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WhiteHouse.gov Goes Drupal [Updated]

Nancy Scola | October 24, 2009 - 2:42pm | [Email This!](#)

[WhiteHouse.gov](#) has gone Drupal. After months of planning, says an Obama Administration source, the White House has ditched the proprietary content management system that had been in place since the days of the Bush Administration in favor of the latest version of the open-source [Drupal software](#), as the [AP](#) alluded to in its reporting several minutes ago.

The great Drupal switch came about after the Obama new media team, with a few months of executive branch service (and tweaking of [WhiteHouse.gov](#)) under their belts, decided they needed a more malleable development environment for the White House web presence. They wanted to be able to more quickly, easily, and gracefully build out their vision of interactive government. [General Dynamics Information Technology \(GDIT\)](#), the Virginia-based government contractor who had executed the Bush-era White House CMS contract, was tasked by the Obama Administration with finding a more flexible alternative. The ideal new platform would be one where dynamic features like question-and-answer forums, live video streaming, and collaborative tools could work more fluidly together with the site's infrastructure. The solution, says the White House, turned out to be Drupal. That's something of a victory for the Drupal (not to mention open-source) community.

Drupal proponents have long tried to make the case that open-source software could be just as safe, just as stable, and just as reliable as pre-boxed software, even if hundreds, thousands, or even millions of volunteer developers had their fingers in the mix at some point along the way. The White House's seal of approval doesn't hurt.



According to White House new media director **Macon Phillips**, working with GDIT on the competitively bid contract are both open-source software practitioners and experts in keeping systems up and running. Notably, the Drupal specialist firm [Acquia](#) is also working with the White House on the project as a subcontractor. Why that's worth noting: Acquia founder **Dries Buytaert** is also happens to be credited as the programmer who created Drupal in the first place, and he currently serves as the Drupal community's project lead in the software's development. Acquia, [writes Buytaert](#), "is to Drupal what Ubuntu or RedHat are to Linux." (Translation for the rest of us: the source for a polished, established, and supported version of a free and open-source software system.) Drupal specialists [Phase2](#), based in Virginia, is also serving as a subcontractors on the GDIT-managed WhiteHouse.gov contract, as are the IT infrastructure firm [Terremark Federal Group](#) and [Akamai](#), the distributed computing company already tasked with keeping the White House website up and running.

Let's really try to extract the last drop of possible meaning from a choice over a CMS. Squint a bit, and it's possible to see the White House's move to open-source software as a move towards the idea that collaborative programming can inspire -- or at least, support -- a more distributed politics. That idea bubbled up in 2004, when young programmers experimented with using Drupal itself to turn the **Howard Dean** campaign into the Howard Dean network. This idea, that a politics crafted by the people could be a powerful thing indeed, emerged in a slightly mutated way during the Obama presidential campaign, but has arguably receded below the surface during the first nine months of the Obama Administration. First the WhiteHouse.gov CMS gets more open, then the White House OS? Perhaps.

For the lay user, the White House website looks much the same as it has since inauguration day (though search should work noticeably better). But by being open source, the White House is opening itself up to all the bright ideas, powerful plug-ins, and innovative tools that the considerable community of Drupal aficionados come up with. It's a community that the White House says it is eager to tap into. "Open source is a great form of civic participation," the White House's Phillips told me this afternoon. "We're looking forward to getting the benefit of their energy and innovation."

[Updated with details on the contractor and subcontractors involved in the WhiteHouse.gov contract.]

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