

Scintilla: the Latest Launch from the Natureplex

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Nature Publishing Group has now launched so many innovative Web 2.0-style initiatives that the development floor of its London offices is being referred to as "the Natureplex." Scintilla, a new information filtering and personalisation aggregator, is the latest service to launch, and indicates not only Nature's understanding of the ways in which scientists work, but also how the range of services might start to come together.

Important details: [Scintilla](#) is described on the blog of one of its chief architects, Alf Eaton, as an aggregator of scientific content which incorporates elements of a variety of Web 2.0 services including [The Hype Machine](#) (aggregation), [Google Reader](#) (checking selected sources), [last.fm](#) (recommendation engine based on other users' activities), and [del.icio.us](#) (social network based around content). The service allows registered users to be served with content matching their stated interests, by selecting sources of interest, and then being presented with recommendations of other content of possible interest. All registered [Nature.com](#) users automatically have access to the service: one example of how Nature is starting to link its offerings together. Users can form groups around topics, add colleagues to these groups, mark items of interest, and recommend items to other people and groups.

At launch, Scintilla is drawing in content from between 700 and 800 sources, including blogs and more formal news sources such as publications and press releases. The only criterion, other than relevance to the scientific community, is that the source must deliver content in an RSS format. The content displayed exactly matches the feed (so if the feed only provides an excerpt of the content, then that's what will be displayed on Scintilla), and sources are clearly referenced. NPG is very aware that, as an aggregator of content, Scintilla must be seen to provide a benefit to content providers, who may otherwise choose to withdraw their material from the service. To this end, source providers who use Google AdSense can register their Google AdSense ID with Scintilla; ads can then be displayed alongside their content on Scintilla and the revenues from those sent on to the original source. This removes the concern that readers will view content on Scintilla and not on the source site, damaging the revenue potential for the content creator. While Nature clearly has an understanding of the revenue potential of a service of this sort, there are no direct revenues generated for Nature by Scintilla, like many of the other services in the portfolio.

Implications: It is the recommendations and social aspects that make Scintilla stand out. After all, most users already have ways of collecting information from their favourite sources (such as using an RSS reader like Google Reader), but having other, previously undiscovered, resources being recommended based on what other users have marked as being of interest, is enormously valuable. Amazon, as a business built on the power of recommendation, can attest to that, and this facility will be of particular value to niche scientific communities.

And no self-respecting Web 2.0 service is complete without some form of social element - indeed, Nature.com users already have social services available through the [Nature Network](#) sites that currently serve London and Boston. Like Scintilla, these services offer the opportunity to set up groups (either around a lab or institution, or around a topic), and it seems likely that, since these services operate off a common user database, facilities of this

sort will start to tie together so that the Nature offerings form a contiguous whole rather than a patchwork quilt. Patching these offerings together is more easily said than done - troublesome items, according to Scintilla developer Euan Adie, include issues such as data protection and user privacy. As the latest in a series of innovative services ([Connotea](#), [Postgenomic](#), [Nature Precedings](#)), Scintilla, whose name means spark of inspiration, shows that inspiration is one thing that the NPG development team certainly does not lack.

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