

Managing Multiple Blogs

Let's face it. Working with WordPress is like eating popcorn or chips—one WordPress blog just isn't enough. If you have more than one WordPress blog to manage, you might wonder about blog networks—maybe you could have organized things differently to make things easier for yourself. Then there is the other side of things, a situation in which you might think something more like WordPress.com is the solution. It's like a network of independent blogs, but where you have some control over the look and feel and such.

When Matt Mullenweg and his friends first created WordPress, it was designed to be one install, one blog. It wasn't long before people wanted to run networks of blogs on WordPress—not just installing WordPress several times on the same server, but installing it so there was a central administrative hub with sites connected to it. Blog network administrators needed some central control over what themes were used, what plugins were used, and how the whole network of blogs grew.

Because WordPress didn't originally work like this, but the entire source code was available for building on, it didn't take long before someone built a solution. That someone was Donncha O Caoimh of Cork, Ireland, and what he built came to be known as WordPress Multiuser or WordPressMU or WPMU. WPMU did all of the above and became the core of WordPress.com.

I started using WPMU in some of its early alpha builds and remember a lot of rough starts and “Oh well, I'll just delete and start over” moments. Overall, however, I knew that WPMU was going to be a huge boon to WP users—boon to users, not the developers who were trying to maintain the codebase for WordPress. This is why in 2009 at WordCamp San Francisco, it was announced that WordPressMU would be merged into the main WordPress codebase in WordPress 3.0, which was a huge change that has taken over a year to put into place.

However, using WordPress in its new “network mode” isn't for everyone. The process of merging the codebases wasn't about making the multiuser functions easier for average users; it was just about bringing all the code together under one

roof. Don't worry: There are other ways to manage multiple blogs, and this chapter talks about not only the "hows" but also the "whys" and "why nots" of the topic.

What WordPress 3.0 Is and Isn't

WordPress 3.0 is a big deal for the WordPress community. Pulling the two codebases into one single one has been a huge development undertaking. We should all tip our hats to the scores of people who help work on WordPress for accomplishing this feat. Don't worry; after you install WordPress 3.0, you won't see the option to make the switch to network blog mode. There's a good reason for this, and I'll get to it in a moment, but here are some of the things that *won't* happen under WordPress 3.0:

- Existing WP 2.x blogs won't have the option to make a switch network mode.
- Existing WPMU blogs won't experience much difference, except for some new labels and such.
- Running and managing blogs in network mode won't be significantly easier than it is under WPMU 2.x.

The final point is very important for understanding how WordPress 3.0 affects you as a WordPress user. Running in network mode will still take some extra server skills that go beyond those needed for a basic WordPress install. What WordPress 3.0 and the new network mode actually represent is a way for network admins to have one codebase that they need to be concerned with. WordPress 3.0 is a huge milestone in the development of WordPress, but perhaps the biggest changes for the WordPress community might come later when network blog setups become more simple to manage. This change will probably not come all that quickly because *most* of us are hosting our WordPress installs on shared hosting accounts, and many hosts will frown upon running WordPress in network mode. Most hosts already frown upon WordPress MU, so just having everything in one install isn't going to change that.

WordPress 3.0 might not be the earth-shattering change that WordPress 2.7 brought with the new dashboard or 2.9 with the image editor, but there are a lot of great things under the hood that are new and very cool.

Enabling Network Blog Mode

Before I give you the secret to turning on the option to switch to network blog mode, I have to reiterate that using blog network mode isn't the right choice for all situations in which you need manage multiple blogs. There is a lot going on

behind the scenes that makes this kind of WordPress setup much harder to work with. Not all plugins work smoothly under network blog mode. Some *themes* don't even like to operate within a network. To run in network blog mode, you need to do a lot of your own troubleshooting, as long as your host doesn't get cranky with you for setting it up in the first place. Consider yourself duly warned.



LET ME TRY IT

WordPress 3.0 and Network Blog Mode

This *only* works under WordPress 3.0 and higher and isn't for the everyday user. It's an understatement to say proceed with caution:

1. Back up both your .htaccess and wp-config.php files. Those files are going to get some major changes, and if you want to go back if something goes wrong, backups are going to be the best way.
2. Edit your wp-config.php and add this line:

```
define('WP_ALLOW_MULTISITE', true);
```
3. Save the wp-config.php file and go to your blog dashboard.
4. The Network option is now available under Tools. Click that link to see the screen shown in Figure 17.1.
5. Choose to use subdomains or subdirectories for creating the sub-blogs. WordPress.com uses subdomains (clearly); however, subdirectories are a lot easier to implement, with far fewer server and DNS tweaks to have to make.

It is *essential* that you make sure the blogs.dir directory has been created in wp-content and make the edits to *both* .htaccess *and* wp-config.php *before* you go to the dashboard if you want to be in network mode.

6. Click Install, and the screen shown in Figure 17.2 displays.
After your edits are complete, you're in network blog mode.
7. If you get to the screen with the editing information and decide that this isn't for you, don't worry. Click your Dashboard button, and you'll still be in single blog mode.

If you start getting into the thick of network mode and want to completely reverse things, you need to roll back to your previous .htaccess and wp-config.php files and clear the tables in your database that pertain to multisite mode.

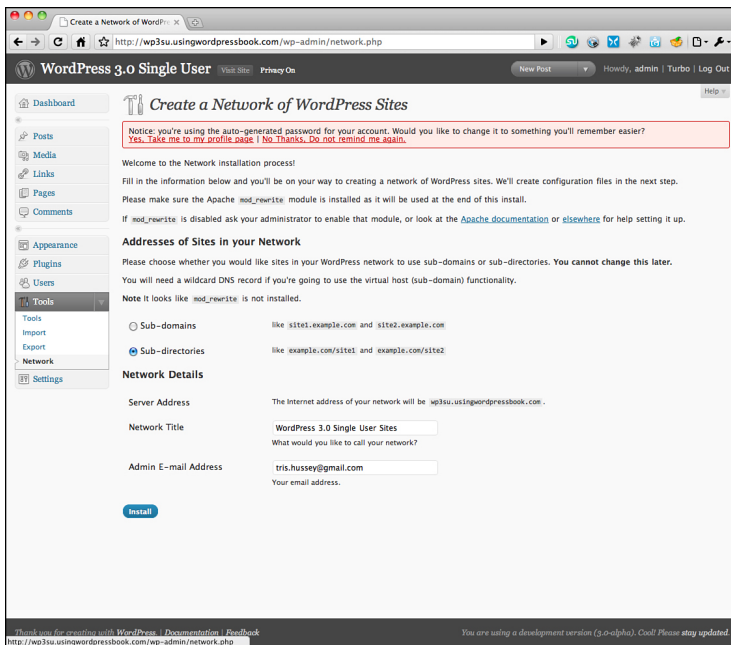


Figure 17.1 With the multisite option enabled, this is the first step to actually making the switch to multisite mode.

There is a bit of anticlimax to switch to network mode, but if you knew what was going on behind the scenes, you'd be amazed with all the code changes. Again, switching to network mode ups the ante on everything you're doing with WordPress. So, if you want to get into this, be ready for a big learning curve.



SHOW ME Media 17.1—Enabling Multisite Mode

Access this video file through your registered Web Edition at
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When a Single Blog Is Right for You

Let's back up a bit here and talk about some of the hows and whys of managing multiple blogs. As I said in the beginning of the chapter, after you start using WordPress, you'll find that you want to have more and more blogs. This, however, brings challenges that you might not have faced before. You have to keep all the installs updated with current versions of WordPress, themes, and plugins. I won't

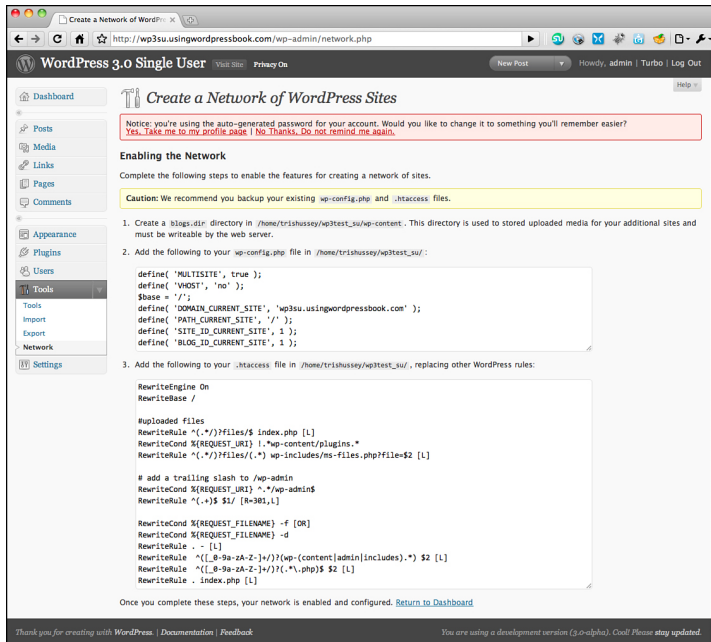


Figure 17.2 Step 2 in switching to multisite mode.

even go into the challenges of managing a number of blogs just from the *content* perspective.

The types of blogs you have helps determine whether you need a blog network or you should maintain individual blogs. When you have several distinct, discrete topics for your blogs, having different blogs for each of those sites makes sense from all aspects of style, content, SEO, and logic. But when you have the situation like a company that has several divisions or a university with departments (and students), you have to ask yourself if one blog or many separate blogs is the right choice.

The first factor to consider is your technical expertise and resources. For example, if you're going to be the only one managing the blog(s), the sole person keeping the technical side of things running, I'd lobby strongly for one blog and one blog only. Just keep it simple. If a particular department wants its own look and feel, work on category templates so the HR department and the IT department don't look identical. Now let's say you have more resources and might have people who are going to run each separate WP install for their group; before you think this is awesome, remember that each install has to be maintained (technically). Who is going to

check up on that? You counter with, what about WPMU/network blog mode? Good, I'm glad you've been following along. Yes, in the case where you have the *desire* to have all these stand-alone blogs, but want to maintain a semblance of control over them (not to mention pushing updates to everyone at once), looking at network blogs makes sense—if you have the technical resources to handle it. Remember, network blog mode isn't just WordPress+; it's almost a different animal in how it has to manage and maintain itself.

It's worth looking at some of the objections I've heard, mostly from larger companies, where one department wants to make sure the things it posts aren't deleted or that someone doesn't accidentally post into their department's section. Inter-department cat fighting aside, these are valid concerns because *at present*, you can't prevent one user for posting in particular categories. Deleting can be controlled somewhat by user privileges, and my solution to someone deleting content on purpose is to demote them to lower privileges. It gets the point across nicely I think.

When I approach a new project, my initial position is always to have just one blog. Do I have places where I've wound up starting several blogs within a company for different reasons? Oh sure, I have, but frankly I also have found that in short order I'm thinking about rolling them into the main blog and making them a super-section or something. Let me speak from personal experience here. I've had my main site at trishussey.com/larixconsulting.com for about seven years. It *started* as a “normal website” and then I added a blog to it. After a few months, I switched the whole kit and kaboodle to one blog (about 2004, I think), and it's stayed that way ever since; until I started writing books. I've started three additional blogs for three book projects since about 2006, and I really thought it was a good idea at the time. When I started writing *Create Your Own Blog* in 2008, I started a blog for it. When I started this book in 2009, I started a blog for it. Before 2010 rolled around, and this book's blog might have been one month old, I realized that having *four* blogs to maintain (and write content for), was pretty foolish. I was smarter than that. If I *really* wanted a different look for each book section, I could edit the template to do that. So, I pulled all the individual sites into my main one. If you visit www.usingwordpressbook.com, you'll wind up at a section of my site (it's just a category, you know) just for this book. If you want to check out the rest of the things I write about, it's just a menu pull or search field away.

There is nothing wrong with having one blog that does a lot for you; that said, there are times when you should consider the network mode blog for your project. Even with the extra server requirements and the potential technical challenges, it might just be the right choice.

When a Network Blog Is Right for You

In spite of how much I've been trying to dissuade you from considering for a moment using WordPress in network mode, there are good reasons to use it. It was invented for a good reason, and WordPress.com wouldn't exist without it. The question is: When is it worth it?

Basically, network mode is right for you when you need to have several independent blogs managed from a central hub. I think one of the best examples would be a university. If you want all students to have some blogging space, even the ability to have private spaces for classes and collaborative groups, the Network blog option is for you. If you're interested in BuddyPress (even though you can run BuddyPress on "regular" WordPress now), network mode is the best option out there. A couple of colleagues built a WPMU-based site for a professional organization where each area needed a certain degree of autonomy that no amount of training or template tweaking could pull off. Although I personally still think it was an overkill solution, the implementation was slick; although you need smarter-than-your-average-bear WordPress and server skills to pull together.

My feeling is that you shouldn't look at the network mode option unless you're really looking at doing something like WordPress.com (offering stand-alone, independent blogs). Running in network blog mode requires more than just the "famous five-minute install" for WordPress, and there will be ongoing maintenance, but if you're up for it, the result is really cool.

Other Ways to Manage Multiple Blogs

Sometimes, you need independent blogs, but you know the network mode isn't going to be the right choice. Because there are real plugin and theme limitations, you need regular WordPress to make it happen, but what's the right way to do it? Frankly, there are lots of right ways to do it, and the determining factor is going to be *scale*. Let's just say you want to have about five blogs of your own that you'd like to have on your basic hosting account. That's actually simple, and here are some of the tricks that I'd suggest you employ.

If you haven't chosen your host yet, look for one that gives you shell access at the very least and optimally enables you to use Subversion as well. Doing things at the command line is *huge* for saving you time and energy updating sites.

Look for hosts that offer unlimited databases and hostnames. This just gives you room to grow more than anything else.

Look for hosts with 10GB or more of space (unlimited space would be best) for storage. Although WordPress files don't take up a lot of space, all the other stuff you upload does. Having to suddenly "clean house" or pony up more money is no fun at all. Seriously.

If you have terminal access, you can use some of the tricks I talked about in Chapter 13, "Maintaining WordPress," for using SVN or even just basic shell commands for downloading and copying WordPress files around. If you can't do that, and you can't all the time, maintain what I call a WordPress DropBox on your local computer. This is just a folder with the current version of WordPress (zipped and unzipped), all the themes you use (clean and modified copies), and all the plugins you use. I find the hard part is keeping the plugins updated, but the end goal here is that if you need to update your blogs, and the automatic update *doesn't* work (if it does, just use it, really), you have all the plugins ready to drag and drop to upload as a batch. Before I had shell access at a client's host, this is exactly how I did it. On the days I was updating WordPress to a new version, it would take most of the morning to upload WordPress because I had to do it over and over and over again. Plugins, thankfully, are a lot smaller and take less time, but still you need to keep track of downloading, unzipping, and uploading all of them.

As for your database, I suggest keeping them all separate. There is a trick, which I sometimes employ, where you can have multiple WordPress installs in one database by changing the default table prefix from `wp_` to something unique for each blog. From a database load standpoint, I don't know which might be better or worse, but from an ease of exporting-importing standpoint, I know having each blog in its own database is a much easier to deal with. If you have to blow out and reinstall the database, it's much less risky if you're dealing with only one site at a time. Imagine if you had an "oops" moment and you blow out not just *one* but *several* blogs all at once. Yeah, the temptation to book a trip out of the country or run away screaming will be very, very strong.

Yes, I agree, WordPress needs some kind of management tool between the whole network mode thing and a bunch of WordPress blogs that can't easily be updated from a central spot (by most users). I hope that at some point, someone creates a web-based version of SVN like phpMyAdmin is for MySQL. That might let people use SVN when they can't use automatic updates, or want to push out a bunch of updates or roll out cookie cutter sites more easily. Time will tell, I guess.



SHOW ME Media 17.2—How I Manage Multiple Blogs with "Regular" WordPress Installs

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