

## Full Feeds Vs. Partial Feeds

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One seemingly minor aspect of blogs I failed to consider carefully when I programmed this site was the composition of its feed. (Frankly, I was more concerned with the merely technical question of how to write code that spits out a valid RSS or Atom feed.) Looking at a lot of blogs and their feeds, I just assumed that the standard way of doing it was to put a small part of the full post in the feed—e.g., the first 50 words or the first paragraph—and then let the reader click through to the full post on your site. I noticed that some bloggers put their entire blog in their feed, but as a new blogger—one who had just spent a lot of time redesigning his old website to accommodate a blog—I couldn't figure out why one would want to do that since it rendered your site irrelevant. It may seem minor, but a year later I've realized that there is, in part, a philosophical difference between a full and partial feed. Choosing which type of feed you are going to use means making a choice about the nature of your blog—and, surprisingly, the nature of your ego too. Subscribers to this blog's feed have probably noticed that as of my last post I've switched from a partial feed to a full feed, so you already know the outcome of the debate I've had in my head about this distinction, but let me explain my reasoning and the advantages and disadvantages of full and partial feeds.

Putting the entire content of your blog into your feed has many practical advantages. Most obviously, it saves your readers the extra step of clicking on a link in their feed reader to view your full post. They can read your blog offline as well as online, and more easily access it on a non-computer device like a cell phone. Machine audiences<sup>[1]</sup> can also take advantage of the full feed, searching it for keywords desired by other machines or people. For instance, most blog search engines allow you to set up feeds for posts from any blogger that contain certain words or phrases.

More important, providing a full feed conforms better with a philosophy I've tried to promote in this space, one of open access and the sharing of

knowledge. A full feed allows for the easy redistribution of your writing and the combination of your posts with others on similar topics from other bloggers. A full feed is closer to “open source” than a feed that is tied to a particular site. For this reason, until the advent of in-feed advertising, most professional bloggers had partial feeds so readers would have to view advertising next to the full text of a post.

Even from the perspective of a non-commercial blogger—or more precisely the perspective of that blogger’s ego—full feeds can be slightly problematic. A liberated, full feed is less identifiably from *you*. As literary theorists know well, reading environments have a significant impact on the reception of a text. A full feed means that most of your blog’s audience will be reading it without the visual context of your site (its branding, in ad-speak), instead looking at the text in the homogenized reading environment of a feed reader. I’ve just switched from [NetNewsWire<sup>\[2\]</sup>](#) to [Google Reader<sup>\[3\]</sup>](#) to browse other blogs, and I especially like the way that Google’s feed reader provides a seamless stream of blog posts, one after the other, on a scrolling web page. I’m able to scan the many blogs I read quickly and easily. That reading style and context, however, makes me much less aware of specific authors. It makes the academic blogosphere seem like a stream of posts by a collective consciousness. Perhaps that’s fine from an information consumption standpoint, but it’s not so wonderful if you believe that individual voices and perspectives matter a great deal. Of course, some writers cut through the clutter and make me aware of their distinctive style and thoughts, but most don’t.

At the [Center for History and New Media<sup>\[4\]</sup>](#), we’ve been thinking a lot about the blog as a medium for academic conversation and publication—and even promotion and tenure—and the homogenized feed reader environment is a bit unsettling. Yes, it can be called academic narcissism, but maintaining authorial voice and also being able to measure the influence of individual voices is important to the future of academic blogging.

I've already mentioned in this space<sup>[5]</sup> that I would like to submit this blog as part of my tenure package, for my own good, of course, but also to make a statement that blogs can and should be a part of the tenure review process and academic publication in general. But tenure committees, which generally focus on peer-reviewed writing, will need to see some proof of a blog's use and impact. Right now the best I can do is to provide some basic stats about the readership of this blog, such as subscriptions to the feed.

But with a full feed, you can slowly lose track of your audience. Providing your entire posts in the feed allows anyone to resyndicate it, aggregate it, mash it up, or simply copy it. I must admit, I am a little leery of this possibility. To be sure, there are great uses for aggregation and resyndication. This blog is resyndicated on a site dedicated to the future of the academic cyberinfrastructure<sup>[6]</sup>, and I'm honored that someone thought to include this modest blog among so many terrific blogs charting the frontiers of libraries, technology, and research. On the other hand, even before I started this blog I had experiences where content from my site appeared somewhere else for less virtuous reasons. I don't have time to tell the full story here, but in 2005 an unscrupulous web developer used text from my website and a small trick called a "302 redirect" to boost the Google rankings of one of his clients. It was more amusing than infuriating—for a while a dentist in Arkansas had my bio<sup>[7]</sup> instead of his. More seriously, millions of spam blogs scrape content from legitimate blogs, a process made much easier if you provide a full feed. And there are dozens of feed aggregators that will create a website from other people's content without their permission. Regardless of the purpose, above board or below, I have no way of knowing about readers or subscribers to my blog when it appears in these other contexts.

But these concerns do not outweigh the spirit and practical advantages of a full feed. So enjoy the new feed—unless you're that Arkansas dentist.

Part 9: The Conclusion<sup>[8]</sup>

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## References

1. ^ [Machine audiences](#) (www.dancohen.org)
2. ^ [NetNewsWire](#) (www.newsgator.com)
3. ^ [Google Reader](#) (www.dancohen.org)
4. ^ [Center for History and New Media](#) (chnm.gmu.edu)
5. ^ [mentioned in this space](#) (www.dancohen.org)
6. ^ [a site dedicated to the future of the academic cyberinfrastructure](#) (planet.code4lib.org)
7. ^ [my bio](#) (www.dancohen.org)
8. ^ [Part 9: The Conclusion](#) (www.dancohen.org)
9. ^ [View all posts in Blogs](#) (www.dancohen.org)
10. ^ [View all posts in Open Access](#) (www.dancohen.org)
11. ^ [View all posts in Open Source](#) (www.dancohen.org)
12. ^ [RSS 2.0](#) (www.dancohen.org)
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