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Why running the White House Web site on Drupal is a political disaster waiting to happen.

By Chris Wilson

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In yet another repudiation of its predecessor, the Obama administration this week migrated the White House Web site to Drupal, the popular open-source Web site management software. By dumping the Bush administration's proprietary system and embracing software authored by the community and available to everyone, the consensus holds, the White House embodies the very essence of the new politics.

I wish Drupal and the White House nothing but happiness. But I have a feeling this story ends badly. If the administration had conducted a few polls among the swing demographic of Web site administrators, it would have realized that Drupal is pocked with political landmines. To wit: Drupal represents everything the Obama team does *not* want to project. Allow me to elaborate.

Drupal knows best. It's not that Drupal thinks you're evil. It just thinks you're ignorant. In a basic setup, the software is suspicious of everything you try to do. Should you, say, go completely rogue and try to add some Javascript in the body of a page—a 14-year-old technology that controls interactive components like buttons—the platform will have none of it. The message: "That's dangerous stuff, and you probably don't know what you're doing." Better to outlaw something altogether, Drupal figures, than simply ask you if you really want to use it. If Drupal ran the Food and Drug Administration, it would ban high-fructose corn syrup. This is just the sort of straitjacketed paternalism that half the country is convinced the Democrats are hell-bent on imposing on us all.

Drupal is impenetrable. Even the software's defenders admit that it is hostile to newcomers—or at least indifferent to their plight, as a University of Baltimore study found. The apologists will tell you that, once you scale the learning curve, it gets much easier. This is probably true, but a lot of ordinary, code-fearing people who just want a simple Web site are getting left behind. If Drupal were an

employee of the federal government, it would be the person who answers the phone at Immigration and Customs Enforcement who is unable to help you and unable to tell you who can. If you suspect government is the problem, not the solution, this sort of bureaucratic sprawl is your worst enemy.

Drupal hates change. Want to modernize Drupal by upgrading to a newer version? Ask theseguys how that worked out for them. If Drupal were a piece of legislation, it would be the farm bill: desperately in need of an overhaul but unlikely ever to get one because entrenched interests keep the forces of reform at bay.

Drupal is disorganized. Instead of displaying your pages in folders that you can browse, like you do on your personal computer, Drupal provides a nightmarish content list. To find what you're looking for, you have to search for it. And unlike most content management systems, Drupal doesn't have a convenient way to prevent two people from accidentally editing the same page at the same time. This is exactly the kind of rudderless confusion that small-government types have always said defines the federal government.

Drupal is righteous. The open-source movement has done wonderful things for the Web. But at its core, it remains a religion. If you went to DrupalCon in Paris last month, then you would have almost

certainly come across proselytizers of one the movement's fundamental tenets: Drupal doesn't break Web sites. People with Drupal break Web sites. Most problems with Drupal stem from people who "don't get it" or aren't using it correctly. This is probably true, but it's not much consolation when you spend 45 minutes trying to upload a photo. Drupal's defenders are eerily reminiscent of those movement Democrats who were constantly knocking at your front door in the summer of 2008. Granted, they did get Obama elected, but it's a miracle they didn't cost him the election in the process.

As a cautionary tale, the WhiteHouse.gov administrators might look to Recovery.gov, which is devoted to tracking stimulus spending. The site originally used Drupal but soon hired a private contractor—at a reported cost of $18 million—to rework the site. Perhaps the White House site's administrators have learned from their colleagues' mistakes.

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But I can't help but think the new software represents the triumph of hope over experience. Drupal looks great in theory: It's a powerful way to govern a Web site that is born out of the collective efforts of the community. In practice, it tends to be a bit of a mess. Does that sound like any particular form of government to you?

*(Disclosure: **Slate** sister sites **The Big Money**, **DoubleX**, and **The Root** run on Drupal. The author is not directly involved with any of those sites or their content management.)*

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