# Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog » Blog Archive » Creating A Blog From Scratch, Part 6: One Year Later

Well, it's been over a year since I started this blog with a mix of trepidation, ambivalence, and faint praise for the genre[1]—not exactly promising stuff—and so it's with a mixture of relief and a smidgen of smug self-satisfaction that I'm writing this post. I'm extremely glad that I started this blog last fall and have kept it going. (Evidently the half-life of blogs is about three months[2], so an active year-old blog is, I suppose, some kind of accomplishment in our attention-deficit age.) I thought it would be a good idea (and several correspondents have prodded me in this direction) to return to my series of posts about starting this blog, "Creating a Blog from Scratch."[3] (For latecomers, this blog is not powered by Blogger, TypePad, or WordPress, but rather by my own feeble concoction of programming and design.) Over the next few posts I'll be revisiting some of the decisions I made, highlighting some good things that have happened and some regrets. And at the end of the series I'll be introducing some adjustments to my blog that I hope will make it better. But first, in something of a sequel to my call to my colleagues to join me in this endeavor, "Professors, Start Your Blogs,"[4] some of the triumphs and tribulations I've encountered over the last year.

As the five-part series on creating this blog[5] detailed, I took the masochistic step of writing my own blog software (that's probably a little too generous; it's really just a set of simple PHP scripts with a MySQL database) because I wanted to learn about how blogs were put together and see if I agreed with all of the assumptions that went into the genre. That learning experience was helpful (and judging by the email still I get about the series others have found it helpful), but I think I have paid a price in some ways. I will readily admit I'm jealous of other bloggers with their fancy professional blogging software with all of the bells and whistles. Worse, much of the blogosphere is driven by the big

mainstream software packages like Blogger, TypePad, and WordPress; having your own blog software means you can't take advantage of cutting-edge features, like new forms of searching or linking between blogs. But I'm also able to tweak the blog format more readily because I wrote every line of the code that powers this blog.

As I wrote in "Welcome to My Blog,"[6] and as regular readers of this blog know well, I'm not a frequent poster. Sometimes I lament this fact when I see blogs I respect maintain a frantic pace. I've written a little over 60 posts (barely better than one per week, although with the Zotero[7] crunch this fall the delays between posts has grown). Many times I've felt I had something to post to the blog but just didn't get around to writing it up. I'm sure other bloggers know that feeling of missed opportunity, which is of course a little silly considering that we're doing this for free, in our spare time, in most cases without a gun to our heads. But you do begin to feel a responsibility to your audience, and there's no one to pawn that responsibility off on—you're simultaneously the head writer, editor, and publisher.

On the other hand, I just did a quick database query and was astonished to discover I've written almost 40,000 words in this space (about 160 pages, double-spaced) in the last twelve months. Most posts were around 500-1000 words, with the longest post (Professors, Start Your Blogs[8]) at close to 2000 words. Had you told me that I would write the equivalent of half a book in this space last fall, a) I wouldn't have believed it, and b) I probably wouldn't have started this blog.

One of the reasons bloggers feel pressure to post, as I've discovered over the last year, is that it's fairly simple to quantify your audience, often in excruciating detail. As of this writing this blog is ranked 34,181 out of 55 million blogs tracked by Technorati[9]. (This sounds pretty good—the top 1/100th of a percent of all blogs!—until you realize that there are millions of abandoned and spam blogs, and that like most Internet statistics, the rankings are effectively logarithmic rather than linear. That is, the blog that is ranked 34th is probably a thousand times more

prominent than mine; on the other hand, this blog is approximately a thousand times more prominent than the poor blogger at 34,000,000.) Because of that kind of quantification, temptations abound for courting popularity in a way that goes against your (or at least my) blog's mission. I've undoubtedly done some posts that were a little unnecessary and gratuitously attention-seeking. For instance, the most-read post over the last year covered the fingers that have crept into Google's book scanning project[10], which of course in its silliness got a lot of play on the popular social news site Digg.com[11] and led to thousands of visitors on the day I posted it and an instant tripling of subscribers to this blog's feed. But I'm proud to say that my subsequent more serious posts immediately alienated the segment of Digg who are overly fond of exclamation points and my numbers quickly returned to a more modest—but I hope better targeted— audience.

Surely the happiest and most unexpected outcome of creating this blog has been the way that it has gotten me in touch with dozens of people whom I probably would not have met otherwise. I meet other professional historians all the time, but the blog has introduced me to brilliant and energetic people in libraries, museums, and archives, literary studies, computer science, people within and outside of academia. Given the balkanization of the academy and its distance from "the real world" I have no idea how I would have met these fascinating people otherwise, or profited from their comments and suggestions. I have never been to a conference where someone has come up to me out of the blue and said, "Hi Dan, I'm so-and-so and I wanted to introduce myself because I loved the article you wrote for such-and-such journal." Yet I regularly have readers of this blog approach me out of the blue, and in turn I seek out others at meetings merely because of their blogs. These experiences have made me feel that blogging has the potential to revitalize academia by creating more frequent interactions between those in a field and, perhaps more important, between those in different fields. So: thanks for reading the blog and for getting in touch!

Next up in the anniversary edition of "Creating a Blog from Scratch": it's

taken me a year, but I finally weigh in on tagging[12].

Part 7: Tags, What Are They Good For?[13]

This entry was posted on Monday, December 11th, 2006 at 6:05 pm and is filed under Academia[14], Blogs[15], Programming[16]. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0[17] feed. You can leave a response[18], or trackback[19] from your own site.

## References

1. ^ a mix of trepidation, ambivalence, and faint praise for the genre (www.dancohen.org)
2. ^ the half-life of blogs is about three months (technorati.com)
3. ^ "Creating a Blog from Scratch." (www.dancohen.org)
4. ^ "Professors, Start Your Blogs," (www.dancohen.org)
5. ^ creating this blog (www.dancohen.org)
6. ^ "Welcome to My Blog," (www.dancohen.org)
7. ^ Zotero (www.zotero.org)
8. ^ Professors, Start Your Blogs (www.dancohen.org)
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10. ^ the fingers that have crept into Google's book scanning project (www.dancohen.org)
11. ^ Digg.com (www.digg.com)
12. ^ weigh in on tagging (www.dancohen.org)
13. ^ Part 7: Tags, What Are They Good For? (www.dancohen.org)
14. ^ View all posts in Academia (www.dancohen.org)
15. ^ View all posts in Blogs (www.dancohen.org)
16. ^ View all posts in Programming (www.dancohen.org)
17. ^ RSS 2.0 (www.dancohen.org)
18. ^ leave a response (www.dancohen.org)
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Excerpted from *Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog » Blog Archive » Creating a Blog from Scratch,*

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http://www.dancohen.org/2006/12/11/creating-a-blog-from-scratch-part-6-one-year-later/

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Readability — An Arc90 Laboratory Experiment

http://lab.arc90.com/experiments/readability