

Advantages And Disadvantages Of Popular Blog Software

In the first post in this series^[1] I briefly recounted the early history of blogs (all of five years ago) and noted how many of their current uses have diverged from two early incarnations (as a place to store interesting web links and as the online equivalent of a diary). Unfortunately, these early, dominant forms gave rise to existing blog software that, at least in my mind, is problematic. This “encoding” of original purposes into the basic structure of software is common in software development, and it often leads to features and configurations in later releases that are undesirable to a large number of users. In this post, I discuss the advantages and disadvantages of common blog packages—often deeply encoded into the software.

There are many good reasons to use popular blog software like Moveable Type, Blogger, or WordPress, almost too many to mention in this space. Here are some of the most important reasons, many of them obvious and others perhaps less so:

- From a single download or by signing up with a service, you get a high level of functionality immediately and can focus on the content of your blog rather than its programming.
- Their web designs make them instantly recognizable as the genre “blog,” thus making new visitors feel comfortable. For instance, most of them list posts in reverse chronological order, with “archives” that contain posts segmented by months and calendars marking days on which you have recently posted.
- They allow people with little time or technical expertise to generate a site with well-formed, standards-compliant web code (most recently XHTML).
- They automatically generate an RSS feed.
- They have large user bases and active developers, which makes for

relatively quick responses to annoyances such as blog spam.

- They have lots of neat “social” features, such as feedback mechanisms (e.g., comments), and tracking (to see who has linked to one of your posts).
- *Some* blog software automatically creates relatively good URLs^[2] (more on that in a later post in this series, and why good URLs are important to a blog).
- Some blog services allow you to post via email and phone in addition to using a web browser.

Some of the disadvantages of popular blog software are merely the flip side of some of these advantages:

- Even with the many templates blog software comes with, their web designs make most blogs look alike. Yes, you can easily figure out that a site is a blog, but on the other hand they begin to blend together in the mind’s eye. The web is made for variety, not sameness. In addition, you really have to work hard to fit a blog seamlessly into a broader site.
- The tyranny of the calendar. There’s too much attention to chronology rather than content and the associations between that content. You can almost hear your blog software saying, “Boy, Dan had a pretty thin November, posting-wise,” taunting you with that empty calendar, or calling attention to the fact that your last post was “56 days ago.” Quality should triumph over quantity or frequency. Taking the emphasis off of time—perhaps not entirely, but a great deal—seemed to me to be a good first step for my own blog software (you’ll note that I only have a greyed-out date below the big red headline and a tiny “date string” in the buttons for each post). Obviously it makes sense to have recent posts highest on the page, but there may also be older posts that are still relevant or popular with visitors that you would like to highlight or reshuffle back into the mix. “Categories” have helped somewhat in this regard, and now post tagging (folksonomy) presents more hope. But I want to have full control over the

position of my posts, recategorize them at will, have breakouts (like this series), different visual presentations, etc. And no thank you to the calendars or monthly archives.

- Large installed user bases, as those who use Microsoft products will tell you, leads to unsavory attacks. Note the enormous proliferation of blog spam in the last year, mostly done by automated programs that know exactly how to find WordPress comment fields, Moveable Type comment fields, etc. Sure, there are now mechanisms for defending against these attacks, but when you really think about it...
- The comment feature of blogs is vastly overrated anyway. My back-of-the-envelope calculation is that 1% of blog comments are useful to other readers. A truly important comment will be emailed to the writer of the blog, as I encourage readers to do at the end of every post. Moreover, increasingly a better place for you to comment on someone's blog is on your own blog, with a link to their post. Indeed, that's what Technorati and other blog search engines have figured out, and now you can acquire of a feed of comments about your blog from these third parties without opening up your blog to comment spam. (This also eliminates the need for trackback technology in your blog software.) So: no comments on my blog. Sorry. Don't need the hassle of deleting even the occasional blog spam, and as readers of this blog have already done in droves (thanks!) you can [email me^{\[3\]}](#) if you need to. I'll be happy to post your comments in this space if they help clarify a topic or make important corrections.
- The search function is often not very good on blogs, even though search is how many people navigate sites. And trying to have a search function that simultaneously searches a blog and a wider site can be very complicated.
- Like most software, there is a factor of "lock-in" when you choose an existing blog software package or service. It's not entirely simple to export your material to a different piece of software. And many blog software packages have made this worse by encouraging posts written with non-standard (i.e., non-XHTML) characters that are

used for formatting or style (as with Textile) and are converted to XHTML equivalents on the fly. This makes writing blog posts slightly faster. But if you export those posts, you will lose the important character translations.

Following this assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of popular blog software, I set about creating my own basic software that would easily fit into the web design you see here. Of course, I was throwing the baby out with the bath water by writing my own blog code. Couldn't I just turn off the comments feature? Didn't I want that easy XHTML compliance? Come on, are the designs so bad (they're actually not, especially WordPress's, but they are fairly similar across blogs)? Don't I want to be able to phone in a post, or email one from a BlackBerry? (OK, the answer is no on both of those counts.)

But as I mentioned at the beginning of this series, I wanted to learn by doing and making. I didn't know much about RSS. Which kind of RSS feed was best? How do you make an RSS feed, anyhow? I've thought a great deal about searching and data-mining, but what was the best way to search a blog? Were there ways to make a blog more searchable?

With these questions and concerns in mind, I started writing a simple PHP/MySQL application, and began to think about how I would make up for the lack of some of the advantages I've outlined above (hint: outsourcing). In the next post in this series, I'll walk you through the basic setup and puzzle at the variety of RSS feeds.

[Part 3: The Double Life of Blogs](#)^[4]

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References

1. [^ first post in this series \(www.dancohen.org\)](http://www.dancohen.org)
2. [^ relatively good URLs \(chnm.gmu.edu\)](http://chnm.gmu.edu)
3. [^ email me \(www.dancohen.org\)](http://www.dancohen.org)
4. [^ Part 3: The Double Life of Blogs \(www.dancohen.org\)](http://www.dancohen.org)
5. [^ View all posts in Blogs \(www.dancohen.org\)](http://www.dancohen.org)
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Excerpted from *Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog » Blog Archive » Creating a Blog from Scratch,*

Part 2: Advantages and Disadvantages of Popular Blog Software

<http://www.dancohen.org/2005/12/18/creating-a-blog-from-scratch-part-2-advantages-and-disadvantages-of-popular-blog-software/>

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