



WordPress and the future of open source

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IT'S NOT MUCH OF AN OVERSTATEMENT to say that WordPress powers the internet. The system is behind nearly half of all websites on the net, according to W3Techs.

For more than two decades since the content management system (CMS) was founded in 2003, the brand name has been synonymous with stability and security. Allowing users to design websites and publish content to them, the software is partially so popular because it is free and open source. That means that not only can users employ its tools for free, but developers can build on top of a freely accessible code.

But the actions of the company's co-founder Matt Mullenweg in recent months have caused disquiet among the WordPress community, which has bled out to the wider open-source community. Legal action is ongoing between WordPress and a platform many people use to host their WordPress websites, called WP Engine, with recriminations flying back and forth across courtroom documents.

What does it all mean for the future of open source, and for the future of the WordPress project?

"I believe this is a watershed moment for trust in open source," says Kellie Peterson, former head of domains at WordPress, who has been a vocal critic of Mullenweg in recent weeks. Peterson explains that trust doesn't just encompass open source's stability and resiliency, but also covers trust in the creators and stewards of that software. "For two decades we, collectively, believed in the benevolence of one man who has turned malignant," says Peterson.



The actions I have taken to date are in furtherance of my commitment to the community that I've been building since I was a teenager



MATT MULLENWEG, WORDPRESS

In a statement emailed to Digital Frontier, Mullenweg said that his actions are legally sound and have been taken to protect users.

What happened at WordPress

To understand where we are with the WordPress debacle now, you need to know where it has come from. WordPress was founded in 2003 after Mullenweg, an avid blogger in the early 2000s as a teenager, decided to fork b2, an open-source blogging platform. A fork is when contributors to an open-source project decide to take a different approach to its development, making a copy of the original software and adding their own features to develop it independently of the original version.

“Matt and his colleague, Mike Little, got in touch with the original developer of the b2 system, who was showing signs at that stage of not really wanting to continue working on it, and said: ‘Can we fork it?’” recalls Mark Howells-Mead, a WordPress designer and developer based in Switzerland, who has been building websites and web apps for 30 years. “Since then, the software itself has been developed by a growing number of people also adhering to the same licensing requirements and commitment requirements,” he says.

Anyone with the technical know-how can help develop WordPress, a process known as contributing to the software’s “core”. By 2005, Mullenweg had founded



eyes of the public. And Automattic and Mullenweg were largely interchangeable, too. “Matt has been the leading force in the decision-making process of how the software has been developed in all those years,” says Howells-Mead.

It hasn't always been smooth sailing – Russell Jennings, a software developer, notes there was controversy within the WordPress community over the transfer of the WordPress trademark from Automattic to the WordPress Foundation, a non-profit organisation that turned out not to be as initially presented to the community. But WordPress has grown in stature, and become one of the key backbones of the digital world, akin to other open-source projects like OpenSSL and others that keep the internet quietly ticking over.

As the software grew more successful, third-party companies that bolted onto the core WordPress software have been able to build reputations and fortunes off the back of the ubiquity of WordPress.

One of these businesses is WP Engine, a hosting service for sites built on WordPress. Founded in 2010, the company grew to a size that meant it was taking \$100m in annual recurring revenue as of last year. Automattic itself had been an investor in the business but exited in 2018, when WP Engine sold a majority stake to private equity firm Silver Lake for \$250m.

But in late September this year, Mullenweg shut off access to WP Engine, blocking its servers from accessing WordPress.org resources.

The decision followed several weeks of uneasy wrangling, including a speech at a conference where Mullenweg described WP Engine, which raised hundreds of millions of dollars in investment since its founding in 2010, as “a cancer to WordPress.”

Mullenweg has been unhappy at the fact that WP Engine took more from the WordPress project than it gave, while accepting outside funding that valued it as a major money-making company. Around the same time that Mullenweg cut off access to WP Engine, he alleged that WP Engine was profiting from brand confusion over its use of the letters WP (which it took to be short for “WordPress”).

Mullenweg pointed to his own mother even being confused about the two brands as evidence of the confusion.

The barracking has had an impact, and WP Engine didn't take it lying down. The business sent its own cease-and-desist letter to Mullenweg and Automattic, alleging



developed a business generating annual revenues of over \$400m, which has been based entirely on extensive and unauthorized uses of our Client’s trademarks.”

The WordPress trademark is held by the WordPress Foundation: Mullenweg is a board member of that foundation, but doesn’t entirely control it himself.

While that argument trundles through courts, with even more legal letters and claims flying back and forth, it appears to observers that Mullenweg has decided to pursue the “scorched earth nuclear approach” that WP Engine’s lawyers claim he threatened to undertake.

He has written outspoken attacks on WP Engine, and offered to take over the running of WP Engine customers’ contracts with Pressable, a competitor to WP Engine he developed, even at his own expense. The WordPress trademark disclaimer was even updated to include a catty shot at WP Engine.

Mullenweg began banning users from the WordPress slack because they took WP Engine’s side in the dispute, and required people logging into the login page on WordPress.org to check a box saying they were not affiliated with WP Engine. “It’s up to you whether to check the box or not,” Mullenweg told people asking why they were being asked this question—and whether it would make them legally liable for anything down the road. He added: “Please consult an attorney.”

Mullenweg has offered Automattic employees the ability to leave if they disagreed with his approach to the dispute over two successful rounds of voluntary redundancies. In the first one, nearly 10% of the workforce took him up on the offer. Mullenweg cited, in a blog post announcing the departures, an old Winston Churchill maxim: “Never let a good crisis go to waste.”

Around the same time, Mullenweg also forcibly took over control of a plugin directory’s presence for a popular plugin that has been owned by WP Engine since June 2022. The developers behind it said they did not know their work was being co-opted. Mullenweg has said it was a “fork”, similar to his initial work on WordPress—though he asked for permission then.

“A lot of people have been very shocked recently by Matt’s personal communication style,” says Howells-Mead. “He’s very angry about what’s happened with this single WP Engine, that’s perhaps been influenced by his own personal feelings on the matter as well,” he adds.



We have been made aware that the Advanced Custom Fields plugin on the WordPress directory has been taken over by WordPress dot org.

A plugin under active development has never been unilaterally and forcibly taken away from its creator without consent in the 21 year history of... [Show more](#)



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Peterson, the former WordPress head of domains, believes that the actions of Mullenweg have irreparably harmed WordPress's reputation in the wider tech world. "He has, by his own actions, permanently damaged the reputation of WordPress as a trusted option for businesses of every size," she says. The damage done is unlikely to be fatal, but could be long-lasting. "I have no doubt WordPress will continue," she says, "but the stranglehold WordPress had on the hosted site builder market will weaken because of the damage he has wrought."



community that I've been building since I was a teenager," he wrote. "People who know me know that my objective is to ensure this ecosystem grows, and right now, that means protecting the ecosystem from organizations and their private equity funders who have no stake in this system and seek to extract profit from it."

The dictator dilemma

One thing is sure: the dispute and its resolution matter. "The outcome of this case may set precedent for open-source communities and business and community usage of trademarks in future, with the real and present danger that those who make these decisions may lack the depth of understanding of the long-established community norms in this space," explains Amanda Brock, CEO of OpenUK and a former lawyer.

"This is a messy situation where both sides end up losing," says Peter Zaitsev, founder of the independent open-source company Percona. "Like the film "WarGames", the only winning move is not to play."

It's not only the two parties engaged in the dispute who lose, reckons Jennings, the software developer. "The impact has been huge to everybody," he says. "WP Engine has lost customers. A lot of people have stopped contributing to WordPress because they now have to check a checkbox of loyalty to say that they don't collaborate with WP Engine at all. And now people are learning that the WordPress.org site itself is owned by Matt, not owned by the Foundation."

It raises two key questions about open-source software in general. One: to what extent should organisations that benefit from open source pay back into its upkeep and future development? And two: to what extent should individuals be left in charge of overseeing open-source projects, with the risks of individual points of failure that brings?

The first is an issue that has long plagued open-source development—which underpins large parts of our digital lives. Big tech companies have long relied on the volunteer work of individuals who happened to find themselves overseeing fundamental tools and technologies that make the modern world work. These individuals have even been referred to as the benevolent dictator for life (BDFL) of a project, a term originally used to refer to Python creator Guido van Rossum.

Examples of this are littered through the history of the internet, including Heartbleed, the vulnerability in OpenSSL discovered in 2014 that threw a spotlight on how underfunded and undervalued something that protected huge proportion of the web was.



they use it, what they use it for, and be technology neutral,” says Zaitsev. That means people can take your project and use it for their own purposes—even if that puts them in direct competition with you.

“That is part of open source,” says Zaitsev. “It always has been.” He points out that Mullenweg’s reaction to the success of WP Engine might suggest the entrepreneur has forgotten that. “The fact Automattic chose to invest a lot of developer time in WordPress is their choice. It is admirable,” he says. “But it does not give them the right to force others to contribute, or to block them when they don’t want to contribute.”

Mullenweg disagrees. “WP Engine has used WordPress and WooCommerce marks to associate themselves with WordPress in a way that goes beyond simply referring to the WordPress platform, so we decided to enforce the trademarks to eliminate any confusion and to protect users,” he told *Digital Frontier* over email. “The actions I am taking are not only in defense of the community, but they are also legally sound.”

While his approach might seem to some antithetical to open-source ideals, [a blog post](#) published by Automattic lays out the bust-up so far as an example of WordPress defending open source. “Silver Lake and WP Engine repeatedly refused to improve the ratio of taking and giving – signaling clear risk to the future of WordPress,” it says.

However the community views recent events, they will likely cause a rethinking of what it means to rely on open source in the future. “I think people are going to take closer look at what open-source software is doing and how it’s structured,” says Jennings.

Whether that means they’ll take Mullenweg and Automattic’s point of view is another question. From their vantage point, this is a battle between private equity and open-source ideals, and they need to stand up and fight against what Automattic terms the “loot and leave” approach they believe WP Engine has engaged in.



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MARK HOWELLS-MEAD

It seems equally likely that a different kind of re-evaluation will go on, addressing the second key question that remains unanswered about open source: the reliance it often has on single, sometimes unreliable, points of failure.

The world woke up to this earlier this year when a nefarious hacker managed to take over the running of, and insert malicious code into, XZ Utils, a piece of software used to compress and decompress data on Linux, which is the operating system running large parts of the hardware keeping the web online. Lasse Collin, the developer who had previously been running XZ Utils stepped back due to burnout.

Another volunteer gained access to the keys to the kingdom because Collin, who had run the tool fastidiously, had become exasperated with the stresses of single-handedly maintaining something of such importance. Unfortunately, the developer who has muscled their way in turned out to be a bad actor.

A similar situation has happened with WordPress now, some argue: the world has recognised the perils of being reliant on one man, Matt Mullenweg, for more than 40% of the websites on the internet. Howells-Mead argues it's a confluence of a



aware of software. They read the terms and conditions, they looked into what the requirements were, and so on.” As the world expanded, and technology refracted away from the core of computing into a friction-free experience, things have changed.

Now, however, people are rekindling their knowledge about how tech works – and particularly how open source works. “He’s not helping the cause,” says Howells-Mead, who also recognises the issues Mullenweg has pointed out. “If you have such a large voice and such a huge amount of visibility, you would certainly defend the project against bad players or people you think are abusing the trust of the project,” he says. However, he says that needs to be done in a way that “isn’t inflammatory and isn’t personal”.

The impact of the last few months will be long-lasting, reckons Jennings. “The thing that’s interesting is that this is kind of a unique case,” he says. “Open source has had some troubles in the past as well,” he explains, but few have been as high-profile as this. “What is happening with WordPress and Matt is going to be important going forward,” he says.

“We will talk about, ‘We don’t want to do what WordPress did. We don’t we don’t want to do what Matt did,’” says Jennings. “I think a lot of people are turned off by that. And they’ll move making sure that they don’t create that – and also that they don’t get into that situation again.”

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