's nice enough to display a pretty picture of your library there, but what if it also delivered some content you created? Maybe an events calendar, your latest blog post or two, or a list of new arrivals in your DVD collection?

To get your information to the desktop, you'll need one really simple tool that comes with your computer: Notepad. If you've never noticed Notepad and aren't sure where to find it, go to the Start menu, choose Run, and type "notepad" (without the quotes) in the box. You could also use any other basic text editor that doesn't add invisible formatting (i.e., not Microsoft Word).

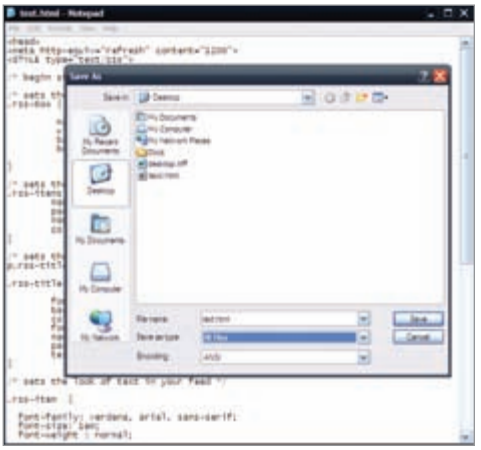
Basic Example—Putting a Live Feed on the Desktop

Let's say your library has a feed you'd like to promote—maybe a blog or a new books feed from your catalog. Get the URL to the feed and copy it someplace handy.

To get you started, I've put some sample code on pastebin, a handy (and free) website for storing any sort of code people might want to share. Go to http://pastebin.com/f3991c2ef, and click the Download link. Save the file to your computer, and then open it with Notepad or your preferred plain text editor.

If you know a little HTML or CSS, you'll see it's pretty basic stuff, and you can get to work playing with the look and feel before proceeding, if you want. If you don't know any code, no worries—it's all set up to simply work, with a clean and simple look. Just read on.

In Notepad, go to Edit—Replace. In the Find What box, type PUT YOUR FEED URL HERE and in the Replace With box, type or paste in your feed URL. Click "Replace All." Close the Find and Replace box. Go to File—Save As and save your file with a name you'll recognize later and an .html extension (for example: desktopfeed.html). You'll need to change Save as Type to All Files to get rid of the .txt extension.



In the Save As box, choose "All Files" to save as .html.

For the moment, we're just going to set it up on your own computer so you can see how it works. Later, you'll follow these 10 steps on your public computers. It's easy to transfer the file around using a thumb drive, and once you've been through the steps a time or two, setup will go really quickly.

Resources Discussed

pastebin code
http://pastebin.com/f3991c2ef

CSS Reference
www.w3schools.com/css/css_reference.asp

Feed2JS
http://feed2js.org/index.php?s=build

1. Copy the file to someplace easy to find but not likely to be accessed. I like to save it to the hard drive, not in any folder (usually just C: under My Computer), but you can save it anywhere that works for you.

2. Right click on your desktop and choose "Properties."

3. Go to the Desktop tab and click "Customize Desktop."

4. Go to the Web tab and click "New."

5. Click the "Browse" button and browse to the place you saved your file. Click Open, then click OK.

6. You'll see your file listed now in the webpages box, with a check mark by it. Click "OK" to dismiss the Desktop Items box, then "Apply" in the Display Properties box that's underneath.

7. Go look at your desktop! Grab the corners of the box to resize to fit your content in a nice way, and drag it around until you find a happy home for it on the desktop. Make sure it looks just right before you move on to step 8, because you're going to lock it down next so users don't accidentally move, resize, or close it.

8. Go back to the still-open Display Properties dialog box, and click "Customize Desktop" again.

9. On the Web tab, check the box that says "Lock desktop items." Click "OK."

10. Close the Display Properties box by clicking the "X" in the upper right corner. This is a weirdly important step. Exiting the box by clicking "OK" or "Apply" might resize your new content in unexpected ways, and I have no idea why.

All done! Your desktop now displays a happy feed showing your content. It will refresh itself automatically, and any new content will appear on your desktop within 20 minutes of being added to the feed. Some blog platforms publish a feed immediately, while others publish at regular intervals, so your mileage may vary a bit on the exact timing. When users click a link in the feed, it will open in a new browser window for them to read.

This is a library blog feed live on the desktop. Look mom, no browser!

Beyond the Basics

You can publish more than one item to your desktop using this same general idea. Nearly anything that offers you code for an embeddable widget can be repurposed this way. Many online calendar applications give you the option to embed your calendar in your own webpage, for example. So if you use a public Google Calendar for library hours and events, go grab the embeddable code for it, copy it into Notepad, save as .html, and then follow the 10 setup steps just like you did for the feed. One of the benefits of going this route is that many applications have a step where you "style" your output, so you can pick the colors and fonts that work best for your needs without having to know how to write that kind of code.

Setting up Google Calendar for use with Active Desktop

This technique can be useful for staff computers as well. At my library, we embed feeds for our public services blog and shift trading blog to the desktops on our reference desk computers, so librarians working there can see the latest news and hours that need coverage whenever they work at the desk, without having to do a thing.

To expand on the basic feed concept, you can play with the colors, fonts, and styling in the basic code file you downloaded from pastebin. W3Schools has a great reference page for CSS that will help you figure out what to edit without your needing to learn all about CSS. Additionally, you can use Feed2JS to modify how the items in your feed list display, and just replace the Feed2JS section in my code with your own code copied from http://feed2js.org.

Once you've grasped the basic idea, you'll likely think of dozens of uses—maybe different uses for different computers and areas of your library. You're a librarian and you know great stuff, so go and put it out there! ■

Donna F. Ekart is a librarian and the communications coordinator at K-State Libraries in Manhattan, Kan., and she spends whole chunks of her days playing with new technologies. She's substituting for regular Tech Tips author Jessamyn West a few times this year.

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