

Chapter 1

The Big Picture

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding open source software
 - ▶ Comparing Content Management Systems
 - ▶ Developing a website with Drupal
 - ▶ Knowing Drupal's potential
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At the dawn of time, if you wanted to create a fully featured website with forms, a blog, and a message board, you practically had to be a computer programmer — or at least have enough dirt on a programmer to bribe him into building a website for you. You needed to know how to write HTML (and possibly JavaScript and CSS), and to accomplish anything dynamic, you needed to know yet another language such as PHP or ASP. You probably would have needed to know SQL, the language that allows websites to store and retrieve information.

As the waters receded and the years wore on, web developers grew weary of having to build each and every site from scratch and began freely sharing code. If you knew some HTML and a few other things, you could use the work of other people to knit your site together. No longer did you need to write code every time you wanted a contact form or poll or image library on your website.

Today, we have entire robust and powerful web applications, supported by communities of web developers. Enter Drupal. Drupal is one of a class of web applications that do nearly all the work for you. You can build a site with Drupal without ever writing a single line of code. Indeed, that's the ultimate goal of Drupal: to free you from the inner workings of the code and instead let you focus on the layout and content of your site. There are other, similar applications you can use that also accomplish this, but Drupal is one of the best open source applications for quick, code-free website creation. In short, Drupal, just like RuPaul, makes looking good look easy.

Before we get into the installation and use of Drupal, we think it's helpful to start by introducing the features of Drupal. After all, there's no sense in installing it if you don't know what it does, right? The more you understand about what Drupal is, the better you can plan and use it to your advantage.

What Drupal Is

The official Drupal website, <http://drupal.org>, describes Drupal as “a free software package that allows an individual or a community of users to easily publish, manage and organize a wide variety of content on a website.” This is a great description of this application. It’s free, as long as you follow certain rules that we mention later in this chapter. Drupal allows for a wide variety of content, making it extremely flexible and customizable. The fact that more than one individual can publish and manage content makes it a Content Management System (CMS). We explain each of these important characteristics of Drupal in more detail a little bit later on.

Free

Drupal is distributed as *open source* software. This means that you can get a copy of the program and install it on your web server, modify the appearance of the pages and layout to suit your needs, and add your content to it without paying for the program. It seems too good to be true!



Software designated as open source essentially means it’s “free,” but it does have certain legal obligations associated with it. For example, if you were a programmer and made changes to the code itself and then provided the new code to other people, there would be certain rules you would have to follow under Drupal’s license. You can learn more about open source licensing here: www.gnu.org/copyleft/gpl.html.

If you really like Drupal, or the great Drupal site you build helps your company make lots of money, you can contribute to the efforts of the many great programmers who have created this software by visiting <http://drupal.org/contribute>.

Flexible

Drupal sites are completely flexible. This means you can do things like

- ✓ **Modify the layout of your pages:** With the use of blocks, you can move your navigation links to anywhere else on your pages you wish. You can put all your content in one column or choose multiple-column layouts.
- ✓ **Remove or replace the default Drupal logo:** By default, your Drupal site will be branded with the official Drupal logo. You can easily remove it or replace it with your own logo.

- ✓ **Add and remove pages:** Drupal wouldn't be of much use to anyone if it were stuck with a specific set of pages. Drupal gives you complete flexibility to create as many pages as your site will need, as well as freedom to choose where page links will appear, and to delete those pages if they're no longer useful to you.
- ✓ **Hide content and pages from certain users:** You can, if you choose, allow only logged-in users (or even a subset of users) to see certain pages on your site. You can even hide content *within* a page from certain users. Sneaky!
- ✓ **Allow users to choose their own layouts:** You can let individual users choose their own layouts. When they log in, they'll see whichever layout they chose. This is a great way to make the visitors to your site feel welcome.

Customizable

One of the best things about Drupal is the ease with which you can customize your site's features. Drupal comes with lots of great features you can turn on or off with the click of a button. If you want to add a forum, poll, or blog, for example, you'll find they are features included with the Drupal application that you can easily include or exclude from your site. Your site can contain precisely what you want it to, and you can turn off features you don't want. Even if the rest of your life is an out-of-control mess, you can rest assured that your Drupal website will be exactly the way you want it.

What's better than free stuff? More free stuff! Beyond the features, or modules, included with the program, many web developers have created and made freely available *thousands* more modules you can download and install! We recommend you take a minute to check out the third-party modules here: <http://drupal.org/project/modules>. You'll find some great add-ons are in there. If you aren't already excited about the potential Drupal offers yet, you will be. For example, free modules allow you to integrate Facebook and Twitter information into your site, turn your site into an online store, or create photo galleries. We tell you about some especially useful and interesting third-party modules later in this book.

A Content Management System

At its heart, Drupal is all about *managing content*. Drupal belongs to a class of applications known as web *Content Management Systems* (CMS). These applications are designed to separate the content on a website from the presentation of that content. In other words, you can manage the text and graphics on your site through the Drupal interface as easily as you can create a Microsoft Word document.

After you set up your site, you don't have to worry about looking at HTML code and putting your desired text into some sort of web format. You can simply type in a text box on a form and click a button. BOOM! Your new content will show up on your site. That, friends, is what they call easy. Behind the scenes, Drupal handles the conversion of your text into a format viewable on the web. Drupal will also, in the case of a blog-style page, save any old content previously published and provide a link to it for your users.

But the real power of CMS applications is that you can give specific users the permission to easily post, edit, and/or delete content on your site, while at the same time, deny them the permissions required to change the layout or features of your site. You can even allow certain users to create content, but not allow it to be published on the site until you've had a chance to approve it. All this control allows your site content to be maintained, while your site structure remains safe from possible harm.

What Drupal Isn't

Drupal is a great application for creating a robust CMS website. But it's not perfect. You may encounter a few difficulties as you work with it:



- ✓ **Drupal isn't so easy to install:** Although the latest version of the CMS — Drupal 7 — introduces a great number of new, user-friendly elements, it can still be a tough nut to crack. Probably the most difficult part of building a Drupal website is installing Drupal in the first place. You have to understand its requirements, make a few decisions, and gather required information to get it installed correctly.

Chapter 2 covers the ins and outs of installation.

- ✓ **Your site isn't automatically ready to go after you finish installing Drupal:** You go on from there to modify the configuration of the site, change the layout, and add your own content. You will also have to spend time deciding on the best site structure for your website.

We show you how to customize your site, in great detail, in Part II.

- ✓ **You have only a limited capability to change the appearance or function of modules:** Any modules you use will have some configurable options, but there may be things you want to change that aren't configurable. This isn't unique to Drupal: It's the case with any open source CMS application you encounter. The developers of modules generally do their best to anticipate what you might want to configure, but they can't read your mind. Fortunately, the beauty of open source is that you have the code available to tweak until your specific needs can be addressed.



We don't discuss programming in this book, but after you get your site running, you may want to learn more about the code side of Drupal. In Chapter 17, we recommend some sites where you can get programming help if you choose to delve into the messy business of modifying the code.

- ✓ **Drupal's interface can be a bit confusing:** Drupal administration menus are not intuitive — which is why you bought this book, right? We show you where everything is and explain Drupal's language for its onscreen things throughout this book. Don't worry. We'll be gentle.

What Drupal Can Do for Your Site

From web polls to blogs and shopping carts, your site can be full of great features without any need for you to get into the actual web programming side of things. We're sure you'll agree that this is a very good thing. As you look through the features, think about creative ways you can use them for the sites you're building.

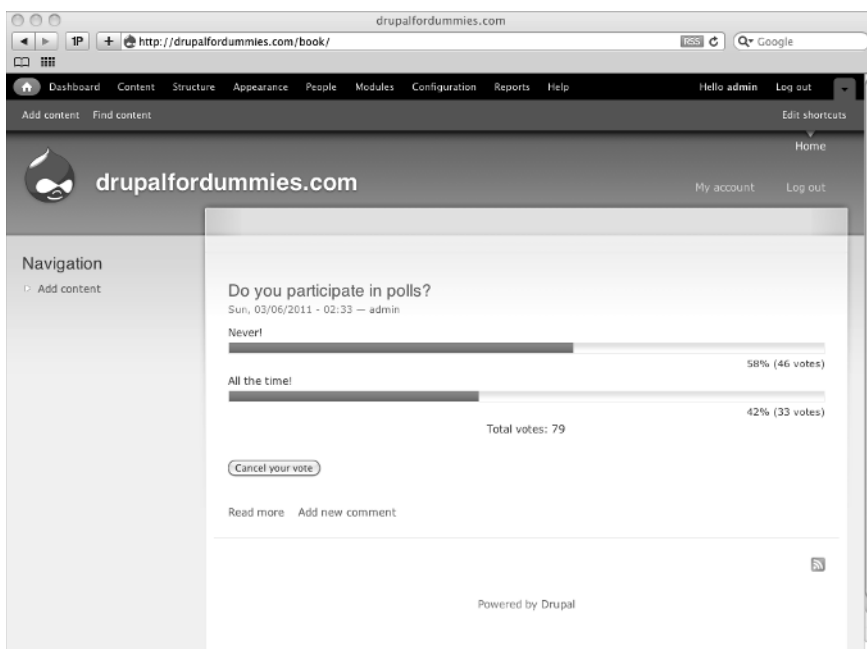
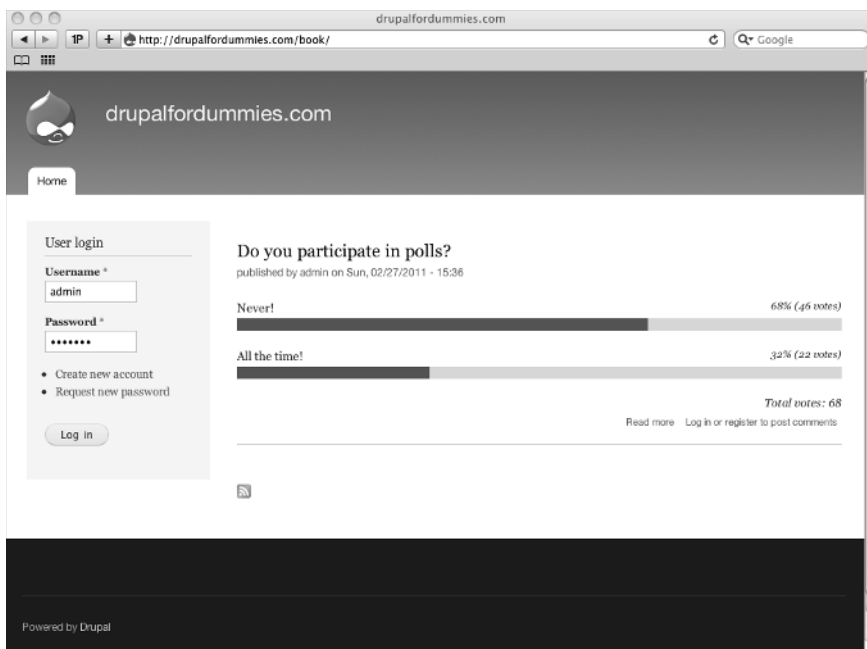


You won't have to build all these features at once; you can always add new features to and remove features from your site at any time.

Polls

A *poll* is a question posed to visitors to your site that users are allowed to answer on the site. Polls are great for getting your community of users involved in discussions. Drupal has a simple interface that allows you to create custom polls, such as the one shown in Figure 1-1. (Note that Figure 1-1 shows the default Bartik theme; in the figures we show in the rest of the chapter, we use the Garland theme because we think it looks nicer on the page.)

After a registered user has voted, he sees a tally of the current voting results (see Figure 1-2) and has the option of cancelling his vote. He can then vote again if he wishes. His vote counts only once.



Blogs

One of the primary reasons web Content Management Systems are extremely popular is the ease with which you can create blogs. Drupal provides full-featured blogging, complete with

- ✓ Automatic archiving of past entries.
- ✓ A simple-to-use interface for creating new blog entries.
- ✓ An optional comment system for site visitors to contribute their thoughts (see Figure 1-3).

Blogs aren't used just to document someone's daily activities. Companies use corporate blogs to keep the content on their sites fresh. Instead of having to create new HTML web pages every time they publish a press release, for example, they can blog the information.

Not only is it incredibly easy to create blog entries, but you also develop a history of all your blog postings over time. All this information, and any other content posted on your site (including forums, static pages, and comments), can be made searchable — an incredibly useful feature! It's also a built-in module you activate.

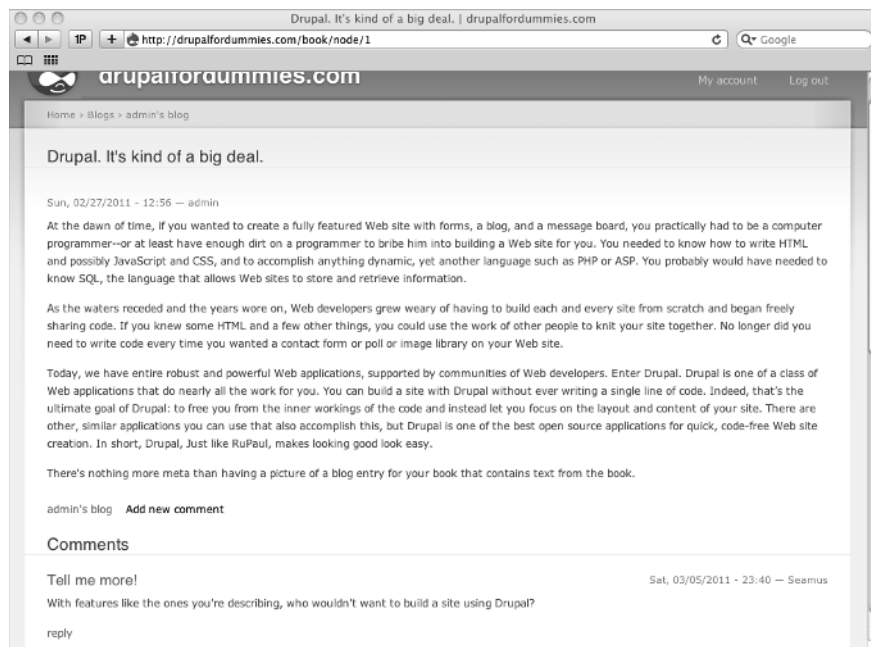


Figure 1-3:
Blog entries
with com-
ments
enabled.

Contact forms

Okay, the contact form may not be the most exciting feature of a website, but it is an important one: Your site visitors need a way to get in touch with you. In the past, if you didn't have programming skill, you might have used an HTML *mailto* link on a web page — and found that it never worked reliably. Drupal takes care of the contact form for you and creates a web form:

- ✓ The form sends the content to your e-mail address, or wherever else you tell Drupal to send it, when the form is submitted (see Figure 1-4).
- ✓ You can configure the form to send a custom confirmation message automatically to the e-mail address of the person who submits the form.

You can't change the fields in this form, but you can modify the text and add information, such as a contact address, a map and directions, and a phone number.



Figure 1-4:
A contact
form.

Forums

A *blog* (weblog) is generally used to share large amounts of information with your users — with the information flowing one way, from you to your site visitors. A *forum*, by contrast, is most often used to allow your site visitors to chat amongst themselves. If it's important to you to build community interaction and encourage communication among the users of your site, you should consider adding a forum.

A forum consists of a set of *discussions*, as shown in Figure 1-5:

- ✓ Inside each discussion is a set of topics (see Figure 1-6).
- ✓ Inside each topic, your users post their comments and replies to each other's comments.

After you drill down into a discussion, you see all posts for that discussion. You also see a small icon indicating postings you have not read since you last visited the forum, allowing you to pick up on a conversation no matter how long you've been away.

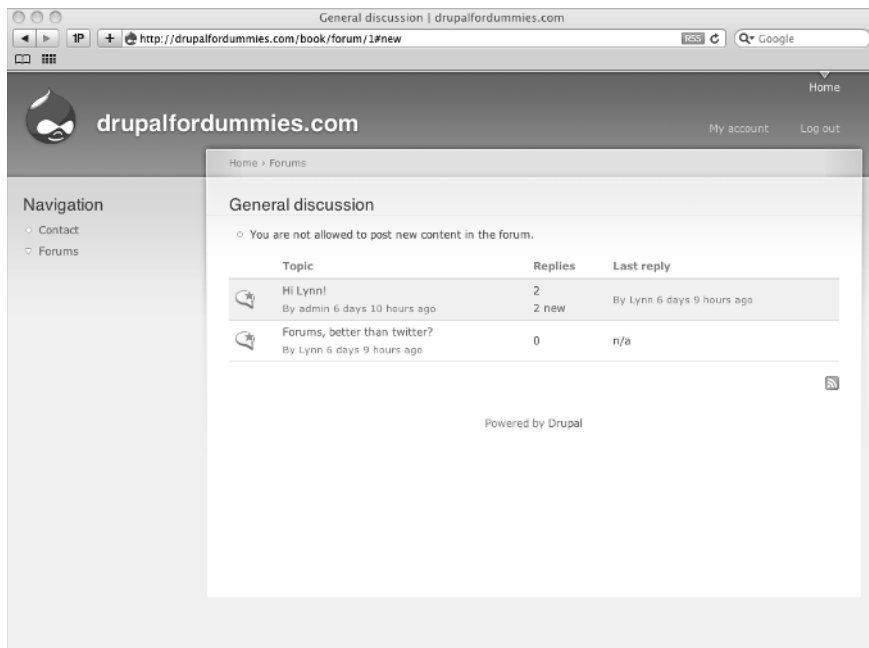


Figure 1-5:
A set of
Drupal user
forums.

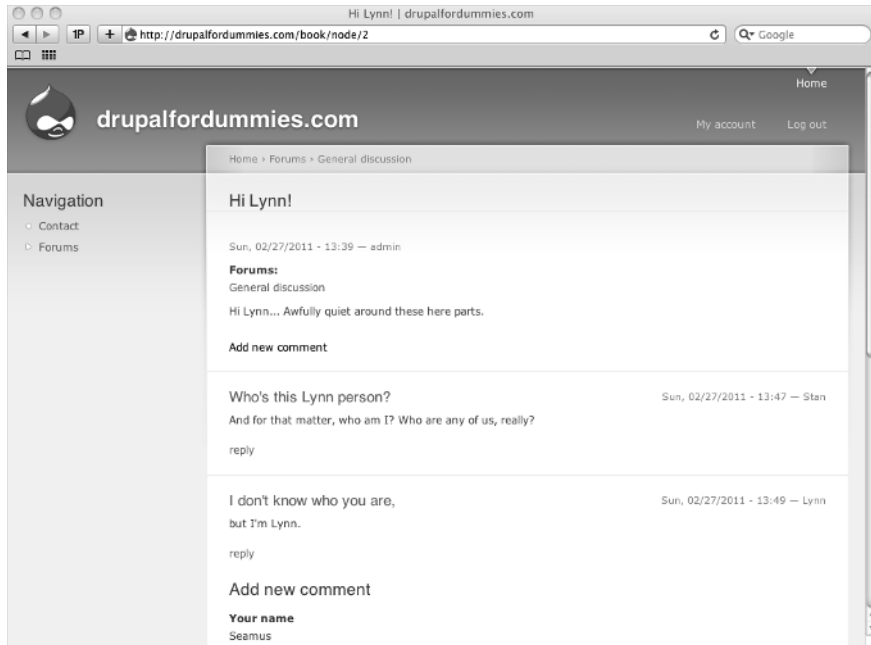


Figure 1-6:
Topics
within a dis-
cussion.

Like many of Drupal's features, the forum configuration settings give you a great deal of control over the permissions you give your users. You can either

- ✓ Maintain complete control over discussion topics.
- ✓ Allow your users to create topics.

You can even delegate specific people to be forum moderators and help you share the workload.



Assigning people to specific tasks on your site not only splits up the workload, but is also a great way to build a sense of community among the visitors and users of your site.

Examples of Drupal Sites

Are you excited about your website? Well, you should be! Using Drupal 7 isn't just a great way to build a site; it's also a superb venue for showing the world how creative you can be. The following are a few really slick-looking sites built using Drupal. Take a look and you'll see why we recommend them.

Drupal.org

It would smack of snake oil if Drupal's own site wasn't built using Drupal. Fortunately, <http://drupal.org> (see Figure 1-7) is built with the product it offers; you can see many of the features we mention earlier in this chapter — blogs, forums, and a search box — make the scene, along with quite a few more.

Zappos.com

Zappos.com (www.zappos.com), a major online retailer, has leveraged Drupal to create a robust online store. Although it customizes the Drupal code base, much of the core Drupal code is used.

Drupalmuseum.com and Drupalsites.net

These two Drupal sites exist to showcase other Drupal sites:

- ✓ Drupalmuseum at www.drupalmuseum.com (see Figure 1-8)
- ✓ Drupalsites.net at www.drupalsites.net

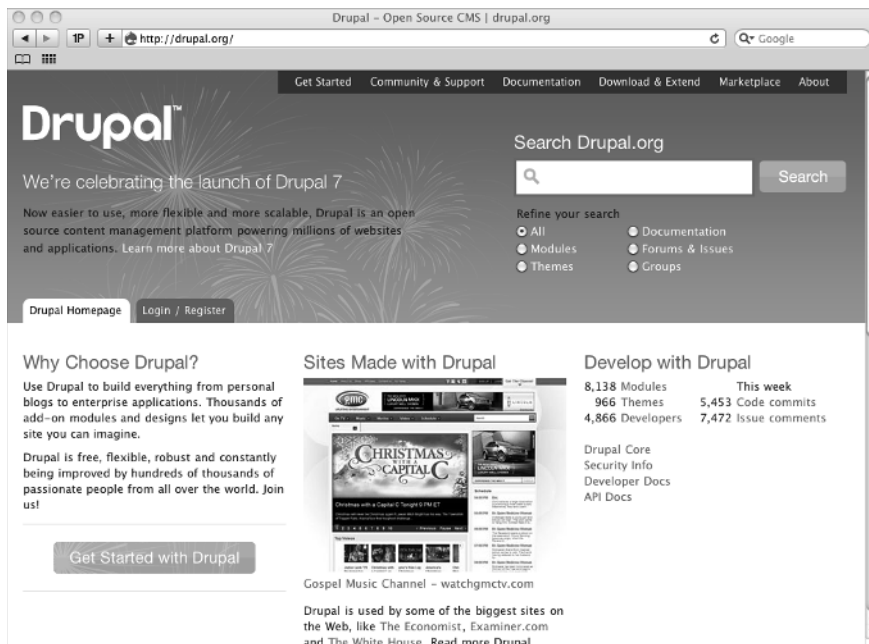


Figure 1-7:
The home of
Drupal.

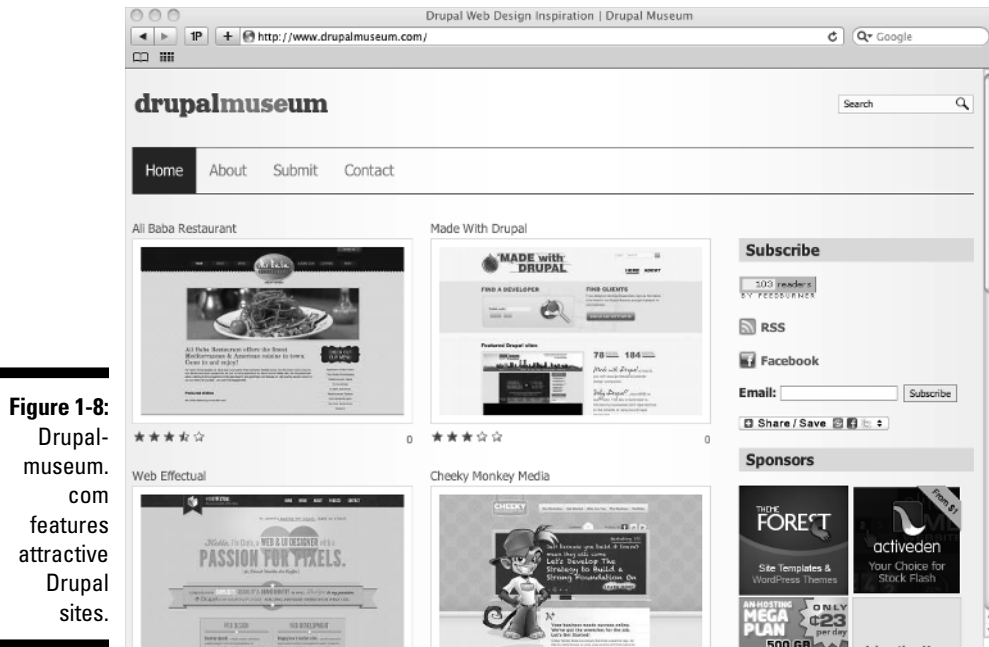


Figure 1-8:
Drupal-
museum.
com
features
attractive
Drupal
sites.

Most of the featured sites have substantially customized their appearance, but the code behind them is all Drupal.