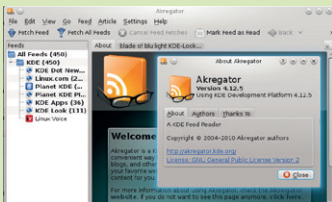


LINUX VOICE
RSS
AGGREGATORS

GROUP TEST

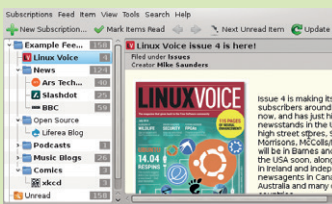
Marco Fioretti explores five different ways to get news from the internet, and explains why you need RSS

On Test Akregator



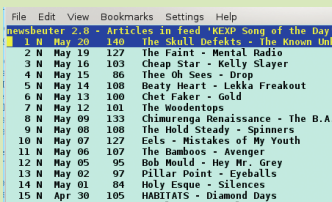
URL www.kde.org
Version 4.12.5
Licence GPL v2
The aggregator from and for the KDE desktop. Does it work well even in other environments?

Liferea



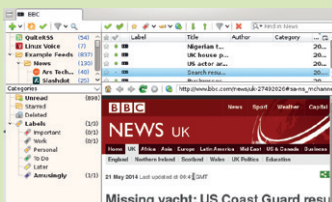
URL <http://lzone.de/>
Version 1.10.8
Licence GPLv2+
A GTK, that is Gnome-oriented application with many features and plugins.

Newsbeuter



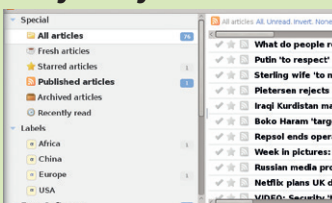
URL <http://newsbeuter.org>
Version 2.8
Licence MIT
This RSS aggregator for the console is at least as rich in features as the others.

QuiteRSS



URL <http://quiterss.org>
Version 0.15.4
Licence GPLv3
A multiplatform aggregator, with a flexible, easy-to-use category and tagging system.

Tiny Tiny RSS



URL <http://tt-rss.org>
Version 1.12
Licence: GPLv3
A web-based aggregator ready for the cloud and perfectly integrated with your main browser.

RSS Aggregators

All the news you want, without Big Brother.

This Group Test may be the most important you read this year, because RSS is vital, both for you and for the web as a whole. Seriously.

RSS means Rich Site Summary or, some say, Really Simple Syndication. A standard RSS feed is a plain text file that always contains the latest headlines from the website that publishes it. In practice, an RSS feed may contain text and links to any kind of resource, from local log files to streamed music.

RSS aggregators download the feeds that their users want and present all their contents in one coherent view, making it possible to read many stories from many sources, very efficiently.

The reasons why RSS is vital are very simple. The most obvious, and less important, is to save time: with a good aggregator you get all the

news you may want to see in one window, without jumping from website to website.

The others are independence and privacy. As long as all the websites you care about publish RSS feeds and you use them, those websites don't run the risk of seeing themselves penalised by private search engines and social networks, which have their own scoring algorithms and priorities. At the same time, you never become dependant on any external service (remember all the complaints last year when Google Reader closed? THAT is what we're talking about!). Above all, nobody else gets (at least with self-hosted, web-based aggregators) one single lists of all the "news" you like to read on a regular basis, so RSS can be a great help in keeping the web a place of many independent publishers and readers. Please use RSS!

"In practice, an RSS feed may contain text and links to any kind of resource."

THE CRUCIAL CRITERIA

We wanted to make trying RSS aggregators as easy as possible. This led us to exclude interesting packages like SnowNews or RSSOwl, which seemed to be available as binary packages in the default repositories of fewer distributions than others.

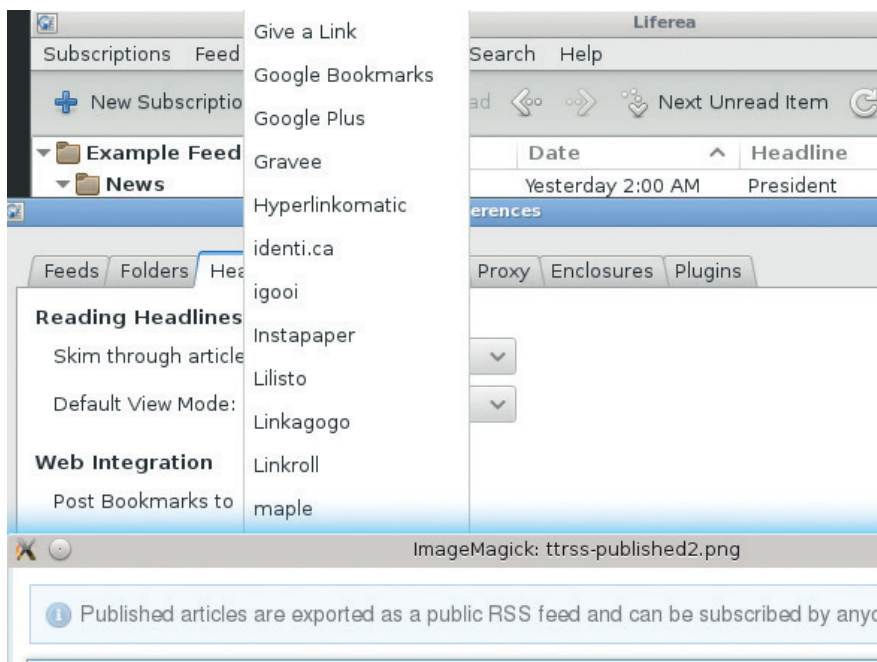
At the same time, we absolutely had to show you how many options you have, from command line aggregators to web-based ones. Programs in the

first category are the fastest, and may be perfect for users with disabilities. Web-based tools, instead, only have to be installed once to be usable from any browser, on any computer.

Other important criteria were active development, documentation, efficient news browsing and support for multimedia enclosures. Features like news tagging were also tested, but treated as slightly less relevant.

Sharing feeds

Can I pass interesting news to all my friends?



Liferea (in the back) knows how to submit links to tens of online communities. Tiny Tiny RSS (front bottom) generates RSS feeds of all the news you want to share.

Good RSS aggregators can easily pass single articles on many other channels with one click, as well as whole lists of feeds.

The open standard called Outline Processor Markup Language (OPML, <http://dev.opml.org/spec2.html>) was created just for the second type of sharing. An OPML file is a plain text, hierarchical list of URLs of RSS feeds. All the aggregators described here can import and export such lists.

With Newsbeuter, you need to pass it an OPML file with the `-i` option the first time you run it, if you want to avoid complaints. Feeds in nested folders will get tags with the same hierarchical structure. Newsbeuter also supports what is called "OPML online subscription mode": give it the URLs of one or more OPML lists, and it will dynamically (re)load all the feeds they contain every time you launch it.

In general, both single users and small organisations can keep in synch, or distribute, their newsfeeds using combinations of the programs presented here. You and all your partners can enjoy the greater speed and desktop integration of a native aggregator on your computers, and still access the same set of feeds

when they are not available. A common way is to create and manage OPML lists or single, custom feeds with Tiny Tiny RSS, optionally protected by passwords, and then read them with any desktop-based aggregator. Newsbeuter and Liferea support this integration with Tiny Tiny RSS (or with Reedah and TheOldReader) out of the box, and even with the others it's quite simple. Independent instances of Tiny Tiny RSS may even directly link to each other in this way.

Liferea can save feeds to heaps of online communities; Newsbeuter can save bookmarked articles to an external file or in your **del.icio.us** account. QuiteRSS sits somewhere in the middle: its default "share" menu has email, Evernote, Google Plus, Facebook, Twitter and a few other services. Tiny Tiny RSS has plugins for sharing news via email or services like Flattr, Google+, Pinterest or Identica, but you may find it more convenient to use the bookmarklets provided by those websites.

VERDICT

Akregator	★★★★★
Liferea	★★★★★
Newsbeuter	★★★★★
QuiteRSS	★★★★★
Tiny Tiny RSS	★★★★★

Multimedia

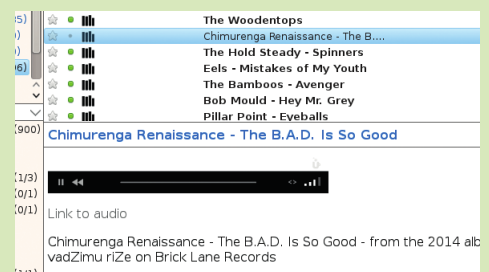
Lots of stories don't come as text. Can I still get them?

News doesn't have to be plain text. Therefore, an RSS aggregator that doesn't know what to make of multimedia content is not worth much.

As with other functionalities, Tiny Tiny RSS is the easiest contender to talk about. Since you must use it from a browser, you will access only the non-text content that your browser already knows how to handle.

You may think that Newsbeuter, being a console application, would be even quicker to deal with, but you would be wrong, at least for audio and other content marked according to the Media RSS extension (www.rssboard.org/media-rss). As it happens, Newsbeuter is developed and distributed with a twin application called Podbeuter, which works both as a download manager and, above all, as a podcast player.

Aggregator, Liferea and QuiteRSS all downloaded and played the audio podcast we tried from our test suite of feeds. Video playback depends on which combination of aggregator, Linux distro, installed multimedia codecs, configuration and content you want to manage. We cannot guarantee that any of the desktop aggregators will be able to play whatever video you may find online. However, there is a quick and dirty solution: whatever your desktop aggregator is, tell it to pass the article that contains the troublesome content to your main browser, which of course you will have already configured with all the plugins you need.



QuiteRSS makes the best job of playing RSS podcasts, but the others are also up to the task.

VERDICT

Akregator	★★★★★
Liferea	★★★★★
Newsbeuter	★★★★★
QuiteRSS	★★★★★
Tiny Tiny RSS	★★★★★

News management

Navigation, search, filters...

Theoretically, a good RSS aggregator displays news when and how you want, and enables you to browse very quickly. It also supports flexible classification of feeds and articles, as well as search and filtering. In practice, some of these features may be irrelevant for you. An avid reader who doesn't care about archiving, for example, would have little use for categorisation and search interfaces.

Navigation is very simple in all aggregators. Newsbeuter is the fastest, thanks to its textual interface and its many bandwidth-saving tricks. Tiny Tiny RSS is only as fast and responsive as the link between its host computer and your browser.

Liferea and Akregator provide the most options for opening links: by themselves, or passing them to new tabs or windows of different browsers, with manual configuration of browser invocation.

QuiteRSS and Liferea seem the best ones for search, with Akregator slightly behind. Our personal preference goes to the search panel of QuiteRSS: many (but not too many) options, all packed in one very friendly panel.

Tiny Tiny RSS has the barest search interface. While it seems that you may only limit the search to fresh articles, it is also possible to type more options, like `@{date}` to match by date, directly in the text input box. However, with the right macros, scripts and the will to set up and use them, Newsbeuter could beat all the others.

All the contenders can organise feeds in hierarchical trees and assign as many non-hierarchical tags or labels as you wish to each article (Tiny Tiny RSS also has limited support for scoring). They also all have some cache or archive, usable (except for Tiny Tiny RSS) even for offline reading. Liferea supports independent "News Bins" – permanent, static containers for articles that you want to keep. The Akregator archive is the easier to configure: with one or two clicks you can, on a per-feed basis, disable archiving, or choose to keep only articles marked "Important".

VERDICT

Akregator	★★★★★
Liferea	★★★★★
Newsbeuter	★★★★★
QuiteRSS	★★★★★
Tiny Tiny RSS	★★★★★

User interface

How will it fit my workflow?

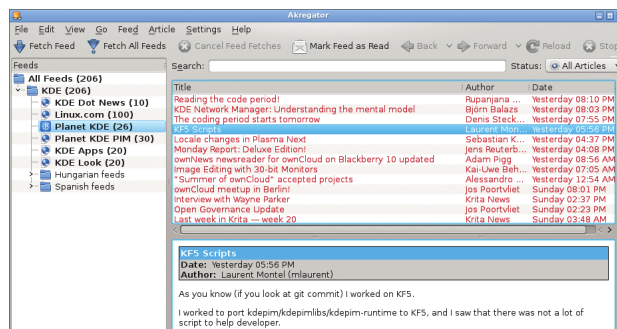
Do you frequently print interesting news for offline reading? Akregator, which integrates the KDE printing panel, may be the best option. Need to process news with other tools? Go with Newsbeuter, which may be run within scripts, or Tiny Tiny RSS which can store everything into a database.

The boxes that follow try to give you a very general idea of how each of the selected aggregators looks, feels and works under the hood. You should use this information to figure out how each tool would integrate with your own current Linux desktop and system maintenance routines.

Akregator ★★★★★

Akregator is the main, if not the official RSS aggregator of the KDE desktop. Printing and integration with your Kontact address book are incorporated within it. Depending on your taste, you may find its default interface and layout dull or unobtrusive and efficient. While it's hard to remember its looks, or be impressed by them, Akregator is also the RSS interface

that makes the configuration tweaks that people most frequently want easier to do: the commands to change fonts, font size and colours are very simple to find and use. Configuration of keyboard shortcuts is equally effortless. Even some less common operations, like playing audio or pop-up windows to signal the arrival of more headlines, are self explanatory.

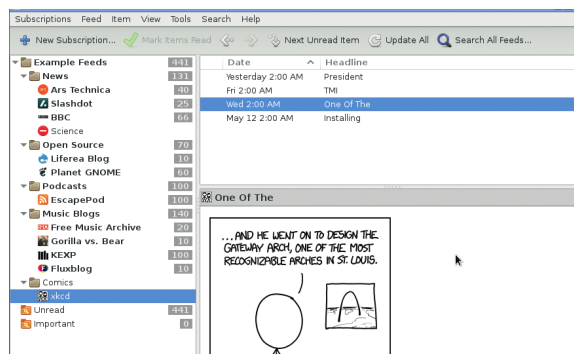


Akregator shares the look and feel of the rest of KDE: solid, practical, simple. Even good looking!

Liferea ★★★★★

Liferea was conceived as a Linux clone of the FeedReader aggregator for Windows. By default the feed selection included ranges from geek-only titles like Slashdot to music and comic blogs. At its bottom there are two very convenient folders: one for all the news still unread and another for those marked as "Important". Saved news is readable in offline mode. The

buttons and menus are even cleaner than those of Akregator. Three layouts are available: Normal, Wide (feeds, titles and content in parallel columns) or Combined, which is the most compact. Should you dislike the default colours and text formatting, you may fix them all with a couple of clicks, replacing the included CSS stylesheet with another you like best.

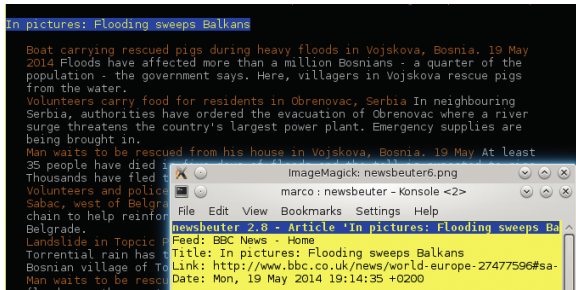


Liferea's 'Normal' look is even cleaner and user friendlier than Akregator, yet is quite powerful.

Newsbeuter ★★★★★

Whoever first called Newsbeuter “the Mutt of RSS aggregators” is right. This program feels like that console email client.

The default browser that displays the articles is Lynx. With the exception of the layout, pretty much everything else can be changed in a few configuration files.



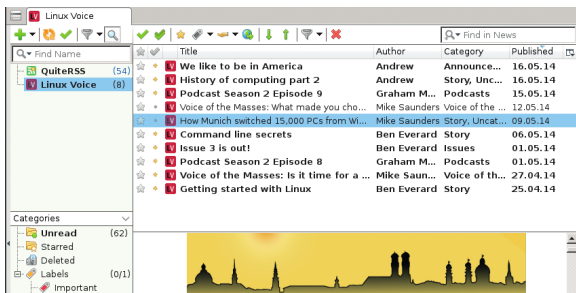
Once you get used to it, Newsbeuter is really efficient. Type **/** to search for text, **N** to open the next unread article and **?** to list all the available commands. All the text dialogs you use remain open for the whole session: type **V** to see their list and reopen any of them.

The feed headlines (front) and the actual content of each article (back) can use completely different colour schemes in Newsbeuter.

QuiteRSS ★★★★★

QuiteRSS uses the Qt toolkit and the WebKit rendering engine to run without problems on Mac OS X, Linux, Windows XP or later and OS/2. The interface is very well organised, with just one exception: the buttons that block banners with Adblock are almost invisible. That said, it's a snap to go full-screen, hiding the feed

tree and rearranging columns as you wish. You can open single feeds or articles in separate tabs, and configuring audio or pop-up notifications for new articles is almost as simple. The default categories and labels in the bottom left pane will be more than enough for most users, and adding your ones only takes a few clicks.



An easy labelling system in plain view, number, order and size of columns in the feed list changeable with a few clicks. That's QuiteRSS for you.

Tiny Tiny RSS ★★★★★

Tiny Tiny RSS is slightly slower, and has a more limited interface than the other GUI aggregators presented here. However, it is also the most “portable” aggregator around. The software itself will run on pretty much any server operating system around, while the UI works on any browser that can handle JavaScript. Please note

that “server operating system” includes any Linux desktop. If all this isn't enough, there is even an official Android client. Even without plugins, you get hierarchical feed display with user-configurable categories and labels, scoring, server-side archive, and three different access levels: user, power user and administrator.



A themeable Web interface accessible from any browser, or through an associated Android client – it's hard to be more portable than Tiny Tiny RSS.

Installation

How do I get started?

Thanks to how we selected the applications for this Group Test, there is very little to say here about the four desktop applications: they should be available in the standard online repositories of most distributions derived from (at least) Debian, Ubuntu and Fedora. Just tell your usual package manager to get them. However, this may not always be enough.

Why? Because, while your browser and/or your Linux box as a whole would surely have a way to play almost any audio or video around, your aggregator may not, unless you constructively mess with its configuration. If an important feed regularly includes multimedia content, check out in advance what its format is, and how your candidate aggregator can handle it.

Tiny Tiny RSS is an entirely different matter. Tiny Tiny RSS is “compatible”, by definition, with any format that your browser can handle. At the same time, this is the only package that must be installed manually. The good thing is that it only takes one “techie” to make Tiny Tiny RSS available to all their friends, relatives or colleagues, whatever operating system they use. How? First, you must download the source code into a folder of any computer equipped with a PostgreSQL or MySQL database and web server. That computer may be anything from your actual Linux desktop to a web hosting account anywhere on the planet.

Next, create a database and database user for Tiny Tiny RSS (see the documentation for detailed instructions). Third, point your browser to the folder where you had installed the software and follow the instructions. You will most probably have to change the permissions and/or ownership of some sub-folder, but that is pretty much it. After a few clicks, you will be able to enter your Tiny Tiny RSS installation as administrator and create new users. Even if you will be the only user of your Tiny Tiny RSS, however, do create a separate account for your daily usage, to avoid messing up the general configuration by mistake.

VERDICT

Akregator	★★★★★
Liferea	★★★★★
Newsbeuter	★★★★★
QuiteRSS	★★★★★
Tiny Tiny RSS	★★★★★

Automation & plugins

What's the point of software, if it doesn't work for you?

Collection and processing of news with Free Software can be much more powerful and efficient (in one word: fun) than you may expect.

The filtering system of QuiteRSS is (much) more limited than the others, but much simpler to use. Feeds or articles matching the user-defined conditions can trigger actions such as adding tags and labels to them, or play sounds. Akregator is more or less in the same situation.

Newsbeuter supports both macros and any external software that either outputs a correct RSS feed by itself, or converts the content of whatever Web page Newsbeuter passed to it to the same format: press the comma key followed by a string to execute the macro defined with that name in the configuration file, or | to pipe the text of the current article to any other program.

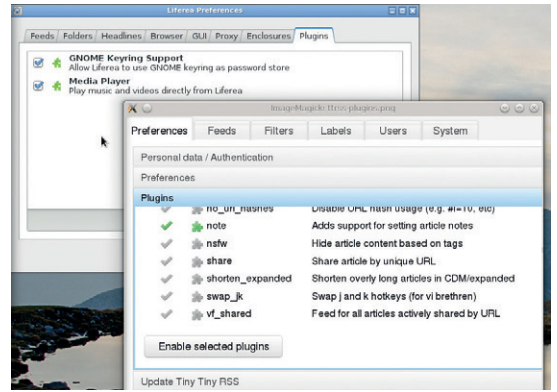
Liferea comes with two plugins installed: a music and video player, and an interface for the Gnome Keyring password manager. If that isn't enough, you can make Liferea interact

automatically with other programs through the DBUS interface.

Liferea can also use RSS feeds even for websites that don't provide one, by scraping their content and reformatting it as an RSS feed. It is possible to configure the program to launch a script that does this, or tell it to run a postprocessing filter. We highly recommend the first approach, which would be reusable with any other aggregator.

SnowNews, an aggregator that for several reasons we couldn't include in this Group Test, has an online repository of feed processing scripts, together with instructions to write your ones, at <http://kiza.kcore.de/software/snownews/snowscripts>. Those scripts can be used also by Liferea and Newsbeuter to do things like removing advertising and other graphics from web pages, or downloading Twitter timelines and Wikipedia watchlists.

No, we haven't forgotten Tiny Tiny RSS: its plugin configuration panel lists dozens of extensions. Some just simplify how certain feeds are



Liferea can scrape the content of websites into an RSS format even if that site doesn't have an RSS feed.

displayed, while others handle feed redirectors, authentication through external services and extensions for download and automatic reformatting of non-standard feeds, from Scientific American to National Geographic.

Last but not least, databases: Tiny Tiny RSS relies on a MySQL or PostgreSQL backend, Newsbeuter and Liferea on SQLite. Akregator, if archiving is enabled, does it with Metakit.

VERDICT

Akregator	★★★★★
Liferea	★★★★★
Newsbeuter	★★★★★
QuiteRSS	★★★★★
Tiny Tiny RSS	★★★★★

Documentation

How do I do that?

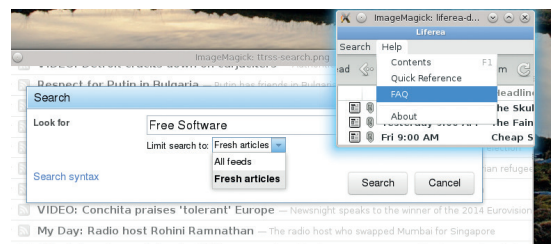
Akregator and QuiteRSS have maybe the smallest and poorest documentation sets of the group. Truth be told, they also are the programs that need it less: you can figure out by yourself practically everything you might have to do just by clicking around.

The same may be said for the end-user part of Tiny Tiny RSS. The administration side is more complex, of course, but the documentation is adequate, including the parts about the installation and the variables in the configuration file. Besides, the forms for several tasks include direct links to the corresponding parts of the manual.

Liferea is the best from this point of view, at least for ordinary users without advanced needs. While still being

friendly enough that you won't need to study anything to get started and perform most tasks, it comes with a good Help menu that links to the FAQ, a Quick Reference Tutorial and to a good manual. The latter explains, among other things, how to update feed subscriptions, use News Bins and manage enclosures and podcasting. The official Liferea blog (<http://lzone.de/liferea/blog>) is another good source of information.

Newsbeuter has the most exhaustive documentation of the pack. Every option and configuration variable is described in detail on the website. Which is good, because Newsbeuter does so much that you could never figure out how to get the most out of this aggregator by simply using it.



The Liferea Help menu (top right) points to everything you need to know to use the program. So do the links embedded in many forms of Tiny Tiny RSS

That's why we strongly suggest reading the "Why NewsBeuter" text (http://newsbeuter.org/doc/newsbeuter.html#_why_newsbeuter). It will give you a good overview of what is possible, and maybe even ideas on how to use the other aggregators.

VERDICT

Akregator	★★★★★
Liferea	★★★★★
Newsbeuter	★★★★★
QuiteRSS	★★★★★
Tiny Tiny RSS	★★★★★

OUR VERDICT

RSS Aggregators

Deciding the winner of this Group Test was hard. Objective evaluation of features and defects of each contender clashed, we confess, with our strong, but personal opinion of where the web and its users should go, and how.

This, they say, is the age of Cloud Computing, that is of software that runs “in the cloud”, on a remote server, somewhere else. If that is true, it had better be your cloud – Free Software that you install and run on a server you can trust –

“The only contender here, never mind the winner, should be Tiny Tiny RSS.”

shouldn't it? By this line of reasoning, the only contender here, never mind the winner, should be Tiny Tiny RSS. It is made to work exactly in that way, and it even has an Android client, so why should you ask for more?

Well, there are two other reasons to prefer Tiny Tiny RSS, which are much more objective than the one above, but do not apply to everybody.


People who use RSS mostly to find and play multimedia content, or participate in online activities (for example, commenting on new

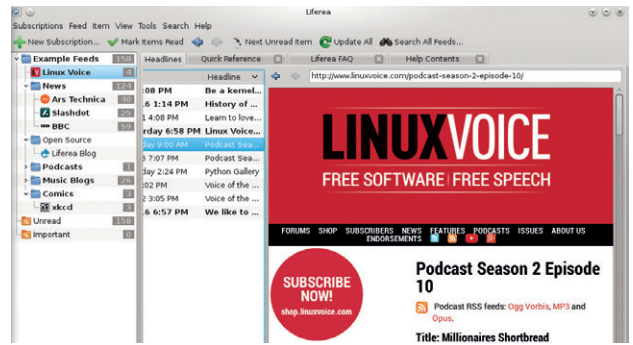
posts and threads in blogs and fora) will find themselves doing those things in their main browser, to reuse cookies if nothing else.

The same is true for everybody who wants to bookmark and categorise the web pages they get via RSS. Why keep two separate tagging and bookmarking systems? This, for the record, is the reason why we didn't pay more attention to labelling, scoring and so on.

In other words, if all your RSS-related activity and indexing would have to happen inside a

browser anyway, why not even read the feeds with the same browser?

At the same time, we acknowledge that most people will not need a full-fledged Web based system, especially if it is slower than native desktop programs. At that point, the choice is simple. Newsbeuter is fast and extremely powerful, but has the steeper learning curve. Akregator is simple and practical, but relatively limited. QuiteRSS is full featured and portable, but not the best in terms of plugins and documentation. So, you guessed it, Liferea wins. 



Liferea is the best compromise between simplicity and features.

1st Liferea

Licence GPLv2+ Version 1.10.8

<http://lzone.de/liferea>

Liferea is fast, has all the main features, can be extended in many ways and installation is dead easy. That's why it wins.

2nd Tiny Tiny RSS

Licence GPLv3 Version 1.12

<http://tt-rss.org/redmine/projects/tt-rss/wiki>

It's slow and its interface isn't really state of the art. However, it is the most portable and future-proof of the pack. Give it a try.

3rd QuiteRSS

Licence GPLv3 Version 0.15.4

<http://quiterss.org>

Do you need to categorise and label all your news, just as you want? This is the aggregator for you.

4th Newsbeuter

Licence MIT Version 2.8

<http://newsbeuter.org>

If you have the time to learn all its possibilities, Newsbeuter can be the most efficient and flexible aggregator around.

5th Akregator

Licence GPLv2 Version 4.12.5

www.kde.org

Akregator lacks the plugins of Liferea, but is so simple and solid it may be all you need.

YOU MAY ALSO WISH TO TRY...

You should also try SnowNews if command-line tools are for you, or RSSowl for a graphical interface: it is multiplatform and even runs as an Eclipse plugin.

There is also plenty of Free Software that can download, generate or otherwise process RSS feeds automatically. An example of such category is Rawdog (<http://offog.org/code/>

rawdog.html): give it a feed, and it will produce a static HTML page with all the corresponding articles. The Python module called feedparser is already used for many tasks of this kind, and well documented.

Even on the opposite side, that is feed generation, there are plenty of choices. Try Planet (www.planetplanet.org), which

downloads and assembles different feeds into a new, combined one. It's also relatively simple to create an RSS feed from any text input. The script at <http://ocsovszki-dorian.blogspot.it/2011/01/generating-rss-feed-width-bash-script.html>, for example, creates feeds for torrent clients, and is easy to study and adapt to other cases.