Twitter Thread by Cory Doctorow #BLM



Cory Doctorow #BLM
@doctorow

It's been twenty years, to the day, since I published my first blog-post.

I'm a blogger.

Blogging - publicly breaking down the things that seem significant, then synthesizing them in longer pieces - is the defining activity of my days.

https://t.co/lksXhU6HKM

1/



Over the years, I've been lauded, threatened, sued (more than once). I've met many people who read my work and have made connections with many more whose work I wrote about. Combing through my old posts every morning is a journey through my intellectual development.

2/

It's been almost exactly a year I left Boing Boing, after 19 years. It wasn't planned, and it wasn't fun, but it was definitely time. I still own a chunk of the business and wish them well. But after 19 years, it was time for a change.

3/

A few weeks after I quit Boing Boing, I started a solo project. It's called Pluralistic: it's a blog that is published simultaneously on Twitter, Mastodon, Tumblr, a newsletter and the web. It's got no tracking or ads. Here's the very first edition:

https://t.co/F2ny06qPAu

4/

I don't often do "process posts" but this merits it. Here's how I built Pluralistic and here's how it works today, after nearly a year.

I get up at 5AM and make coffee. Then I sit down on the sofa and open a huge tab-group, and scroll through my RSS feeds

using @newsblur.

5/

I spend the next 1-2 hours winnowing through all the stuff that seems important. I have a chronic pain problem and I really shouldn't sit on the sofa for more than 10 minutes, so I use a timer and get up every 10 minutes and do one minute of physio.

6/

After a couple hours, I'm left with 3-4 tabs that I want to write articles about that day. When I started writing Pluralistic, I had a text file on my desktop with some blank HTML I'd tinkered with to generate a layout; now I have an XML file (more on that later).

7/

First I go through these tabs and think up metadata tags I want to use for each; I type these into the template using my text-editor (gedit), like this:

process, blogging, pluralistic, recursion, navel-gazing

8/

Each post has its own little template. It needs an anchor tag (for this post, that's "hfbd"), a title ("20 years a blogger") and a slug ("Reflections on a lifetime of reflecting"). I fill these in for each post.

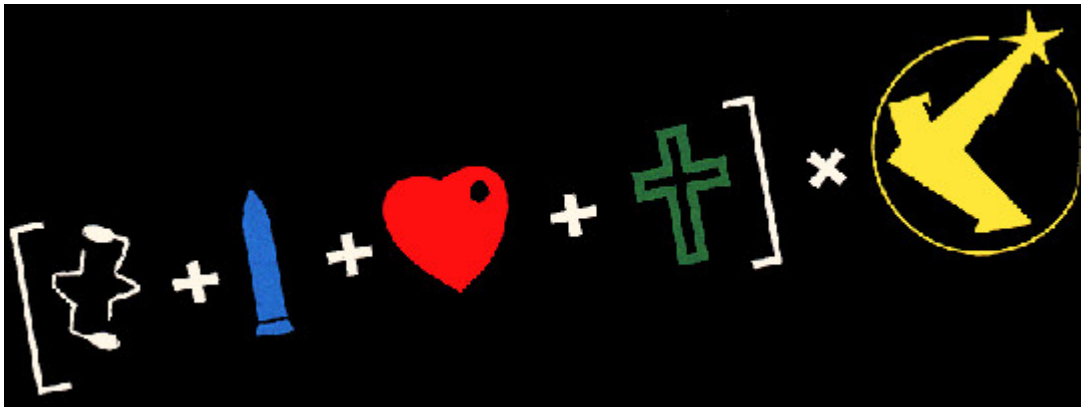
9/

Then I come up with a graphic for each post: I've got a giant folder of public domain clip-art, and I'm good at using all the search tools for open-licensed art: the Library of Congress, Wikimedia, Creative Commons, Flickr Commons, and, ofc, Google Image Search.

10/

I am neither an artist nor a shooper, but I've been editing clip art since I created pixel-art versions of the Frankie Goes to Hollywood glyphs using Bannermaker for the Apple //c in 1985 and printed them out on enough fan-fold paper to form a border around my bedroom.

11/



As I create the graphics, I pre-compose Creative Commons attribution strings to go in the post; there's two versions, one for the blog/newsletter and one for Mastodon/Twitter/Tumblr. I compose these manually.

12/

Here's a recent one:

Blog/Newsletter:

(*Image: https://t.co/JhDqTiJkXZ">Marc Nozell, https://t.co/k23s7Hso7i">CC BY, modified*)

Twitter/Masto/Tumblr:
Image: Marc Nozell (modified)
https://t.co/JhDqTiJkXZ

CC BY
https://t.co/k23s7Hso7i

13/

This is purely manual work, but I've been composing these CC attribution strings since CC launched in 2003, and they're just muscle-memory now. Reflex.

14/

These attribution strings, as well as anything else I'll need to go from Twitter to the web (for example, the names of people whose Twitter handles I use in posts, or images I drop in, go into the text file). Here's how the post looks at this point in the composition.

15/

```
27 <hr>
28
29 <a name="hfbd"></a>
30 <img src="https://craphound.com/images/20yrs.jpg">
31 <h1>20 years a blogger</h1><xtagline>Reflections on a lifetime of reflecting.</
   xtagline>
32
33 <img src="https://craphound.com/images/frnklogo.jpg">
34
35 <hr>
```

See that tag in there for frnklogo.jpg? I snuck that in while I was composing this in Twitter. When I locate an image on the web I want to use in a post, I save it to a dir on my desktop that syncs every 60 seconds to the /images/ dir on my webserver.

16/

As I save it, I copy the filename to my clipboard, flip over to gedit, and type in the tag, pasting the filename. I've typed https://t.co/nAP17kQyAJ CTRL-V"> tens of thousands of times - muscle memory.

17/

Once the thread is complete, I copy each tweet back into gedit, tabbing back and forth, replacing Twitter handles and hashtags with non-Twitter versions, changing the ALL CAPS EMPHASIS to the extra-character-consuming *asterisk-bracketed emphasis*.

18/

My composition is greatly aided both 20 years' worth of mnemonic slurry of semi-remembered posts and the ability to search https://t.co/5AYu99Z3Bu (the site where I've mirrored all my Boing Boing posts) easily.

19/

A huge, searchable database of decades of thoughts really simplifies the process of synthesis.

Next I port the posts to other media. I copy the headline and paste it into a new Tumblr compose tab, then import the image and tag the post "pluralistic."

20/

Then I paste the text of the post into Tumblr and manually select, cut, and re-paste every URL in the post (because Tumblr's automatic URL-to-clickable-link tool's been broken for 10+ months).

21/

Next I past the whole post into a Mastodon compose field. Working by trial and error, I cut it down to <500 characters, breaking at a para-break and putting the rest on my clipboard. I post, reply, and add the next item in the thread until it's all done.

22/

THEN I hit publish on my Twitter thread. Composing in Twitter is the most unforgiving medium I've ever worked in. You have to keep each stanza below 280 chars. You can't save a thread as a draft, so as you edit it, you have to pray your browser doesn't crash.

23/

And once you hit publish, you can't edit it. Forever. So you want to publish Twitter threads LAST, because the process of mirroring them to Tumblr and Mastodon reveals typos and mistakes (but there's no way to save the thread while you work!).

24/

Now I create a draft Wordpress post on https://t.co/iSBh8s9m7q, and create a custom slug for the page (today's is "two-decades"). Saving the draft generates the URL for the page, which I add to the XML file.

25/

Once all the day's posts are done, I make sure to credit all my sources in another part of that master XML file, and then I flip to the command line and run a bunch of python scripts that do MAGIC: formatting the master file as a newsletter, a blog post, and a master thread.

26/

Those python scripts saved my ASS. For the first two months of Pluralistic, i did all the reformatting by hand. It was a lot of search-replace (I used a checklist) and I ALWAYS screwed it up and had to debug, sometimes taking hours.

27/

Then, out of the blue, a reader - Loren Kohnfelder - wrote to me to point out bugs in the site's RSS. He offered to help with text automation and we embarked on a month of intensive back-and-forth as he wrote a custom suite for me.

28/

Those programs take my XML file and spit out all the files I need to publish my site, newsletter and master thread (which I pin to my profile). They've saved me more time than I can say. I probably couldn't kept this up without Loren's generous help (thank you, Loren!).

29/

I open up the output from the scripts in gedit. I paste the blog post into the Wordpress draft and copy-paste the metadata tags into WP's "tags" field. I preview the post, tweak as necessary, and publish.

30/

(And now I write this, I realize I forgot to mention that while I'm doing the graphics, I also create a square header image that makes a grid-collage out of the day's post images, using the Gimp's "alignment" tool)

31/

(because I'm composing this in Twitter, it would be a LOT of work to insert that information further up in the post, where it would make sense to have it - see what I mean about an unforgiving medium?)

32/

(While I'm on the subject: putting the "add tweet to thread" and "publish the whole thread" buttons next to each other is a cruel joke that has caused me to repeatedly publish before I was done, and deleting a thread after you publish it is a nightmare)

33/

Now I paste the newsletter file into a new mail message, address it to my Mailman server, and create a custom subject for the day, send it, open the Mailman admin interface in a browser, and approve the message.

34/

Now it's time to create that anthology post you can see pinned to my Mastodon and Twitter accounts. Loren's script uses a template to produce all the tweets for the day, but it's not easy to get that pre-written thread into Twitter and Mastodon.

35/

Part of the problem is that each day's Twitter master thread has a tweet with a link to the day's Mastodon master thread ("Are you trying to wean yourself off Big Tech? Follow these threads on the #fediverse at https://twitter.com/pluralistic@mamot.fr." target="_blank">@pluralistic@mamot.fr. Here's today's edition: LINK").

36/

So the first order of business is to create the Mastodon thread, pin it, copy the link to it, and paste it into the template for the Twitter thread, then create and pin the Twitter thread.

37/

Now it's time to get ready for tomorrow. I open up the master XML template file and overwrite my daily working file with its contents. I edit the file's header with tomorrow's date, trim away any "Upcoming appearances" that have gone by, etc.

38/

Then I compose tomorrow's retrospective links. I open tabs for this day a year ago, 5 years ago, 10 years ago, 15 years ago, and (now) 20 years ago:

https://t.co/iGwIkXNxmg

https://t.co/K2UtR1OH82

https://t.co/CeEkpJccLN

https://t.co/CF3FgkaN1i

https://t.co/ar13T1e2tF

39/

I go through each day, and open anything I want to republish in its own tab, then open the OP link in the next tab (finding it in the @internetarchive if necessary). Then I copy my original headline and the link to the article into tomorrow's XML file, like so:

40/

#10yrsago Disney World’s awful Tiki Room catches fire https://t.co/6t7jy4xIRt">https://t.co/6t7jy4xIRt

And NOW my day is done.

So, why do I do all this?

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First and foremost, I do it for ME. The memex I've created by thinking about and then describing every interesting thing I've encountered is hugely important for how I understand the world. It's the raw material of every novel, article, story and speech I write.

42/

And I do it for the causes I believe in. There's stuff in this world I want to change for the better. Explaining what I think is wrong, and how it can be improved, is the best way I know for nudging it in a direction I want to see it move.

43/

The more people I reach, the more it moves.

When I left Boing Boing, I lost access to a freestanding way of communicating. Though I had popular Twitter and Tumblr accounts, they are at the mercy of giant companies with itchy banhammers and arbitrary moderation policies.

44/

I'd long been a fan of the POSSE - Post Own Site, Share Everywhere - ethic, the idea that your work lives on platforms you control, but that it travels to meet your readers wherever they are.

45/

Pluralistic posts start out as Twitter threads because that's the most constrained medium I work in, but their permalinks (each with multiple hidden messages in their slugs) are anchored to a server I control.

46/

When my threads get popular, I make a point of appending the https://t.co/iSBh8s9m7q permalink to them.

When I started blogging, 20 years ago, https://t.co/HOFG9iMR3W had few amenities. None of the familiar utilities of today's media came with the package.

47/

Back then, I'd manually create my headlines with

tags. I'd manually create discussion links for each post on Quicktopic. I'd manually paste each post into a Yahoo Groups email. All the guff I do today to publish Pluralistic is, in some way, nothing new.

48/

20 years in, blogging is still a curious mix of both technical, literary and graphic bodgery, with each day's work demanding the kind of technical minutuae we were told would disappear with WYSIWYG desktop publishing.

49/

I grew up in the back-rooms of print shops where my dad and his friends published radical newspapers, laying out editions with a razor-blade and rubber cement on a light table. Today, I spend hours slicing up ASCII with a cursor.

50/

I go through my old posts every day. I know that much - most? - of them are not for the ages. But some of them are good. Some, I think, are great. They define who I am. They're my outboard brain.

eof/