



Building Blocks

The Evolution of WordPress

github.com/WordPress/wp20-book



Building Blocks: The Evolution of WordPress



Written by [Rebecca Haden](#)

Edited by [Chloé Bringmann](#) and [Jonathan Pantani](#)

Executive Editor, [Josepha Haden Chomphosy](#)

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Chapter 1 — Catching up on 2013

2013 by the numbers

In 2013, WordPress was ten years old and a far cry from the small personal project it had been at the beginning of 2003.

At this point, over half of all websites using a content management system were using WordPress. That came to 69 million websites, or 19% of all the websites online. One hundred thousand new WordPress websites were being created every day, and 500,000 daily new posts were published.

WordPress site users could choose from 26,252 plugins. Eighty new themes were approved every month.

The WordPress [official tally](#) for 2013 was impressive. By the end of the year, 13,704,819 new WordPress blogs were created in 2013 alone. 489,281,136 new posts had been published. 667,675,929 comments had been posted — an average of 21 comments in each second of 2013. Posts had received 95,424,985 Likes.

The goal of WordPress was then, as it is today, the democratization of publishing. Ten years into the Project, building a website and publishing it online, thanks to the WordPress platform, was easier than ever. People could connect with other enthusiasts of any interest; however small the group of enthusiasts might be. Everyone could find fellowship anywhere in the world. The world had never experienced this degree of connection, digital or otherwise, before.



2013
A Milestone year
By the numbers

69M

69 million websites,
or 19% of all the
sites online

50%

Half of all websites
utilizing CMS were
using WordPress

10Y

In the year 2013,
WordPress was
10 years old

100K

new WordPress
websites were
created daily

500K

daily new posts
were published

26,525

existing plugins

80

new themes
approved monthly

WORDPRESS 2013 TOTALS

Comments posted — 21 comments per second **667,675,929**

Likes received on posts **95,424,985**

Total new WordPress blogs **13,704,819**

WordPress was no longer just a blogging platform. The content management system empowered users and let them ensure that their websites were more than a pretty face. For the first time, an individual with a dream could create an online presence with the same kind of presence and heft as a major company. A small nonprofit could show its commitment to its cause and bring in volunteers and donations just like a well-established organization. Every project could find its home on the web, from fantasy sports leagues to town history archives.

Matt reported in his [State of the Word address for 2013](#) that 69% of respondents said they used WordPress as a content management system rather than a blogging platform.

It was not the only web-building platform or content management system available, but WordPress stood out among its competitors. The famous five-minute install meant that everyone could build their own website if they were willing to put in the effort to learn. The system of themes and plugins allowed site owners to create a look and functionality that would have required many hours of professional design and development just a few years before.

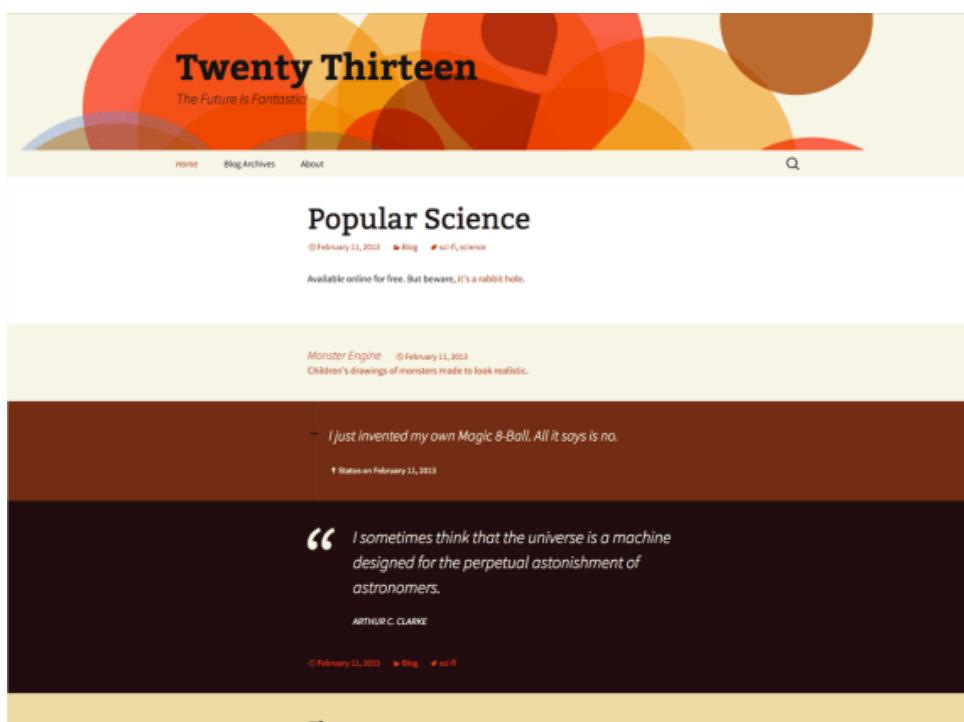
And the supportive WordPress community allowed people to share their strengths and benefit from others' strengths to a degree not seen in other platforms. An open source solution drew involvement and encouraged innovation. A welcoming community brought people to solve challenges and figure out ways to accomplish their goals.

The annual WordPress survey in 2013 brought more than 30,000 responses from 178 countries, and there were two top favorite characteristics of WordPress: its ease of use and the community.

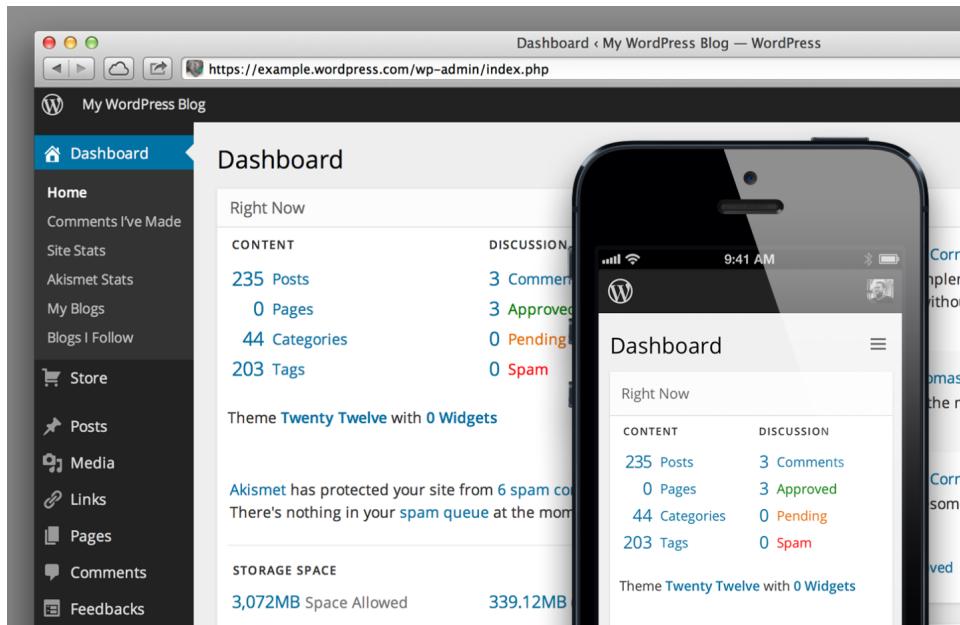
The impressive statistics about WordPress were just a reflection of the power of the software and its community.

2013 Releases

The WordPress 3.6 release was due in August of 2013 with Revamped Revisions. The Twenty Thirteen theme added a touch of color and a controversial one-column layout to the annual themes update. By 3.8, auto updates for minor releases were added to core. 3.8 also brought a new user interface, which was first released as a plugin named MP6, allowing it to reap all the benefits of proper community vetting and feedback before its merge into core.



Matías Ventura, the lead architect of Gutenberg, recalls that the 2013 version releases tried to build a new user interface around post formats: identifying posts as quotes, videos, standard posts, images, etc. Other content management systems had done this. The experiment wasn't successful, so the team decided to "embrace the flexibility of WordPress." Looking back, this was one of the steps along the way to Gutenberg.



WPTavern

Core committers continued to make their marks on the software, and the Project and community worked to stabilize and iterate upon the work completed before 2013. But 2013 was also the year that the WordPress community learned that Matt Mullenweg, co-founder of WordPress and CEO of Automattic, had bought WPTavern. WPTavern, at that time, was a news site founded by Jeff Chandler, reporting on all things WordPress.org. The purchase took place in 2011, but the identity of the buyer was not revealed until 2013.

Matt later revealed that his motivation was simple. “Jeff wanted to step back from WPTavern and had an offer, but I thought it wasn’t really fair given the years and effort he had put into the blog,” he said in comments at the WPTavern site. “Even if he wasn’t going to be part of the WordPress world anymore I wanted him to go out of it with the best deal possible.”

Besides, he continued, “WPTavern could be a ‘third place’ for the WordPress community.”

But the choice to buy the online publication was controversial. Kevin Muldoon of [WPHub](#) said it this way:

I think most people would agree that the company behind a product or service should not own the websites that break news about it. News should be impartial and for a website to be truly impartial, it cannot be owned by the same company. Web Tools Collection will remain as an archive, however, Matt wasted no time in adding WPTavern to the “Other WordPress News” widget on the admin dashboard. This instantly added links to WPTavern on millions of websites online. Every post that is published there is added to your admin area.

I am a huge fan of Matt and love his views on open source, though I feel that trying to control how the flow of news is the wrong way to go. That should be left to the community. What do you think?

And a few people had a lot to say about it. Despite concerns that the official source of funding for WPTavern could make it less objective in its journalistic pursuits, most reactions were positive and congratulatory.

Chandler stayed on as the main content producer for WPTavern until 2019.

Wrapping up 2013

As the year came to an end, WordPress users had a sleek new dashboard, the ability to add widgets with a single click, a new highly visual way to choose themes, and a choice of color schemes for their admin areas. WordPress reaffirmed its commitment to the freedom to publish, offering better security along with robust capability that expanded the possibilities for WordPress and for WordPress users.

In Matt’s State of the Word address for 2013, he described a WYSIWYG editor that would allow users to drag and drop sections. Looking at it now, we can clearly see the foreshadowing of Gutenberg...but that’s a story for another chapter.

WordPress was ready to take on 2014.

Chapter 2 — BuddyPress

WordPress gets social

With 2013 come and gone, the Project entered its 12th year of operation. Thanks to its rich community of worldwide contributors, something was always happening in the world's most popular CMS, which by 2014 had about 21% share of websites worldwide.

[BuddyPress](#) began in 2007. Developers include John James Jacoby, Paul Gibbs, Boone Georges, and Andy Peatling. The goal of the plugin is to create specialized social networks.

At the time, Matt had said, “Someday, perhaps, the world will have a truly Free and Open Source alternative to the walled gardens and open-only-in-API platforms that currently dominate our social landscape.” BuddyPress was the solution, an open source sister project for WordPress.

In 2009, TechCrunch lauded the arrival of BuddyPress 1.0, comparing it with Facebook and MySpace. “It’s basically a social layer that you can lay on top of your WordPress...blog to give it some of the social network features that you’re already familiar with from larger social networking sites,” they said. John James Jacoby says they were ahead of their time.

BuddyPress was initially available only for multisite WordPress sites, but this soon changed. Availability for all WordPress sites began with version 1.2, and usage soared.

In 2010, BuddyPress placed third in [Packt](#)'s Most Promising Open Source Project Awards. 2012 saw the first BuddyCamp, and 2013 saw the first U.S. BuddyCamp. 2013 was also the date of a major survey on BuddyPress which found that nearly half the respondents had websites in languages other than English.

In 2014, [John James Jacoby \(JJJ\)](#) raised over \$50,000 in an Indiegogo campaign to support his full-time work on BuddyPress, bbPress, and GlotPress.

How it began

JJJ's interest in BuddyPress grew out of a desire for strong profile pages in WordPress. "What attracted me was the idea that we can all blog, but the thing that keeps people coming back is engagement," he says.

He was looking for a profile plugin that would create a great profile page and didn't find anything that met the need. His idea was to create a profile page to encourage real connections among users, and BuddyPress had that potential. BuddyPress soon became an open source network in a box — a perfect tool for social connections and collaboration.

Collaboration is central for JJJ. He was just finishing college and starting to attend WordCamps, he says, "meeting really fun people and collaborating."

He knew people were trying to connect with others online, but as he discovered, finding tools that rewarded and supported those connections was quite difficult. "BuddyPress had some clear problems it could solve," he says, "I went where I could make the most people the happiest."

It was the collaborative aspect that brought him the greatest happiness and overall sense of satisfaction. "We had so many really cool contributors," he recalls. "You'd wake up and there was this whole new thing to look at."

At the same time, BuddyPress became a use case that showed the unlimited potential of WordPress. "It was the first big plugin that really pushed the boundaries of what WordPress could do," says JJJ. He invested immeasurable energy into supporting it and encouraging others to contribute.

Challenges

Like anything in open source, BuddyPress had its challenges. People who thought they could turn their websites into Facebook learned, JJJ says, “how much work goes into moderating and maintaining your community.”

BuddyPress works best for existing communities. “If you have no community and you get BuddyPress, you still have no community,” says Paul Gibbs.

It's undeniable that a web admin can't just install BuddyPress and expect lively discussions to occur just because the installed software would make it possible. There's a critical mass required to get things to lift off. “If it's a ghost town,” he says, “no one's going to participate.”

In addition to the ability to forge human connections, BuddyPress requires some technical skill to create the look and feel website owners want. In software, there's always a trade-off between keeping power and flexibility and making it easy.

BuddyPress has chosen to be a robust solution with great versatility and freedom. Many people find that intimidating.

JJJ recounted finding it frustrating to see how many projects could benefit from using BuddyPress under the hood...and don't. He gets feelings of nostalgia for his experience with BuddyPress back in 2014. It seemed that the sky was the limit back then, and growth didn't continue on the rapid trajectory it had in those early days.

Still, BuddyPress has had hundreds of thousands of active installs and inspired numerous plugins. It has been translated into 45 languages. The current version, 10.3.0, is widely used in schools, by nonprofits, supporting mainstream news sites, and more. From the point of view of many observers, it's the gold standard against which other forum software is measured.

It's still tough to tell what the future has in store for BuddyPress. As platforms like Facebook and Twitter face government resentment and user suspicion, it may well see a renewed resurgence of interest.

Chapter 3 — Plugging into Plugins

The extensibility of WordPress

One billion downloads. In 2014, 11 years into its existence, WordPress reached this impressive milestone number of plugin downloads.

The plugin system is a central distinguishing feature of WordPress, allowing people to have website functionality that would otherwise require thousands of dollars of developer time. Plugins are free pieces of software that add functionality to WordPress websites. Most can be used on any website, with virtually any theme, regardless of the design or content. Most can be downloaded for free and uploaded to the websites. Once activated, they provide special functionality, from inserting analytics code to creating special widgets. With plugins, non-technical users could have everything from shopping carts to galleries on their websites, and WordPress began to be much more than a blogging platform.

At the same time, plugins allowed WordPress developers to keep WordPress core to a practical size and level of complexity without limiting creativity. Instead of shoehorning every great feature into the core functionality, they could add myriad plugins to satisfy a wide range of needs and wants.

The plugin repository was launched in 2005 as a place to host and work on code. Users could browse an alphabetical list of plugins but could not search. With no agreed-upon system for naming plugins, it was impossible to predict what a particular plugin or type of plugin might be named. The repository quickly grew unwieldy.

The plugin directory, a place for users to find the plugins they needed, was launched in 2007. The directory finally made it possible to search for a specific plugin or type.

Plugin update notifications were implemented later that year. In 2008, WordPress admin began offering a simple option for adding plugins without using file transfer protocol, the special software for transferring computer files. This was a boon for non-technical users.

A plugin explosion

As plugins became more important, the numbers increased significantly. There are — at the time of writing — [over 60,000 plugins](#). The number doubled from 30,000 in 2014. Almost anything users might want to do with a website could be done with a plugin – if they had the patience to browse through the list and try out enough examples to identify a plugin that would meet their needs.

At the same time, the sheer number of plugins began to be overwhelming. WordCamp sessions comparing half a dozen social sharing plugins or listing the ten most important plugins became popular. Debates on the correct number of plugins for a single website were common.

Plugin quality was a concern. Incompatibilities among plugins were (and continue to be) a primary cause of technical issues for WordPress websites.

“I see this entire issue as one of the big problems facing WordPress,” wrote Jeff Chandler at WPTavern. “As more plugins are added to the repository...and the bar to entry to use WordPress is lowered even more, the ingredients are slowly coming together to increase the risk for all who use the software.”

Users wondered why they should sift through dozens of contact form plugins. Couldn’t WordPress include one? The Core team created the idea of identifying core plugins: the best examples of the most important plugins, developed with the same care that went into core WordPress.

The advantages were obvious, but plugin developers balked.

In 2009, a core plugins project was launched...and died.

"There's a lot of potential with having a more curated list of plugins," core team member [Aaron Campbell](#) suggests. He thought of the often-referenced distinction between the cathedral and the bazaar. Getting everyone to collaborate on one magnificent contact form may seem like a better idea than having the fragmented focus of dozens of similar plugins.

But there are benefits to the fragmentation, too. "There's a wide array of users with different needs," he points out. Each new idea for a contact form may work best in a slightly different setting. "They all have their markets."

Besides, Aaron asks, who should sift through those 60,000 plugins and identify the best? The WordPress Foundation? A committee? "That's a lot of weight to put on a small group," he says.

Matt says, "WordPress does best when we give people a lot of control." In his 2022 State of the Word address, he announced a new taxonomy for the plugin directory, allowing plugin developers to self-identify the type of plugins they're offering: solo or single-player plugins, community plugins, canonical plugins which are supported by WordPress core developers, and commercial plugins which might include upsells and freemium models. This new taxonomy helps users get a clear idea of what is offered with any given plugin.

Plugin Security

A plugin repository review team was established in 2012. The group included Mark Riley, Samuel Wood (Otto), Mika Epstein, Pippin Williamson, Boone Gorges, and Scott Riley.

In 2014, when the repository marked its billionth download, the top ten most popular plugins list began with Akismet and WordPress SEO by Yoast. Contact Form 7, Jetpack, and NextGen Gallery were high on the list, along with WooCommerce.

Browse: Featured

Plugins contained within this category get displayed on the Featured tab.



Classic Editor

★★★★★ (1,130)

Enables the previous "classic" editor and the old-style Edit Post screen with TinyMCE, Meta Boxes,...

WordPress Contributors

5+ million active installations

Tested with 6.2.2



Akismet Anti-Spam: Spam Protection

★★★★★ (977)

The best anti-spam protection to block spam comments and spam in a contact form. The...

Automattic - Anti Spam Team

5+ million active installations

Tested with 6.2.2



Jetpack – WP Security, Backup, Speed, & Growth

★★★★★ (1,878)

Improve your WP security with powerful one-click tools like backup, WAF, and malware scan. Get...

Automattic

5+ million active installations

Tested with 6.2.2



Classic Widgets

★★★★★ (239)

Enables the previous "classic" widgets settings screens in Appearance – Widgets and the Customizer. Disables...

WordPress Contributors

2+ million active installations

Tested with 6.2.2



Health Check & Troubleshooting

★★★★★ (148)

Health Check identifies common problems, and helps you troubleshoot plugin and theme conflicts.

The WordPress.org community

300,000+ active installations

Tested with 6.2.2



Gutenberg

★★★★★ (3,664)

The Gutenberg plugin provides editing, customization, and site building features to WordPress. This beta plugin...

Gutenberg Team

300,000+ active installations

Tested with 6.2.2

Akismet, the core plugin that shields WordPress sites from spam comments, had been downloaded 25,653,482 times.

Custom Contacts Form wasn't in the top ten that year, but it hit the headlines when Sucuri revealed that the plugin had a vulnerability that allowed the remote takeover of the 600,000+ sites it lived in.

The WordPress security team worked with the developers to fix the vulnerability and to offer a patch, but Sucuri had already advised readers to jump ship.

"Due to the unresponsive nature of the development team, we'd encourage you to pursue other sources for your WordPress form needs," [they wrote](#). "There are various options with developers that are very responsive and are actively concerned with your security needs. The most common and popular ones would obviously be JetPack [sic] and Gravity Forms."

2014 was also the year that the WordPress security team discovered 14 malicious plugins that inserted code to hijack websites. The plugins were removed from the repository, but hundreds of sites continued to use the malicious plugins.

Some community members wanted WordPress to alert everyone who downloaded the plugin.

"IF an exploit exists and we publicize that fact without a patch, we put you MORE at risk," [said Mika Epstein](#), a security team member. "If we make it known there is an exploit, [MOST] hackers attack everyone. If we don't tell anyone, then hackers who DO know will attack, but they would have anyway."

Other community members proposed that WordPress simply disable and remove the plugins from websites. Practical, legal, and ethical issues made this idea unworkable.

Auto updates

WordPress has a limited ability to force updates, which was added to WordPress in 2013. Aaron, formerly the Security team's representative, explained that a self-hosted WordPress install is designed to check in with WordPress servers. The servers respond with security alerts. This is how WordPress websites tell their owners that updates are needed.

There was [extensive discussion](#) of auto updates during this time. Over the years, increasing the implementation of auto updates in core has become a settled goal for WordPress. In 2013, however, auto updates for minor releases of WordPress core were a new feature of version 3.7. There was controversy, with reactions ranging from relief that updates were easier to the angry insistence that updates should never be automatic for reasons of personal liberty.

WordPress shared [instructions for disabling](#) auto updates and plugins were developed to make it easier. However, Andrew Nacin wrote in his instructions for sabotaging the auto updates, “I’d argue that ‘I don’t want them’ is not a compelling reason for disabling updates. If you don’t keep your site up to date, you are making the web a less safe place for you and everyone who visits your website.”

Site owners got the chance to opt into auto updates for major core versions with 5.6 in 2020.

If core security is involved and the site owner doesn’t take the necessary steps, the WordPress servers will instruct the website to update itself. This is done for core updates but also for some plugins.

Which plugins? There are two factors, Aaron says. First, how bad is the vulnerability? Second, how many sites are using the plugin?

A plugin that would allow remote takeover would cause a severe vulnerability. A plugin that added a pop-up advertisement would not be as severe – but if it had 600,000 downloads, it could affect the ecosystem more severely. Balancing the two factors allows WordPress security to make the decision.

“The Wild West of plugins makes that considerably more challenging,” Aaron points out.

Core contributor Ian Dunn suggested in a recent discussion that abandoned websites could be candidates for forced updates while frequently updated websites might be treated differently. This discussion included comments like that from core contributor Angelika Reisiger who called on colleagues to “respect the responsibility and the ownership of these webmasters.”

Ian brought the discussion full circle, saying, “Do we let them get hacked and then damage the rest of the Internet, in order to respect their rights; or do we break some of them in order to keep them all secure?”

The philosophical questions linger. Meanwhile, Aaron says, WordPress keeps up with plugin security through defensive coding and relationships with major plugin authors and companies. WordPress stays in close contact with Yoast, Awesome Motive, and makers of other very widely used plugins, ensuring that good communication practices are in place when issues need to be resolved.

Chapter 4 — Activating Diversity and Inclusion

2014, A watershed year

In a statement posted on Automattic.com, the company declared: “In 2014 we started to work, as a company, on facilitating spaces for discussions about diversity at Automattic.” They went on to say, “We want to build Automattic as an environment where people love their work and show respect and empathy to those with whom we interact. Diversity typically includes, but is not limited to, differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, political and religious affiliation, socioeconomic background, cultural background, geographic location, physical disabilities and abilities, relationship status, veteran status, and age. To work on diversity means that we welcome these differences and strive to increase the visibility of traditionally underrepresented groups.”

Automattic is not the equivalent of WordPress, but the two have moved on parallel courses when it comes to diversity and inclusion.

[Andrea Middleton](#) was hired in 2011 to manage the WordCamp program. “Diversity and inclusion were central to WordCamp from the start,” she says, “but the community became ready to embrace the concept in 2014.” The 2014 WordPress Community Summit in San Francisco included “leading voices,” but also “missing voices.” These “missing voices” brought to the summit at least 50 people from underrepresented communities across the globe. Financial support was offered to ensure that cost was not a concern. The team put their heads together to address how to increase diversity within the project.

Gender

Gender was one of the first areas of focus. In 2012, [Jen Mylo](#) found that, on average, women presented just 19% of WordCamp sessions. In 2013, the number rose to a mere 21%. In both years, some WordCamps had exactly 0 female speakers.

Jen shared this information in a 2014 blog post and received some responses dismissing her concern. A typical example is this one from Sarah Gooding: “I don’t find these numbers to be sad or disappointing in the slightest and sincerely hope that we will not be pressuring organizers to make diversity more of a focus.”

This concern that diversity would supplant merit in decision-making, is a common yet misplaced worry at the start of conversations about diversity, and many community members brought it up.

Over time, as in other communities, recognition of the value of diversity and inclusion grew. Concerns about this issue faded.

Discussions at the time included the idea of training sessions to encourage women to speak at WordCamps and Meetup events. This project finally came to fruition in 2019 as part of the Diverse Speaker Training group led by [Jill Binder](#).

Others involved in the project were Vanessa Cleven, Kate Moore Hermes, Mandi Wise, Kathryn Presner, Tammie Lister, and Morgan Kay.

Jill had seen at her hometown WordCamp in Vancouver that women were underrepresented among their speakers. “We got 52 applications and only seven were from women,” she recalls. She wanted to see greater representation for women on principle and because of the outcomes for speakers.

People who speak at WordCamps, she said, benefit directly from that. “They get jobs, they get asked to do more speaking, they get positions of leadership.” What’s more, the addition of more perspectives brings greater innovation. As people see their identities on the stage, they feel more comfortable speaking and taking on leadership positions; it’s a virtuous circle.

“There are societal reasons why this happens and I can’t fix all of them, but there’s one thing I can do.” Jill elaborates that when people lack confidence about speaking and they feel underrepresented they feel disempowered.

The workshop helped women – and then all varieties of underrepresented speakers – feel emboldened enough to apply to speak. WordCamp Vancouver had 50% female speakers the following year.

Jill shares the story of [Ebonie Butler](#), an alumna of the Diverse Speaker Training, who was accepted to speak at WordCamp U.S. in 2022. Her message, “Be your authentic self,” is one of the important messages of Diverse Speaker Training.

“Diversity in WordPress is one of the things that will ensure the long-term health and growth of the project,” Jill says.

Diversity among speakers and at in-person events was a big part of the effort, though the focus was initially on gender parity. The Code of Conduct for WordCamps added this statement:

“WordCamp CITYNAMEHERE believes our community should be truly open for everyone. As such, we are committed to providing a friendly, safe and welcoming environment for all, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, religion, age, caste, social class, preferred operating system, programming language, or text editor, among other identifying characteristics.”

By 2017, some WordCamp organizers were bragging that half of the speakers at their WordCamps were female, though many camps were still celebrating representation nearing 50% in 2022.

[Release names](#), however, celebrated male jazz musicians far more than female ones.

Ethnicity

Jill and her team moved on from their focus on women and eventually developed three workshops: one to encourage people from underrepresented groups to become speakers, a Diverse Speaker Support Program, and a workshop on organizing inclusive events. Aurooba Ahmed, Allie Nimmons, and David Wolfpaw were involved in creating the workshop on inclusive events.

As ethnic diversity became part of the effort, there were also some results in this area. BlackPress, a community for Black WordPressers, was developed by alumni of the Diverse Speaker program.

Some WordCamps worked on increasing ethnic diversity, usually by inviting speakers or organizers from diverse communities. [Angela Jin](#) of the Community team led a panel discussion on the issue in 2020. She also opened an online discussion in 2022. The same issues continued to arise, and the focus continued to be on events. “Saying that ‘everyone is welcome’ is not enough towards creating diverse events,” she wrote. “Being intentional and consistent, and creating welcoming spaces, builds much needed trust towards inclusion in an event and its broader community.”

There was a hope that getting a more varied group of people onto the stage would foster more diverse audiences and naturally lead to less homogenous groups. Still, like so much of the tech community, WordPress continues to see limited levels of participation from historically underrepresented voices.

While ethnic diversity has not always been a strong focus for the WordPress community, increasing the number of contributors from different countries has been a goal, and great progress has been made in that area.

[Yvette Sonneveld](#) of the Marketing team acknowledged that “most decisions still happen in the U.S.” but was one of many contributors celebrating the greater international focus of her team.

[Courtney Robertson](#) of the Training team is another contributor who revels in the international diversity of her team. “DEI work has been fundamental to work happening in the Training team,” she says. With more than 800 members, the Training team has been able to translate lessons at the Learn site into 21 languages, including Japanese, Brazilian Portuguese, Indonesian, and Hindi. The Training team includes active contributors from over a dozen nations – two dozen counting periodic contributors.

"The community was always diverse, as it's a global project, said [Allie Nimmons](#). "The problem is that the voices of those at the top - whether that be the people who run our product companies, the people on podcasts, the people leading Make Teams - are not always reflective of that diversity. I do think that this is changing, slowly but surely, thanks to community efforts and projects and conversations. So yes, the community leaders are more diverse than they used to be, but still not diverse enough to truly reflect all the appropriate voices and perspectives."

Jill pointed out that diversity can have different meanings in different cultures. Skin color is often a primary focus in the U.S., but in other nations, the lines may be drawn on the basis of national heritage, religion, social standing, native language, or many more factors.

Taking action

Jen Mylo wrote, in September 2014, "We've been talking about diversity — more diverse organizing teams, more diverse speaker rosters, more diverse contributor groups — and most everyone wants to help us grow in that area. Where we fall down is people not knowing how to get there."

Over the course of the next few years, WordPress kept talking the talk but also began walking the walk, taking greater action toward a more diverse community.

"It was part of a broader movement in technology," Andrea points out, "People didn't realize that part of their responsibility in organizing events was creating space for people not like them. It took a while for us to cement that in the greater zeitgeist of the WordPress community, and it took a while for the people who didn't really want to do that to figure out whether they wanted to do it anyway or change their level of involvement in WordPress."

What was the source of pushback?

"There was a lot of implied or learned helplessness involved," Andrea recalled. Communities would say, "It's not our fault if people in our communities aren't diverse. It's not our fault if women don't apply."

Often the problem was, Andrea said, “very homogenous groups of friends in Meetups... We didn’t want to take a white knight attitude and fix things for people, but to pull more diverse leadership into the group.”

“I was raised as a Quaker,” Andrea says. “What gets me out of bed in the morning is the prospect of making the world a better place.” Andrea, Jen, and other pioneers were prepared to make the effort and they saw change.

WordPress began to support organizations like [Hack the Hood](#), [Black Girls Code](#), and [Girl Develop It](#) with funds and leadership. Hack the Hood and Black Girls Code each received a \$15,000 grant from the WordPress Foundation in 2017.

The Training team prepared curricula for Hack the Hood events during these years, including a themes workshop. At the same time, Josepha Haden Chomphosy worked with schools in low-income neighborhoods in Kansas City and San Francisco, presenting WordPress 101 courses for underrepresented populations. In addition to extending the commitment to diversity, the goal was to use WordPress to bridge the digital divide within schools.

The [Kim Parsell Memorial Scholarship](#) supports travel and lodging for one woman each year to attend her first WordCamp U.S. This effort began in 2015 following the death of community member Kim Parrsell. She had been helped to attend a WordCamp in 2014 and said that the experience changed her life. The WordPress Foundation funds one scholarship each year to WordCamp U.S. to a WordPress contributor who has yet to attend WordCamp US.

Between 2015 and 2022, the Foundation paid \$15,418 in travel funds.

In 2017, the Diversity Outreach Speaker Training working group began meeting. Diversity beyond female representation began to be a common topic in conversations around WordCamps and in sessions at WordCamps. While it is clear that these were aspirational conversations, many organizers spoke frankly about efforts they were making to welcome more diverse groups of speakers and attendees. In this year, Yoast SEO also created a scholarship for diverse speakers.

Version 5.6



In 2020, after several years of planning and effort, Josepha led WordPress release 5.6, "Simone," with a release squad of women and non-binary individuals. "WordPress can be used by anybody," she said, "so it should also be built by anybody."

Not everyone agreed. [Francesca Marano](#) recalls that there were some who reacted with anger. "A release for women – that's discrimination," she heard some people saying. "It showed the true allies of women in WordPress."

It also brought new contributors to the project. "It was a way for underrepresented folks to get their foot in the door," Francesca said.

5.6 introduced a new default theme, Twenty Twenty-One, focusing on accessibility and built-in block patterns. It allowed users to opt into automatic core updates and improved video captioning. More than 600 volunteers contributed to this release.

2014 was a watershed year for diversity and inclusion for WordPress. Years of work followed, and results continue to blossom.

Chapter 5 — WordCamp US Philadelphia

Flagship events

In 2015, the first national WordCamp U.S. took place at the Pennsylvania Convention Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. More than 1,800 WordPress users and makers attended.



WordCamp US was the evolution of the larger scope pioneered by WordCamp San Francisco. 2015 was the first official year of flagship WordCamps as we know them today.

By the time WordCamp US took place, there had already been 89 WordCamps in 2015, with more than 21,000 total attendees. Nonetheless, WordCamp US was the largest WordCamp that had ever taken place.

During WordPress co-founder Matt Mullenweg's State of the Word address, Philadelphia Councilman David Oh declared December 5 'WordPress Day.' Presentations ranged from sessions on security and accessibility to yoga and turning blogs into books.

The REST API

Meanwhile, REST — REpresentational State Transfer — was a central topic in more than one session. The REST API merged with core in WordPress 4.4, released on December 8, 2015, immediately after WordCamp U.S. This release, named "Clifford" in honor of Clifford Brown, integrated infrastructure for the REST API directly into core.

Scott Taylor was the release lead for 4.4. "When WordPress adopts modern technologies, the Internet adopts modern technologies," Scott said at WordCamp U.S. He pointed out that the WordPress team had taken a leadership position across the web.

REST API allows developers to access WordPress with JavaScript outside the WordPress installation. APIs enable multiple systems to work together, and the REST API provides an interface for a variety of applications to access WordPress.

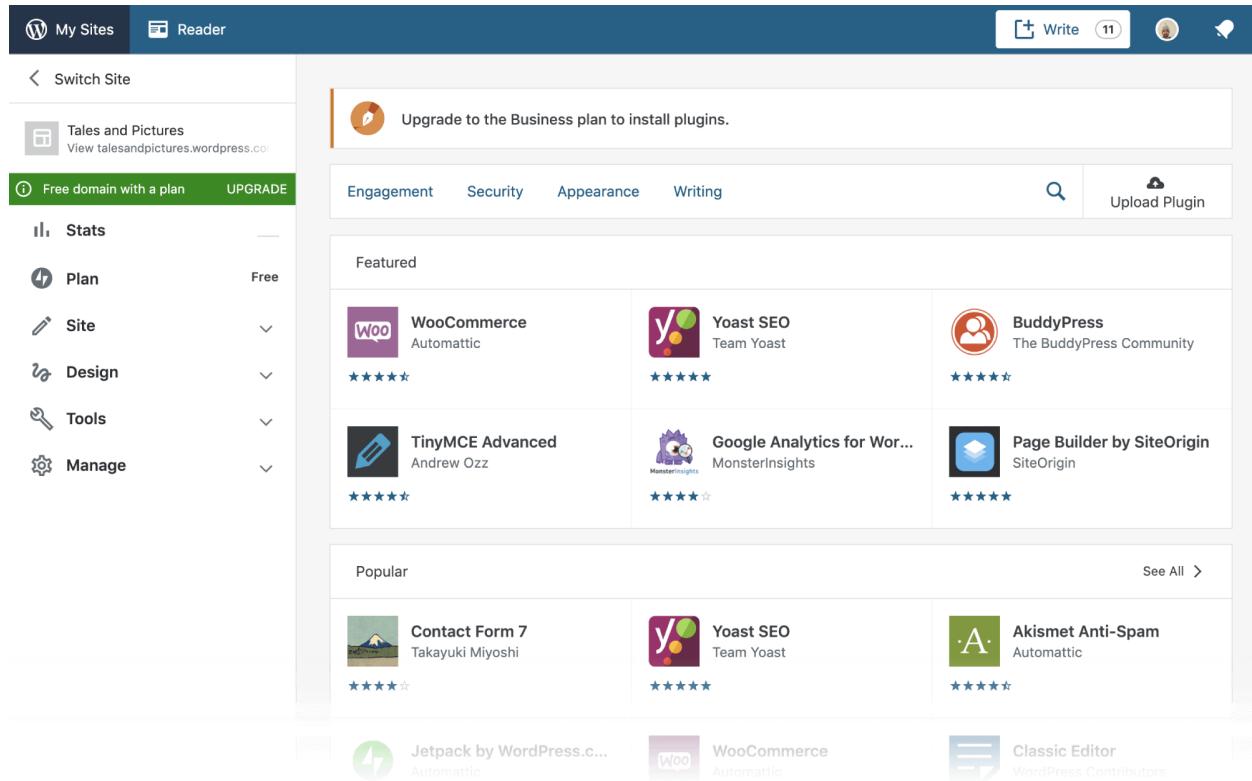
The REST API is the foundation for the block editor. It was available as a plugin before it was merged with core, since that method of bringing in new features had been working well.

Calypso

It was also the basis of Calypso, the open source project allowing users to manage WordPress.com and Jetpack-enabled self-hosted WordPress websites using a desktop interface.

Calypso is a new interface for managing multiple WordPress sites written in JavaScript rather than PHP. Matt described it as the interface he would have built for WordPress in the first place if he had known then what he knew in 2015. While it's often called "the new WordPress," it is optional for WordPress.org (self-hosted) websites.

Jetpack must be installed on your website for Calypso to be available, and you must download the app. In January 2015, there were just 71 contributors to Calypso. By November, there were 127. By the spring of 2020, the number had grown to 496.



Calypso is now the standard interface for WordPress.com and is readily available for WordPress.org. It allows quick management of multiple websites from the same interface.

As always, there were complaints. “I hope there is no plan or intention to delete the proper editor in favor of this terrible cut down version, clearly driven by the curse of the mobile phone,” wrote one commenter in a Calypso forum post.

There was also excitement about the use of JavaScript. In his State of the Word presentation, Matt reassured that, “PhP is not going away.

Community Summit and Contributor Day

There was a Community Summit on December 2, Unconference Day, and on December 3. The Unconference Day was a day of discussions with no slides, presentations, or electronic conversations. “The goal of the summit is to be honest and work through community issues without distractions,” says the website.

Contributor Day fell on Sunday, December 6. Teams included: Core, led by Mike Schroder Design, led by Mel Choyce Accessibility, led by Rian Rietveld Support, led by Jan Dembowski Polyglots, led by Petya Rakovska Documentation, led by Drew Jaynes Theme Reviews, led by Tammie Lister Marketing, led by Sara Rosso Community, led by Josepha Haden Meta, led by Ian Dunn Training, led by Beth Soderberg

The next Community Summit would not take place until 2018 and then again planned for August 2023. WordCamp U.S. became an important annual event.

Chapter 6 — The Customizer

Introducing a new way to publish

The Customizer debuted as the theme customizer during “[Green](#)” or WordPress 3.4 named after Grant Green in June 2012, with features added gradually over the following years. It allowed users to set the title and tagline, adjust colors and fonts, handle some images, and make other design changes without code. It was a groundbreaking and memorable change in the editor.

The magic of the Customizer takes place in a narrow left-hand sidebar that can be seen simultaneously as the webpages rather than from the backend admin view. The Customizer allows users to see what their changes will look like before publishing them, which removed the need to switch back and forth from the editor to the preview and lessened the chances of publishing and then having to rush to undo an effect that didn’t look as expected.

While long-time designers might be able to envision how their work would look when published, the average user often found it frustrating to work hard in the editor – only to find that the result on the page didn’t look the same.

The Customizer was also intended to give developers a standardized way to present theme options.

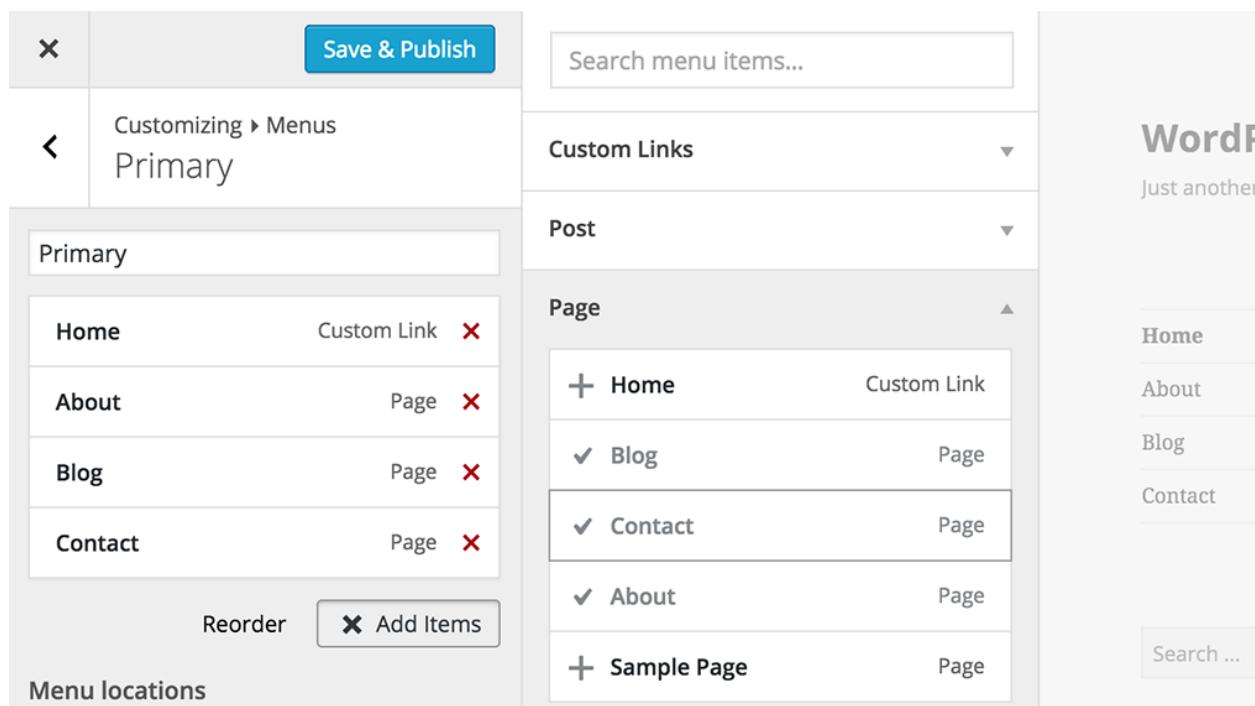
Individual themes added more options to the settings choices in the Customizer, and in 2015 all themes were required to support the Customizer — but the Customizer for each theme continued to be individual. No consistent format was required. Different items were handled differently and presented in different places in different themes, leading to some confusion and frustration among users. However, since each theme previously had its own admin pages with no pretense of uniformity, the Customizer could actually be seen as making WordPress design easier for users.

Users didn't all agree, and developers didn't all comply. In 2015, when themes were officially required to support the Customizer, only 24% of the themes offered in the Theme Directory did. Adoption was lagging and as late as 2017, a survey found that more than half of regular WordPress users never used the Customizer. Would the Customizer ever catch on with the WordPress community?

"Billie" stirs controversy

From the beginning, there were designers who felt that the Customizer stifled creativity and users who found it confusing, but in 2015, with the [release of 4.3](#), the controversy surrounding it peaked. In WordPress version 4.3, named for Billie Holiday, menus were added to the Customizer.

In addition to people who had never liked the Customizer and people who didn't want to see even more things shoehorned into it, many felt that the Customizer should be for styling only. Menus, they said, were content, and content didn't belong in the theme customizer.



[Konstantin Obenland](#), a 4.3 release lead, shared some of the reactions he heard at the time:

"The Customizer is very unpleasant to work with." "It's crazy pants." "I think it's a horrible user experience and the more options that are added to it, the worse it gets." "Content management doesn't belong in the theme Customizer," one commenter pronounced in the WordPress forum.

"I haven't seen anyone outside of the decision makers who thinks this is a good idea," said another. This viewpoint—that the developers were making choices contrary to the will and best interests of the users—became a recurring motif in the discussions.

Sara Gooding wrote, "Anti-Customizer vitriol reached its zenith last week when the Menu Customizer plugin was officially approved for merge into WordPress 4.3."

Nick Halsey described "general and ongoing resistance to the Customizer as a whole that we've seen from many community members (which I think is more of an educational issue)."

The core team was called "a totalitarian regime."

Konstantin laughed ruefully about the reaction. "It was just a UX improvement," he said. "The goal was to make it easier to use WordPress and to encourage adoption."

"Menus are inherently difficult," he observed, and the original Menus interface didn't have a preview feature. The Customizer allowed users to see the visual effect as they were constructing menus. "It gave the benefit of immediate feedback, and the people I talked to loved it."

Designer Jay Jaro is one of the fans of the customizer. “As a designer I rely heavily on the WordPress customizer, because I’m not adept at coding scripts but have a good understanding of HTML5 and CSS3.” he said. “Beginners can set up a site easily because of the user-friendly interface. What I also like is that it allows you to see a live preview of that theme and make changes before you activate it.” Remembering his first use of the Customizer, he reminisced that it was exciting “just effortlessly placing the logo and background seamlessly.”

New users, especially designers, enjoyed the Customizer and stayed out of the emotional discussions, but reactions to the changes continued to be mixed.

Two WordPress developers reacted to the menu change by creating a plugin called “WordPress Customizer Remove All Parts” or “WP-CRAP.” It suppressed the Customizer, removing all signs of it from websites where it was installed.

WordPress 4.3 included a lot of which Konstantin was proud. It shipped on time and set off a string of on-time releases after years of missed deadlines.

It provided strong passwords by default, a feature still in use today. It made it easy to add a favicon to websites. It fixed and improved myriad small things and provided an important jumping-off point for 4.4, which included the REST API.

The Fate of the Customizer

The distinction between design and content was one of the strong points of WordPress compared with traditional HTML websites. It was possible to update a website’s design without losing the content and to update content without affecting the design.

Without a content management system, website owners could not safely change their phone numbers or update team member bios without help from tech specialists. WordPress, the world’s most popular content management system, changed that.

The Customizer can now be used in some themes to update content as well as design. Some themes are designed to allow full site editing with the block editor through the Customizer. This was one of the primary objections to adding the menu function to the Customizer with Release 4.3.

Objections didn't end there. "Whether you like the WordPress Customizer or not, it's not going anywhere (unfortunately)," wrote developer Anthony Hortin in 2017, following up on an earlier description of the Customizer saying, "I think the Customizer in its current form is a horrible interface, and certainly not one that should be made as 'standard'."

The Customizer began with the goal of standardization but has become even less standardized over time. Block themes intended for full site editing don't require or support the Customizer and instead are customized in the Site Editor. The Customizer won't even show up for websites with block themes unless a plugin requires it.

Universal themes allow the use of both the Customizer and the Site Editor. The Customizer can also be reached through a direct link on any WordPress website—if you know how.

The controversy around the Customizer has died down as people have either figured out how to work with it or around it. Other dramas arose to take its place as a flashpoint.

Chapter 7 — WordCamp Jurisdictions

Local is relative

The first WordCamp Europe took place in Leiden, the Netherlands, in 2013, though it wasn't until Vienna in 2016 that WordCamp Europe truly became a landmark event. Attendance soared, with over 1,950 people attending, coming from 68 different countries. There were also 1,402 Live Streaming tickets representing 82 countries. Contributor Day drew 440 Contributors. This was the largest WordCamp ever at the time.

There were 20 organizers, 69 speakers, and 160 volunteers. WordCamp Europe also featured a Wapuu coloring book.

WordCamp Europe was a continent-wide event and has continued through the years. WordCamp U.S. was the other flagship WordCamp, inaugurated in 2015 in Philadelphia. Prior to this time, there were a number of other nationwide WordCamps, including WordCamp Netherlands, which began in 2009. WordCamps UK, Switzerland, Denmark, Croatia, and Israel were other examples.

In 2017, however, the decision was made not to allow WordCamp Netherlands but to insist on a city-based WordCamp. "We have worked hard in the past eight years to move the WordCamp program away from country-named events and toward city-named events for a number of reasons that focus on the health and longevity of the community as a whole," Josepha wrote. "After observing hundreds of WordCamps and WordPress Meetup events over the years, we have seen that hosting city-named events helps to prevent entrenched leadership, makes space for new volunteers and participants, and gives clarity to how the program functions."

She went on to point out that the growing focus on big, flashy events was setting a bar that made it hard for the small, local events to feel successful, even though the original intent for WordCamps was to support local WordPress communities.

A controversial ruling

The Netherlands organizers didn't just disagree. In fact, the decision was met with fierce opposition.

"The NL are a small country, the land area is only a tenth of California and a third of the inhabitants. Within 2 hours you can reach almost any place in the country," wrote one. "Perhaps this makes it eventually clear why we should not set the same standards here as in the U.S. or France."

WordCamp Netherlands was held in different cities around the nation, and members of the smaller WordPress communities looked forward to seeing one another at this annual event.

Other regional WordCamps, as the community began to call the national and continental camps, had disagreed with the rulings as well, but they had complied with a fairly good grace. The Netherlands, perhaps particularly because they had hosted the first WordCamp Europe, were openly upset about the ruling.

They announced that they might go rogue and hold their WordCamp under some other name without the auspices of the central committee.

Andrea Middleton had previously written, "One goal for the WordPress Community program is to have a WordPress meetup and annual WordCamp in as many cities as possible in the world. So while regional or national events have a purpose, they should never be a replacement for our focus on supporting the growth and health of local communities."

She went on, "Another goal in the WordPress Community program (which dovetails nicely with our goal of having a community in as many cities in the world as possible) is to make WordPress community accessible to as many people as possible, regardless of their financial status or other factors that might limit travel. Having several WordCamps in a certain country every year makes WordCamp more available to more people, even if those folks are not able to travel."

In the ensuing discussion, organizers from countries that had been required to switch from regional to city-based WordCamps brought up concerns:

- Small camps were as much effort to organize as large camps, thus making their “bang for the buck” lower.
- City-level WordCamps would cannibalize organizers, speakers, and attendees from monthly meetup groups.
- Regional WordCamps allow people from small communities to meet new people in ways that city-wide WordCamps don’t.
- Organizers in smaller countries wanted to pool their resources to produce stronger events than they could within their own cities.
- Instead of “regional” and “city,” which equates a city the size of New York with a city the size of Zurich, determining the jurisdictions of WordCamps should rely on population size and geographic distances.

Yvette Sonneveld, a contributor on the Marketing team and team lead for the community team at Yoast, said the objections were practical, not emotional. “If you have only ever worked and lived in the U.S.,” she points out, “it can be hard to imagine how small some of the countries in Europe can be.” Cities just one hour’s drive apart found themselves competing for attendees and sponsors.

Arguments on the other side were few and far between, though [Kåre Mulvad Steffensen](#) of Denmark said, “I think it’s clear that the ecosystem is based on strong hyperlocal communities, that feed into a larger community, on a regional or countrywide basis.” However, he also added, “The geographical rules have no real value. We should trust WordPress community members to be able to self-organize in groups that does [sic] not challenge the hyperlocal activities.”

Randy Hicks, lead organizer for WordCamp Nashville, spoke in favor of regional camps but worried that “they are going to be a huge vacuum sucking up resources.”

Back in the Netherlands

The organizing committee reported on their experience of the change in 2018.

They found that people in the Netherlands had to choose among the various city-based WordCamps and that this pressured organizers to make each city-based WordCamp different from the others, with different target markets and different speakers. They felt that the cities were competing with one another rather than serving their local audience.

This experience also affected finances at the city-based WordCamps, which had difficulty finding sponsors and sometimes ran at a deficit.

Discussions on the experience at that point focused on the vision of small, informal local WordCamps vs. larger, fancier regional WordCamps.

While the Dutch participants were steadfast in their claims that they are just too small a country for city-based camps to make sense, sponsored contributor [Hugh Lashbrook](#) from New Zealand emphasized the way that city-based WordCamps could serve as incubators for leaders and speakers.

WordCamp, he pointed out, was developed with a strong emphasis on local connections. Regional WordCamps prevented those close connections. "As soon as you get a WordCamp of that size, you can't really connect with everyone."

The situation with the Netherlands also highlighted other concerns with regional WordCamps. The same organizing team planned WordCamp Netherlands year after year, leading to entrenched leadership. Not only is this contrary to the goal of open source projects like WordPress but there have been other individuals in the Netherlands who reached out to the WordCamp core team saying that they didn't feel they had the opportunity to join in organizing WordCamp.

WordCamps intended to increase diversity and encourage new speakers and new organizers, which is less likely when the same group of people is in charge over the years.

Yvette reported that the WordPress community in the Netherlands gave the city-based WordCamps a fair try before deciding against them.

One more problem Hugh mentioned was that people will attend a flagship event like WordCamp Europe or WordCamp US and think, “I want my WordCamp to look like that!” The desire for a flashy event at a premium venue with fancy fittings and famous speakers is understandable, but it’s not the point of local WordCamps.

Matt remarked that much of the debate was based on nomenclature. He could envision smaller or more rural states in the U.S. holding statewide WordCamps that just happened to be named for the city which was able to host the event. In a large and highly populated country like India, on the other hand, he could see WordCamps being divided according to participants’ native languages. Again, naming the WordCamp for the city in which it took place would not need to limit participants’ creativity.

Rules on regional WordCamps were relaxed in 2020, and online regional events occurred during the pandemic. As the pandemic calmed and in-person events emerged again, several smaller European nations returned to the national WordCamp model.

Chapter 8 — A Modern Day Printing Press?

WordPress makes a case for Gutenberg

Gutenberg, now known as the Block Editor, was a major change for WordPress. On the surface, Gutenberg was just a new text editor, but there is more to the story beneath the surface.

For some time, as people began accessing the web with their phones and other devices, web content producers talked about the need to change how content was presented. Instead of thinking of a page and trying to make it work on a smaller screen, it made sense to think of content as blocks that could be arranged in different ways to work on different kinds of screens and devices for different purposes.



The new Gutenberg editor did exactly that.

Just as some users were frustrated when the Customizer added menus, bringing content into a design tool, some users were alarmed when Gutenberg brought layout and, thus, design into the text editor.

Eventually, the long-term goal was to make it possible to do site editing in a single interface. That goal is on the horizon.

When Gutenberg first made its appearance in 2017, it was a new way to write posts and pages. Matt introduced the idea of a visual editor in his State of the Word address in 2016, and the Gutenberg plugin was soon the result.

"We called it Gutenberg for a reason," [he wrote](#) in August 2017. "Movable type was about books, but it wasn't just about books. Ideas spread. Literacy spiked. The elite monopoly on education started to crack...WordPress has always been about websites, but it's not just about websites. It's about freedom, about possibility, and about carving out your own livelihood."

Gutenberg, he said, was about democratizing publishing "and democratizing work — for everyone, regardless of language, ability, or economic wherewithal."

Gutenberg did that by providing a standard, portable publishing method without proprietary page builders or premium themes that locked users into a walled-garden approach to building pages and creating posts. It was intended to open new pathways for plugins, allow photographers, artists, poets, and musicians to present their creative works creatively, and allow everyone to make their sites look and behave as they had envisioned.

Gutenberg would create a truly WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) editor and allow greater control over the visual presentation of the website without a need to write code. At the same time, it breaks the work of managing a site into its smallest parts – blocks – and applies that to the whole site.

Resistance

Nothing with that scope can be expected to come about without resistance, and there was plenty of resistance to Gutenberg. As [Michael Philips](#) wrote, "WordPress unveiled the new post and page editor named Gutenberg and the world rejoiced. And by 'rejoiced,' I mean they almost universally heaped condemnation and hatred upon the defenseless new editor."

Many users saw Gutenberg as a market-driven reaction to Wix and Squarespace. Some of those who knew and loved WordPress in its classic form resented having their experience disrupted for the sake — they were convinced — of competing for new users. And at first, it appeared to make few allies.

Writers found it slow. Each paragraph had to be written in a new block, and all the pointing and clicking interfered with the flow of ideas. For writers who thought of the words as their domain and relied on designers to make the pages look good, Gutenberg provided no clear benefits to compensate for the obstacles.

Designers felt they had less control than they were used to. At the same time, they worried that Gutenberg would make WordPress into a fully DIY platform and put them out of a job.

Developers worried that all their products would have to be rebuilt to fit in with Gutenberg. Sites built with widgets and custom post types would become obsolete, they feared, and metaboxes would no longer be available.

Site owners found that the WordPress skills they had learned no longer allowed them to accomplish the tasks they needed to control. Staff who had been able to make updates reliably might not be able to do so anymore, and plugins they had paid to have installed and configured suddenly had compatibility issues.

And the truth remained: most people who were not designers couldn't build a beautiful page with Gutenberg. It had a steep learning curve that required considerable skill and rewarded those who tenaciously exercised their creative abilities.

Disruption

When Gutenberg became the default editor, core contributors created the Classic Editor plugin as a transitional onramp to using the block editor. Initially, the plan was to sunset that plugin on December 31, 2021, having given everyone enough time to get used to the new editor. That didn't happen. In fact, the block editor now offers an experience like the classic editor as one of its blocks.

In 2017, however, at WordCamp Europe in Paris, Matt asked the audience to be cheerleaders for Gutenberg, to go home and encourage its use in their meetups and local WordCamps.

The community seemed to be warming up to it. Sessions advocating for Gutenberg became a fixture at WordCamps. A typical cheerleading session was “The Future of WordPress is Gutenberg” at WordCamp US 2018.

“WordPress has been around for 15 years. Over 30% of sites use it, and that figure continues to climb. We’re here for the long term, so we need to plan for the long term: Gutenberg has been built as the base for the next 15 years of WordPress,” the description reads. “What you see in the block editor is the first practical application of what’s going on underneath: a modern design process, an extensible technical architecture, and a forward-thinking foundation to build our future upon.”

Other Gutenberg-related sessions that year included “Gutenberg, GraphQL and Government: Building Blocks,” “Block Development,” a session on AMP support in Gutenberg blocks, Gutenberg for front-end developers, and use case examples.

“Since Gutenberg is still a work in progress, this presentation is not intended as the absolute truth,” one session description confessed.

There was excitement, and there was continued resistance. Joseph said, “I spent six months going to the angriest communities and listening.” Some discussions focused on the feeling that WordPress users — or particular segments of the user community — weren’t being listened to. Others suggested that people who refused to use Gutenberg were hidebound and not open to change, which is never an easy thing to hear. Still, others didn’t center on Gutenberg as an editor at all but complained that the change process had not seemed collaborative enough.

"How can you bring something that disruptive without being that disruptive?" asked Matias Ventura, the lead architect of Gutenberg. In a blog post, he compared Gutenberg to the ship of Theseus, which had to be completely rebuilt while it was still sailing. "How can such a vision happen without dismantling, rebuilding, fragmenting, or breaking the WordPress ship that for over a decade has been carrying the thoughts, joys, and livelihoods of millions of people and more than a quarter of the web?" That was the Gutenberg experience.

Continuous improvement

Meanwhile, Gutenberg was improved and updated very regularly. Some users had problems and gave up Gutenberg, not realizing that the problems they faced were being solved.

For example, the earliest iterations of the Gutenberg plugin were designed so that a page built with the block editor would lose its formatting if it was later edited with the classic editor. Today few users remember that — but it was the kind of experience that caused people to give up on Gutenberg early.

Many plugins didn't work on pages built in Gutenberg, but plugin designers hurried to update their offerings, so most problems were also solved fairly quickly.

Tools were in different places than users expected, sometimes in multiple places, and sometimes hard to find. They moved many times during the process of improving Gutenberg. This ended up being one of the most common pain points. But again, users who stuck with Gutenberg through the growing pains found that, in the long run, their concerns were addressed.

"There was not immediate agreement on what constituted a breaking change," Josepha observed. "Breaking workflow can be as much of a problem as breaking a web page."

The core team continued to test and improve. Users continued to be divided. The Gutenberg plugin continues to receive reviews, even though the block editor is now the default editor. The plugin is updated every two weeks, and users of the plugin can try out the new features ahead of the pack. Their feedback, says [Tammie Lister](#), is important to what makes it into core. Roughly 10% of updates make it into a major release.

However, especially for designers who are not developers, full site editing with the block editor allows creative page building without a need to rely on code. Drag-and-drop and point-and-click functionality let people who have grown skilled with the block editor do things that just a few years ago would have required a developer to create.

By the end of 2018, WordPress powered 32.7% of the world's websites, and in 2019 that number grew to 35.4%. The new patterns directory and a constantly-growing collection of blocks and block-friendly plugins have opened new vistas for site builders and made WordPress a welcoming option for a new cadre of users.

Chapter 9 — Open Source: A Political Choice?

Governments Using Open Source

American presidents from across the political spectrum have used WordPress for their official websites. There is nothing partisan about the software; instead, its popularity with the presidents of this century shows its power and influence on the web.

Indeed, it is not only American political leaders who have embraced WordPress. Here are just a few international examples:

- [The President of Yemen](#)
- [The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom](#)
- [The Prime Minister of India](#)
- [The Royal Thai Embassy](#)
- [Sweden's official national website](#)

We can see the evolution of WordPress as a trusted platform for official government websites through its use by recent U.S. presidents.

Barack Obama

In 2017, President Obama chose WordPress for his Obama Foundation website. He was the first U.S. President to use WordPress.

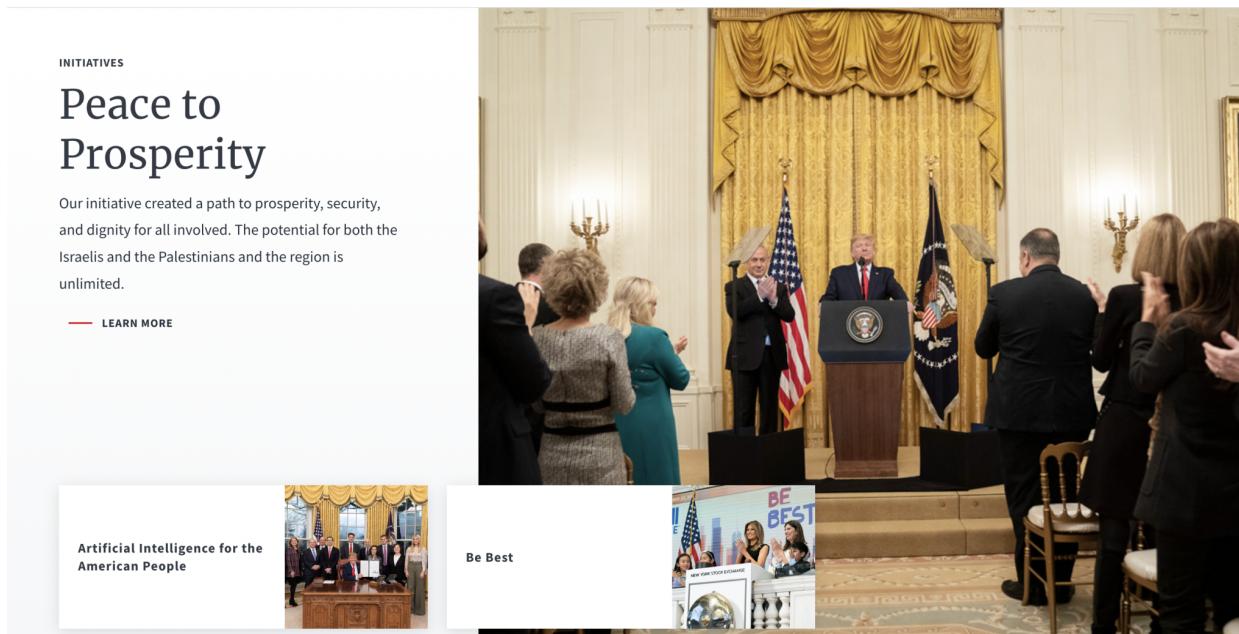


It's worth noting that Obama's WhiteHouse.gov site was the first iteration to use an open source CMS, albeit Drupal, in 2009.

Drupal's founder, Dries Buytaert, [wrote](#), "Drupal is a perfect match for President Barack Obama's push for an open and transparent government...this is a clear sign that governments realize that Open Source does not pose additional risks compared to proprietary software." The decision in 2009 was recognized as a sign of change. The choice of WordPress in 2017 for the Obama Foundation website can be understood as part of that evolution.

Donald J. Trump

Later in 2017, the White House switched from Drupal to WordPress for whitehouse.gov. The White House [announced](#) that the new site looked cleaner and more presidential than the previous version. It included no interactive elements.



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The [Washington Examiner reported](#) that the new website would be much cheaper to maintain, cutting the previous website's maintenance and security costs in half from \$6 million per year. This was given as the explanation of the platform shift, based on the word of a "White House spokesperson."

The Trump administration's version of WhiteHouse.gov archives are still visible at [TrumpWhiteHouse.archives.gov](#). Trump also had a WordPress blog called "From the Desk of Donald J. Trump," though that has been shut down. His current official website, [donaldjtrump.com](#), is not a WordPress site.

Joseph R. Biden

Joe Biden used WordPress for his campaign site, [JoeBiden.com](#), and the Harris-Biden transition site, BuildBackBetter.com. Upon Biden's win, the transition site redirected to [BuildBackBetter.gov](#), and then to whitehouse.gov when his administration updated the national site.

A photograph of President Joe Biden in a blue suit and tie, walking down the red-carpeted stairs of Air Force One. He is smiling and gesturing with his right hand. The aircraft's exterior is visible, featuring the seal of the President of the United States and the words "PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES".

THE WHITE HOUSE

Administration Priorities The Record Briefing Room Español MENU

MARCH 31, 2023
Statement from President Joe Biden on February PCE Report

MARCH 31, 2023
Statement from President Joe Biden on Transgender Day of Visibility

MARCH 31, 2023
STATE FACT SHEETS: How President Biden's Investing in America agenda is delivering for Americans in all 50 states and territories

MARCH 30, 2023
A Proclamation on César Chávez Day, 2023

MARCH 30, 2023
FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration Announces New Private and Public Sector Investments for Affordable Electric Vehicles

MARCH 27, 2023
FACT SHEET: Extreme MAGA Congressional Republicans Propose Handouts to Rich and Tax Hikes for Working Families

MARCH 26, 2023
Remarks by Vice President Harris at

Remarks by President Biden on Investing in America

Biden's [WhiteHouse.gov](#) focused on accessibility. It includes the language switcher MultilingualPress. Visitors can toggle to a high-contrast dark mode and larger font sizes designed to help people with limited vision. Inclusive pronouns were added to the contact page.

[Andrew Nacin](#) oversaw the WhiteHouse.gov effort for Biden's administration, and the new site was completed in six weeks, launching on inauguration day.

Not just U.S. presidents

While the use of WordPress by three presidents of the United States in a row (so far) indicates the platform's importance, it is not only the presidents who use WordPress in government.

The State Department's official website, State.gov, is a WordPress website. USA.gov, and the new beta site at beta.usa.gov, are WordPress websites.

According to [PublishPress](#), every U.S. embassy in the world uses WordPress. [Democrats.org](#) is the Democratic Party's website, also powered by WordPress. The Republican Party does not use WordPress, but the [Republican Governors Association](#) does. The [Library of Congress](#) runs its blog on WordPress. [Digital.gov](#) is a WordPress website.

State and city governments also use WordPress widely. The popularity of WordPress for government websites should put to rest the myth that WordPress is less secure than traditional websites.

WordPress also has the avowed mission of democratizing publishing. Does this make WordPress an obvious candidate for applications that support democracy?

WordPress politics

In 2018, when Obama, Trump, and Biden all had WordPress websites (JoeBiden.com redirected to AmericanPossibilities.org), WordPress reached an important milestone: powering one-third of the global web. In turn, it made sense that powerful and important websites were being built on WordPress, regardless of the political leanings of the content.

Yet some believe that the WordPress mission of democratizing publishing is a political statement in itself. [Justin Tadlock](#) wrote at [WPTavern](#) that there is no point in insisting that WordPress should be divorced from politics. “WordPress itself is inherently political. From its license to its mission statement, WordPress takes some political stances,” he wrote. “The concept that users have the freedom to run, copy, alter, improve, or even distribute software is a political statement. It is a political statement in direct defiance of major corporations and governments controlling software through proprietary licenses.”

Chapter 10 — Wix and WordPress Go Head to Head

Integrity and open source

WordPress generally has friendly relations with competing tech firms. An exception is Wix. The conflict between Wix and WordPress began in 2016 when Matt Mullenweg called Wix out for using GPL-licensed code in a proprietary app without crediting WordPress or releasing their derivative app under GPL.

"This explicitly contravenes the GPL, which requires attribution and a corresponding GPL license on whatever you release publicly built on top of GPL code," Matt wrote in a blog post. "The GPL is what has allowed WordPress to flourish, and that let us create this code. Your app's editor is built with stolen code, so your whole app is now in violation of the license."

Matt called for Wix to release their app under a GPL license, which the rules of GPL licensing require.

Avishai Abrahami, CEO of Wix, responded in an open letter to Matt, saying, "Yes, we did use the WordPress open source library for a minor part of the application (that is the concept of open source right?), and everything we improved there or modified, we submitted back as open source...If you believe that we need to give you credit, that you deserve credit, I must say, absolutely yes. You guys deserve a lot of credit, but not because of a few lines of source code, you deserve credit because you guys have been making the internet dramatically better, and for that we at Wix are big fans. We love what you have been trying to do, and are working very hard to add our own contribution to make the internet better."

This response stopped short of agreeing to release the app under a GPL license, and Matt responded that he would be willing to go to court to defend the GPL.

The discussion continued in public on Twitter and in blog posts. Commenters came down on both sides regarding the tone of the posts. Most of the conversations online centered on which tech CEO had been the most collegial and which had sounded the snarkiest. Still, some observers continued to point out that Wix had simply broken the rules of GPL and then tried to finesse the question of whether they planned to correct their error.

“Open source is not a swap meet,” commented Cody Hatch at Hacker News, “you can’t violate a license if you voluntarily release some other code to make up for it.”

What's the GPL?

The GNU General Public License is a free and open source software license. It gives users four freedoms: to run, study, share, and modify the software. The license provides clear permissions and rules for sharing, which protect the work of open source creators.

Any software created with GPL-licensed code must be distributed under a GPL license. This is the rule that Wix broke. That is, there was no problem with Wix using the code. They just weren't allowed then to sell the product based on it as their own commercial software.

Pearl Cohen wrote at Lexology, a legal resource, that this kind of dispute “thickens the fear that some companies have about using open source.” He continued, “The truth of the matter is that Open Source may be used safely in almost every case as long as the developer is aware of the license terms, controls the use and follows the license provisions. This is no doubt demanding, but not unfeasible.”

At the same time, some observers in the tech world were expressing hope that the case would go to court since it would demonstrate whether GPL licensing could hold up in court or not.

In the end

Wix changed their app's code in 2017. They removed the GPL-licensed code, which Matt recognized, stopped their participation in open source projects, and created a new version of their app.

To go with the app, they created a new license, "The Enhanced MIT License," or EMIT. It claims that it is the same as the MIT license, except that work created using EMIT-licensed code cannot be licensed as GPL.

To some, this might not sound like something a lawyer would say, and that would be correct. EMIT was not written up in legal terms and has not been used since Wix leveraged it to make a point about their misstep.

Wix vs. WordPress continues

The controversy resolved once Wix removed the GPL-licensed code from their app. But the bad feelings seem to have lingered on. In 2021, Wix produced an anti-WordPress campaign.

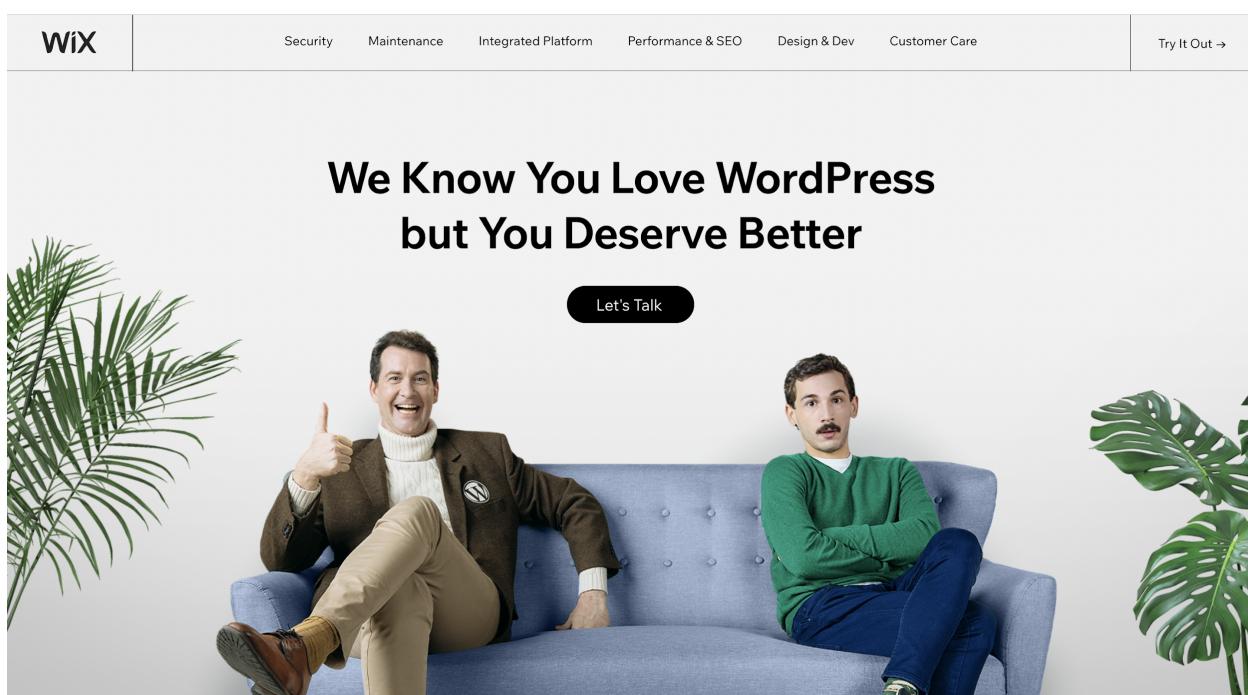
Wix began by sending WordPress influencers Bose headphones. They didn't show the source of the gifts except on the shipping label. Instead, they enclosed a note with a QR code, signed "Yours, WP."

"They were actually impersonating WordPress," Matt said in a podcast at wpmrr.com.

Following the QR code led to a video directed at the influencers. It featured an actor wearing a WordPress logo. "Apparently, Wix is coming out with a campaign trashing me," the actor said. "I just want you to know that it's totally fake news, completely bogus. They're just spreading lies because they're jealous of our relationship."

Wix followed this up with public anti-WordPress ads showing a father and son in a therapist's office. The father represented WordPress, and his son was the therapist's patient. "The WordPress character was kind of like a drunk absent father character," said Matt, describing the ads as "tasteless."

The ads portrayed WordPress software as unreliable and high maintenance but also featured the WordPress-branded character from the video made for the influencers. The hapless patient in the therapy scenario was shown as the victim of an abusive relationship leading to anxiety and mental instability.



Many community members saw this as particularly inappropriate given that the pandemic was at that time leading to record levels of anxiety and depression around the world.

In the podcast and his blog post responding to the negative ad campaign, Matt reminded everyone of the GPL episode. "We have a history," he said on the podcast. "They stole GPL code, embedded it illegally in a proprietary application, then denied it, lied about it, then rewrote it when it was clear that they were caught."

Avishai Abrahami responded to Matt's blog post with an open letter implying that Matt's response had been overly emotional and personal.

Matt laughed ruefully about the conflicts and said, "It's like, don't wrestle with a pig. You both get dirty. The pig likes it."

By late 2022 Wix had 2.4% of the CMS market, while WordPress had upwards of 40%. The controversy may have allowed Wix to present itself as a serious competitor to WordPress but does not seem to have benefitted them in terms of market share.

Chapter 11 — The WordPress Economy

In 2018, WordPress hit 32% market share. By 2019, WordPress powered 43% of the web, according to Kinsta, so somewhere in that year, WordPress zoomed past one-third of the web on its way to nearly half of all the CMS-based websites in the universe.

Among key competitors in this space, Joomla was at 3.1% in 2018 and 2.9% in 2019. Drupal went from 2.2% to 1.9%.

Wix and Squarespace both grew their market share in those years, but by 2019 they hit just 1.1% and 1.5%, respectively.

WordPress had clearly become the most popular website platform, and its market share has only grown since then.

Economic effects

In terms of Economics, what does this popularity mean? As WordPress sought to democratize publishing, making it easier than ever before to build highly functional websites, it opened doors to the online economy for millions of people. Barriers to entry fell for e-commerce, monetized blogging, lead generation, brand awareness websites, and many more creative opportunities.

In 2018 and 2019, traditional hand-coded websites were still in the majority, but by 2021 WordPress surpassed them. In 2018-2019, as is still true now, the use of WordPress dwarfed the use of all other content management systems combined. According to WP Engine's Study of the WordPress Economy, the WordPress-enabled economy reached \$596.7 billion early in 2021.

"If WordPress were a country," [the WP Engine report](#) claims, "its economy would rank 39th in the world."

In a podcast, Josepha listed five groups of people in the WordPress ecosystem:

- Visitors to websites
- Users of websites, including site owners and builders
- Extenders, including plugin and theme builders
- Contributors to WordPress
- Leaders of WordPress

Agencies, web hosts (which Matt identifies as the group that benefits the most financially from WordPress), and infrastructure suppliers, are also included in the WordPress economy.

Each member of these groups plays an essential role in the ecosystem as well as the economy.

WordPress heroes

[Topher DeRosia](#) of [HeroPress](#) curates stories about people who have entered the WordPress economy and improved their lives. Sometimes they have made the world a better place as well. These WordPress heroes are part of the people economy of WordPress – the human beings who use WordPress for their livelihoods.

From all over the world, people have shared their inspiring stories. [Nigel Rodgers](#) of Zimbabwe tells how WordPress community involvement made him a global citizen. [Devin Maeztri](#) of Indonesia tells how she found a place in the community without being a developer. [Marieke van de Rakt](#) of the Netherlands wrote about finding her place in a welcoming community. [Gobinda Tarafdar](#) from Bangladesh enlarged her life experience by making friends worldwide.

Many of the essays center on a sentiment similar to this line from [Michelle Schulp](#) of Minnesota: “WordPress has changed my career. It has helped me achieve financial and personal independence.”

Often, they elaborate that they are women, older people, people with parenting responsibilities that limited their options, people with disabilities, or people who are marginalized in their cultures — in short, they were conscious of obstacles to their economic progress and fulfillment.

WordPress changed that reality for them. Many essays speak of how “WordPress transformed my life.”

These and countless similar stories combined with the statistics prove that WordPress has remarkably impacted the global economy.

Giving: Five for the Future

Josepha Haden Chomphosy gave a [lecture on the WordPress economy](#) in an economics class at Hendrix College. She mentioned the size of the WordPress economy in dollars, but she also took a different approach. As an open source Project with many volunteer contributors, WordPress is unlike other big tech projects.

WordPress users in a survey estimated that, on average, 25% to 48% of their incomes were directly attributable to WordPress. WordPress.org doesn't charge for the use of the software or of any other tools or resources. It is possible to use WordPress as the basis of a business without giving anything at all to WordPress.

But WordPress asks for a 5% give-back contribution in the [Five for the Future](#) (5ftF) project. That contribution might be in the form of time, money, or a combination of the two. It might be a matter of volunteering to work on the software, donating a team member's time to work on core, organizing WordCamps or Meetup events, or engaging with the community in marketing, translation, or any number of other activities voluntarily.

Josepha brought up the concept of “free riders.”

"Free Riders"

There's an economic theory about those who don't contribute but reap the rewards. It's called the "[free rider](#)" problem. The metaphor comes from people riding a bus without buying a ticket. As long as plenty of people buy tickets, a few can ride for free without any consequences: the supply of seats is adequate and their choice to pay or not to pay has no effect on the bus schedule.

Economics theory tells us, though, that there is a tipping point. If there are too many free riders, the system breaks down.

Imagine a bus with riders paying for their rides — except for a few people who jump on the back without paying.

That's no problem as long as enough people pay for their tickets. The free riders don't slow down the bus or create problems by catching a ride. But if there are more free riders than paying customers, at some point the bus line can't afford to run their buses anymore.

This is the conundrum with free riders.

There were many responses to the idea that WordPress could face a free rider problem. A small proportion of the users of WordPress contribute to the Project. WordPress relies heavily on those contributions.

The conversation about free riders quickly began to sound like a conversation about freeloaders – a completely different situation.

The free rider metaphor works for resources that don't get used up, as Joseph pointed out in a [blog post](#). "No matter how many new sites are launched using WordPress, the core software does not become any worse for wear, and there is no end to the available 'seats.' Access to and use of the software is wholly unconstrained and any advancement to the software benefits everyone equally regardless of the size of their company or contribution."

"How can we rebalance the tenacious need for contribution with the immense benefit WordPress brings to everyone, including our free riders and contributors?" she asked.

Commenters suggested including funding tools in WordPress and combining all the smaller contributors into a single identity but also asked for an end to "disparaging" free riders and compassion for those organizations that couldn't "overcome the obstacles" to contribution.

Acknowledgment

WordPress established the Five for the Future project in 2014. In 2018, Andrea Middleton wrote a proposal for a Five for the Future acknowledgment page. The idea was to acknowledge companies that supported the effort and to motivate more companies to join.

Contributions have more than quadrupled in that time. WordPress.org has a Pledges page that shows numerous organizations that have pledged, from a handful of organizations pledging one hour each week to Automattic's 4,069 hours a week.

This section of the website also points out the benefits of contributing:

- Training opportunities
- Contributing to the future of WordPress
- Staying up to date on the WordPress platform
- Working with talented individuals
- Opportunities to identify and hire talented people
- The chance to represent individual or client concerns

There has been some controversy around the program, including questions about whether core contributions and ecosystem contributions are equally important, whether it's right to acknowledge companies or if it amounts to "toxic score-keeping," and whether activities like building WordPress websites count as 5ftF contributions (officially, no).

Contributors can add their contributions to their profiles, and a special web page for the project was added in 2019. In 2022, Josepha spoke of “a culture of generosity” and proposed a set of questions to guide future acknowledgment of contributions.

The program continues to evolve and develop, and the contributions of volunteers continue to be central to the WordPress economy. The most recent contributor days brought skyrocketing numbers: 800 in Porto for WordCamp Europe 2022 and more than 630 in Bangkok for WordCamp Asia 2023.

Chapter 12 — WordPress Matures

2019’s theme for WordPress.org was “Tighten Up.” One step forward was the release of [Betty](#), led by [Matt Mullenweg](#) and [Gary Pendergast](#). It improved editor performance, optimized background processes, and helped users update outdated versions of PHP, and this suite of improvements proved a boon for the Project’s most technical users.

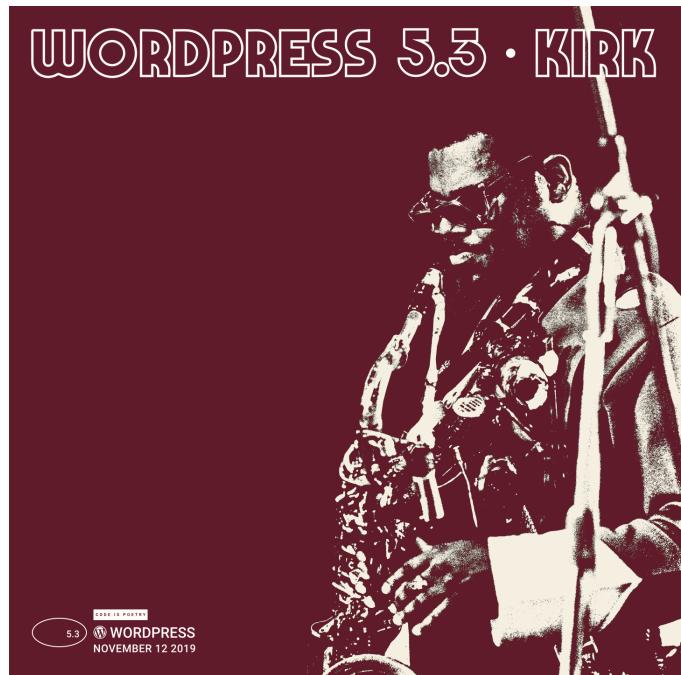
5.1 also introduced several Site Health features. The Site Health project provides a dashboard showing technical issues affecting the health of a website, with suggestions for improvement. Some suggestions are straightforward, like “Delete unused plugins,” but many are intended for developers rather than site owners.

The updates specifically relating to PHP included:

- Detection of outdated or insecure versions of PHP
- Notices about PHP versions
- Checks for plugin compatibility with the site’s PHP version

5.2, [Jaco](#), was also released in 2019. It was led by [Matt Mullenweg](#), [Josepha Haden Chomphosy](#), and [Gary Pendergast](#).

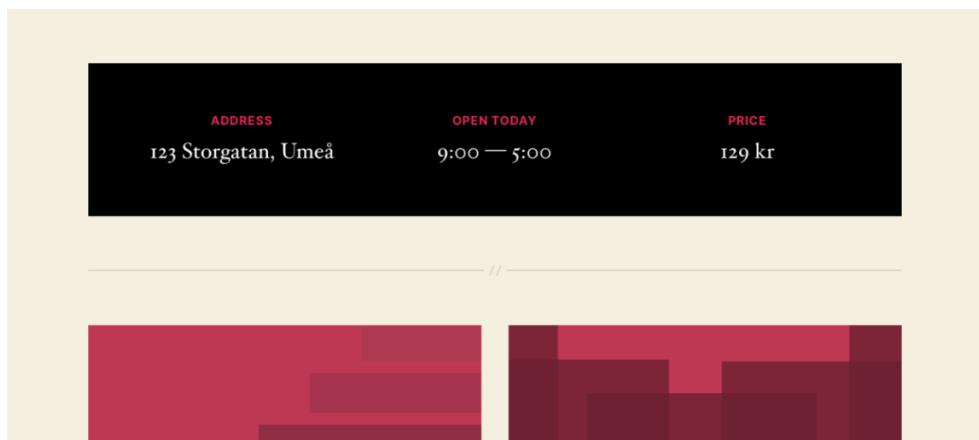
As of 5.2, PHP version 5.6.20 became the minimum version supported by WordPress. 7.3 was recommended.



The third update for 2019 was [5.3, Kirk](#), led by [Matt Mullenweg](#), [Francesca Marano](#), and [David Baumwald](#). It included a new default theme, Twenty Twenty, designed for the block editor, further tweaks to the Site Health features, and full support for PHP 7.4.

[Twenty Twenty](#) The Default Theme for 2020 Home Exhibitions About Us News ... Search

Welcome to the Swedish Museum of Modern Art



The importance of PHP updates

WordPress has the democratization of publishing as a central goal: making it easier for more people to share their content online, regardless of their technical skill and knowledge levels. Many happy WordPress users could manage their websites with no knowledge even of HTML or CSS, let alone PHP.

PHP is an open source server-side scripting language that has been used for web development since 1993. Like most computer languages, it gets updated regularly. In the case of PHP, the planned life span is two years from its first stable release. Using old PHP versions is possible, but it has consequences for speed and security.

However, WordPress powers nearly half of the websites around the world. While the WordPress community has a strong streak of independence, allowing WordPress sites to run on outdated, insecure technology would have far-reaching consequences for the internet.

By 2019, the PHP 5 family was already two years past its end-of-life. Updates had become essential. While it would have been possible to continue to run websites on outdated versions of PHP — and [statistics](#) show that many still do — the tightening up process focused on getting site owners and hosting companies to make those PHP updates.

The Site Health Project

The Site Health screen in the WordPress admin area gives users information on the version of PHP their site was running, what needs to be updated, and some other recommendations regarding performance and security.

Users of WordPress with lower levels of tech savvy often remain unaware of the changes. PHP updates can be done automatically through many hosting companies, but not without risks. In fact, many site owners found that their websites broke when they updated their PHP version. Sadly, plain white screens and unrecoverable websites were not an uncommon occurrence at that time.

A widget encouraging users to update had been shown in the dashboards of websites, and sites that were kept up to date could benefit from the White Screen of Death Protection feature introduced in 5.1. Unfortunately, the most vulnerable websites were often the same sites that were not kept up to date and whose users didn't visit the admin area often enough to see the informative widget.

Often, the source of the problem was the website's theme or key plugins. Compatibility problems meant that the themes or plugins could not be used until and unless they were updated to be compatible with the new versions of PHP. While this could be a simple matter for a personal blog — just change the theme and replace the plugins! — it could be a big, costly problem for businesses and organizations relying on their websites. Often, trying to fix the site without downtime or major design changes was the goal, and the Site Health screen was an important tool.

The Site Health Project gave users tips like "Your PHP version should be updated" and "One or more recommended modules are missing." Unfortunately, many site owners simply had no idea what these instructions meant or how they could fix these problems.

While there are explanations on the site health screen, they often are couched in terms that many site owners do not understand. For example, here is the explanation for "Not all recommended security headers are installed" from one website:

"Your website does not send all recommended security headers.

- Upgrade Insecure Requests
- X-XSS protection
- X-Content Type Options
- Referrer-Policy
- Expect-CT
- X-Frame-Options
- Permissions-Policy
- HTTP Strict Transport Security"

While this is plenty of information for developers, a small business owner with a WordPress website may have no clue to the meanings of any of those phrases, let alone the actions required to resolve them.

The information was written for hosting companies, developers, and other specific audiences, not for every user of WordPress. In some ways, the frustration people felt on encountering this was a symptom of the empowerment WordPress offered.

Just as medical patients now have access to radiology reports written for medical professionals that may not convey much to patients, site owners had access to health reports for their websites written for specialists. In many cases, they did not convey much to the site owners.

Responsibility

There have been many conversations in the WordPress community on the question of who should be responsible for WordPress websites. Should there be automatic updates of themes or plugins initiated by the core software? Should WordPress be disabled on an abandoned website, and if so, who gets to decide what constitutes an abandoned website?

Aaron Campbell pointed out that any decision-making on site ownership and control issues by [WordPress.org](#) would end up being decision-making for a large number of people by a small number of people. “Right and wrong,” he said, “is left up to the marketplace.”

On the other hand, the need to update PHP versions is based on security and the health of the internet as a whole. The tightening up in 2019 versions of WordPress aimed at encouraging those updates without forcing them.

But that was along a continuum from WordPress.org responsibility to individual site owner responsibility. As always, that continuum had a lot more stops along the way.

Hosting companies stopped supporting old versions of PHP, forcing updates. However, they didn’t always alert site owners that their websites might break—or even that they had broken. Hands-off site owners might not realize that their websites were no longer functional until they began to affect the bottom line of their business or organization, which was when they were in crisis mode.

One example is the experience of Operation Sail, or [OpSail](#), a nonprofit established in 1961 by President Kennedy and supported by the U.S. Congress and the British royal family. Their website broke. Months later, as the organization prepared for an event, they discovered that their website was offline. Neither their hosting company nor the agency that originally built the site was able to solve the problem, and OpSail had to start over.

Agencies and freelance site builders might have a continuing relationship with the site owners, but in many cases, they had only built the site. Without being hired to serve as webmasters, they often did not feel a responsibility to keep these websites functional.

Many designers do not offer continuing services for the websites they design. Site owners may not even have contact information for the people who built their websites.

Office staff, who may be users of a website without being owners, may not have any design or development training. They may have limited access and may not even be administrators on a website, even if they are the primary user of the admin area.

While it is possible to imagine further steps that could have been taken to limit the disruption, it is by no means clear who should or could have taken those steps.

The PHP updates were, however, necessary. While many individual users had negative experiences, the changes did not affect the market share or progress of WordPress.

Chapter 13 — The Pandemic

In November 2019, life around the world was carried on as usual, and COVID-19 was nothing but a whisper in epidemiological circles. The biggest news in WordPress circles was that Matt had just given the annual State of the Word address in St. Louis, Missouri, and shared Block Editor enhancements and the great work done by the community.

But by December 12, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in China. Two months after the State of the Word address, on January 20, the first case in the United States was identified in Washington state.

WordCamp Asia



[WordCamp Asia](#) was to take place in Bangkok in February 2020. The organizing team began their preparations months earlier, in May 2019. Amid fears of the contagion that began gripping the world in late January 2020, they became acutely aware that COVID-19 impact their planning and started thinking of the best ways to have a safe event.

The organizers created a channel in the collaboration software, Slack, that acted as a forum for discussions that ranged from designs for masks to updates on travelers from China. They planned an advisory page for the website and discussed how to accomplish social distancing. In a meeting with WordCamp Central early in February, they were asked whether they thought they could safely proceed. They felt that they could. They planned to proceed with caution. “We were 100% sure we were having the event,” says [Naoko Takano](#), the event's lead organizer.

On February 12, 2020, WordCamp Asia [was abruptly canceled](#). The event was scheduled for February 21, so all the arrangements were already in place, and some attendees had already traveled to Thailand. Josepha Haden Chomphosy recalled that there had been close to four years of work building the community and a full year of preparations for the event. She did not want to cancel, but Matt Mullenweg decided that the event could not take place. Josepha agreed, looking back, that this was the right decision.

Naoko agrees. At the time, the news was devastating. “If we had planned it for even a week earlier...” Naoko says sadly.

“Our thoughts are with everyone affected by the virus so far, and we sincerely hope that everything is resolved quickly so that this precaution looks unnecessary in hindsight,” Matt wrote.

WordCamp Asia could have been one of the early superspread events, Matt now realizes. “I follow world news quite a bit and have a personal passion for science,” he explains, which allowed him to foresee the dangers of COVID-19 at that early date. “It was an unpopular decision...the team was very upset.”

Nonetheless, the decision was made. The virus had spread across continents. Countries began closing their borders to outsiders. Italy went into a nationwide lockdown on March 9th. Two days later, on March 11, 2020, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization.

WordCamp Asia had been expected to be the first flagship WordCamp in Asia but instead became the first WordCamp to fall victim to the pandemic.

"At some point," said Josepha, "it turns into disaster recovery." The event organizers wanted to be the ones to communicate about the cancellation to speakers and attendees, but WordPress assisted with efforts to get refunds for people who had already made their travel arrangements.

Amid the uncertainty, the WordPress community began adjusting to a new normal. Sponsors also stepped up to help with cancellation funds and relief efforts.

Naoko Takano, the lead organizer, [wrote](#), "Reading all the caring and thoughtful messages from the global WordPress community makes me happy and sad at the same time. And they remind me of the reasons why I started this adventure in the first place: I wanted to help connect more people through this event. So my wish is that this event that never happened can still somehow trigger you to "meet" (online or offline) someone new, get to know them, help them out, and build a trusting relationship."

Attempts to hold the event in 2021 were also canceled, and the first WordCamp Asia would not take place until February 2023.

WordPress in the time of COVID-19

WordCamp San Antonio was the first virtual WordCamp, taking place March 28-29, 2020. Many more followed, including WordCamp Europe, another flagship event, in Portugal. WordCamp U.S. was canceled, but there were 31 [WordCamps](#) in 2020, mostly virtual.

Meetups went virtual in many communities but remained an important part of the organization. 745 meetup groups in the WordPress chapter program met, for a total of more than [4,900 meetups](#).

For some participants, these virtual meetups were essential sources of human contact. One developer who lived alone and worked remotely shared at a Meetup that he had not seen another person in two weeks.

Contributors were affected too. [The Corporation for National and Community Service](#) (AmeriCorps) found that one-third of Americans volunteered regularly before the pandemic and that there was a 60% drop in these rates after the pandemic began. Community organizer [Cami Kaos](#) saw similar patterns among WordPress contributors.

"About a month in there is just this utter and complete fatigue where we realize this is no longer a fun novelty thing that we're doing," [she told MasterWP](#). "This is our world now. We can't go and see our friends, we can't do in-person events. Now, rather than being excited that we can do these fun new event types, we're upset because we can't do the at-there event types."

She found that community members felt frustrated. They began to ask things like, "Why won't you let us meet in person?"

"Then," she says, "I saw people start to just ghost." More than half her volunteers disappeared.

"I have never, in my decade with WordPress, had a hard time getting people to volunteer to do something," she said. During the pandemic, though, it was tough "because A, it was a whole new thing people had to learn how to do, but B, everyone's life was just bogged down with heaviness. We have to look at the mental health crisis that the pandemic created, we have to look in families where you have children in the home, those children were no longer going to school, they were no longer going to preschool or daycare."

Grief, fear, loneliness, and general uncertainty about the future caused people's priorities to change. "So many contributors to WordPress do it for fun," Matt pointed out. "Other things took precedence."

Josephina noted that the lack of in-person events affected contributor recruitment significantly. “One of the things that we were not able to account for in the potential disaster recovery plan was contributor recruitment and acknowledgment,” she said. “It’s not the same as being with them at a Contributor Day and saying, ‘I really love that thing you did!’ There’s nothing that can really take the place of that. Recruiting people to use WordPress or learn WordPress or to learn how to contribute to WordPress is really hard to do online.”

The lack of in-person WordCamp and Meetup experiences resulted in fewer contributors and fewer opportunities for recruitment and development. However, the decision to end in-person events was taken early and continued for a long time.

“People did not all agree with that decision,” said Josephina. “Some said this was us trying to exert too much influence into that space or that people should be able to just make their own decisions and take their own personal risks.”

Mark Maunder wrote at [Wordfence](#) in March 2020:

Thus far, I’ve seen most of the arguments for attending events or traveling centered around how deadly COVID-19 is, or how likely an individual is to die from infection. While this may be based in fact, this is an individualistic view and does not take the global community into account. Instead, are we considering whether we are facilitating transmission or helping contain the outbreak? That should be the moral arithmetic, not whether it will inconvenience or kill you personally.

“WordPress” and “community” are two words that often appear side by side in sentences, and rightfully so. Much of what makes WordPress successful is the community that supports this open-source Project. We all see this, and we value this “community” for all the goodness it brings.

A question to consider: Do we care enough about the WordPress community and the global community to make the hard decisions we should be making to help protect those communities that we value?

"The best way for us to work together toward a common goal was for us all to stay away from each other," Josepha said, reflecting that the WordPress community didn't like that idea. "Here's the thing about WordPressers: you cannot keep them away from one another. They really enjoy the community. That community is the thing that makes WordPress so remarkably different from other open source solutions."

Yet ending in-person events seemed unavoidable. "As we were watching it get worse and worse and worse, at some point you have to decide we're not helping."

Still, in many ways, WordPress provided opportunities and escape from the problems that beset people worldwide.

Remote work

The frequency of remote work [tripled](#) in the U.S. over the course of the pandemic, with [71%](#) of those who could work from home doing so in October 2020. [Earthweb](#) estimates that 18% of the global workforce worked from home during the pandemic, leaving many global workers describing remote work as "[the new normal](#)." While remote work percentages [varied considerably](#) from one country to another, rates were much higher everywhere during the pandemic than before 2020.

Many people in the WordPress community already worked remotely. Matt considered himself an [evangelist](#) for remote working, and Automattic had a distributed workforce from the beginning. Naturally, WordPress offered many tools for online collaboration and productivity. So there was less upheaval for the human economy of WordPress than in other industries.

As Topher DeRosia [put it](#), "Aside from the emotional stress of the world being just crazy, it was kind of a time of prosperity for my family. I already worked from home, so that didn't change. We ended up spending less money eating out and doing shopping so, financially, we were better off."

"We had a bunch of skills that were already required for people that had to be shut in their homes, basically," Joseph said, "WordPress and open source projects in general can help you learn the 21st-Century skills required to work in technology, but also teach you the emotional intelligence type things that you need to know in order to work as a remote worker."

Those skills made it easy for people in the WordPress ecosystem to adapt to Zoom meetings and other collaborative technology. "A lot of good came out of the pandemic," said Courtney Robertson, a designer on the Training team, on contributors. "We didn't have the volume, but I saw more teams mixing together." With global collaborations and increased integration of different groups within the Project, cross-team collaboration has continued to grow.

Learn WordPress

[Jonathan Bossenger](#) recalls that "the idea for the current iteration of Learn WordPress was born out of the fact that we couldn't hold in-person events during the pandemic." The project had been more or less on hold since 2013, but with the pandemic causing limitations on working together, the community worked with members of the training team to revive the project.

[Courtney Robertson](#) became a full time contributor during the pandemic and is still a dedicated WordPress Training Team Faculty Member. She explained that supporting other teams' training needs was an initial impetus for her work with the training team.

The website at learn.wordpress.org shares tutorials to help people learn best practices for WordPress, lesson plans to help people conduct in-person or virtual training, and courses covering a variety of topics for developers as well as other WordPress users. Many of the lessons are translated into multiple languages.

The Learn WordPress site has been lively since the pandemic began to wind down. Projects are presented as ideas, as lessons ready for content creators to work on, and at various stages of progress. The team is working toward certification, and some lessons and courses are required for various community roles, though certification is not at this point possible or required.

"Learn WordPress has grown," says Jonathan, "and continues to grow, and empowers users to achieve their goals with WordPress through actionable and practical learning experiences that bring the community together."

Economics

At the same time, businesses that had not been online before the pandemic realized that they needed an online presence. Gyms and yoga studios switched to online classes, restaurants took up online ordering and curbside pickup, and e-commerce soared.

For businesses to cope with the changes the pandemic thrust upon them, an online presence became essential. It was unavoidable even for those that had avoided digital platforms before the pandemic. For businesses thinking about getting online or had just dipped their toes in the virtual water, the pandemic often motivated action that had been easy to put off before. With its versatility, robust technology, and user-friendliness, WordPress was an excellent choice for small businesses seeking to create or expand their online presence.

For WordPress, it was a boom, one where the [market share](#) rose more than it ever had in the years before the pandemic.

A wave of pandemic entrepreneurs started [4.4 million](#) businesses in 2020—a record. 70% of those businesses were all-digital. WordPress was the foundation for a large segment of those businesses.

"There's never been a better time to learn and invest in improving your WordPress skills," Matt said during State of the Word 2020.

One example was contributor Paul Biron. He built a website for COVAX, an international organization supporting COVID-19 vaccinations. The African Union and UNICEF followed suit. The three COVID-19-related websites provided exciting and rewarding work through the pandemic.

Across the board, people in the WordPress economy had more options than those working in fields like hospitality or manufacturing.

People with disabilities/comorbidities

The pandemic led to widespread illness and over [350,000 deaths in the U.S.](#) in 2020 alone. At the same time, it brought other health issues to the fore. Some people were more vulnerable than others to COVID-19. Older people, people with chronic diseases, smokers, the obese — these people were more likely to catch COVID-19 and more likely to have severe cases of the disease. They and their families needed to avoid contagion even more than the general populace.

Remote work allowed some people in these positions to continue working safely and also introduced greater flexibility and a better work/life balance.

Mental health became a focus globally as rates of depression and anxiety [spiked](#). The [World Health Organization reported](#) a 25% increase worldwide for 2020.

“In 2019, we had extensive conversations in the WordPress community about whether or not to include mental health and well-being as essentially a component of the WordPress project,” said Joseph. “We had a lot of discussions about whether it made sense because we had groups that were looking out for accessibility. There was a group saying, a lot of us are sustained by this community. So why not just make that an official component of the WordPress project?”

The decision was made not to include that element in the project.

"So up came 2020 and then 2021 where I did really worry about how our WordPress community was doing," Josepha said. "I told folks regularly this whole project is designed so that if you need to step away because you are physically unwell or mentally unwell, or otherwise need a break, do it. It's designed to let people come in and out as they are able or are willing. And I really really committed to that with folks in 2020."

Blogging has been shown to be [good for mental health](#), and WordPress provided the best and easiest opportunity to start and continue blogs during the pandemic. WordPress thus supported mental health in several ways, within the community, and as an affirming software tool.

In addition to providing the tools and community support, as well as creating opportunities for people with special health needs, members of the WordPress community banded together to offer numerous resources relating to physical and mental health.

[WP&Up](#), which rebranded itself during the pandemic as A Big Orange Heart, offered specific support for remote workers during the pandemic. The [University of Innsbruck](#) in Austria used WordPress to set up an emergency online mental health program during their lockdown. The Harlem Family Institute used WordPress to publish [My Pandemic Story](#), a guided workbook supporting kids' mental health.

Community support

Even in the absence of serious mental health concerns, WordPress helped some people with the general disquiet the pandemic brought. Francesca Marano remembers being the lead release coordinator for version 5.4 in 2020. "It was surreal in Italy," she says. "We were all in lockdown, I was interacting only with my son...Having 5.4 to launch helped us to get through."

The welcoming community and robust yet friendly software made WordPress an important source of support for pandemic-era health needs.

The pandemic also reinforced the importance of collaboration, the focus of Gutenberg Phase 3. “A lot of good came out of the pandemic,” Courtney Robertson said. “We didn’t have the volume [of contact] but I saw more teams mixing together...It reduced the global barriers actually that much more because everybody had to get comfortable hopping on to Zoom more.”

Tammie Lister, too, remarked that she no longer took her ability to travel the world and connect with other people for granted. “I look out the window now,” she mused. “Even on airplanes.”

With supply chain disruptions, travel limitations, and increased awareness of the world's interconnectedness, the pandemic began to bring Phase 4—native multilingual support—to people’s minds as well.

Chapter 14 — “Parlez-vous WordPress s'il vous plaît?”

Multilingual efforts over the years

As the pandemic slowed down, a new awareness of the ways in which the world is interconnected brought increasing concern with the plans for Gutenberg Phase 4 -- Multilingual Support.

Multiple languages were not by any means a new phenomenon for WordPress. “WordPress has always been localized,” says Francesca Morano. “Localization of WordPress and the wealth of plugins we have is the big factor in making WordPress so popular.” A look at the history of WordPress shows that localization gathered momentum as time went on.

Multiple language packs, the technology that allows automatic translation on WordPress sites, were available as early as 2007. The first Rosetta site—WordPress.org websites in non-English languages—was launched in 2008. It was in [Bulgarian](#), largely because a Bulgarian contributor put in the time. While this was a classic example of progress where a highly motivated individual was involved, WordPress continued to move toward better multilingual performance every year.

2013’s version 3.7 featured “better global support,” including automatic translation for version updates. 2013 was also the point at which the mission and work of the Polyglots team became more structured, Francesca says.

In 2014, version 4.0 included the capacity to install WordPress in a variety of languages, leading to what Aaron Campbell called “explosive growth” of installs in other languages and outside the United States. By the end of the year, non-English WordPress reached an impressive milestone, with downloads outpacing downloads of the English version.

In 2015's State of the Word presentation, Matt announced that all plugins and themes would support language packs. The plugin and theme directories were localized and became available in more languages that year. In 2016, WordPress added the language switching feature for users on a WordPress site. Users could choose their site's admin language from a drop-down menu. 2017's 4.7.2 release brought in numerous additional language packs. More continued (and continue) to be added in nearly every release. Plugins and themes continued to be required for complete translation, but the changes to the software were speeding up.

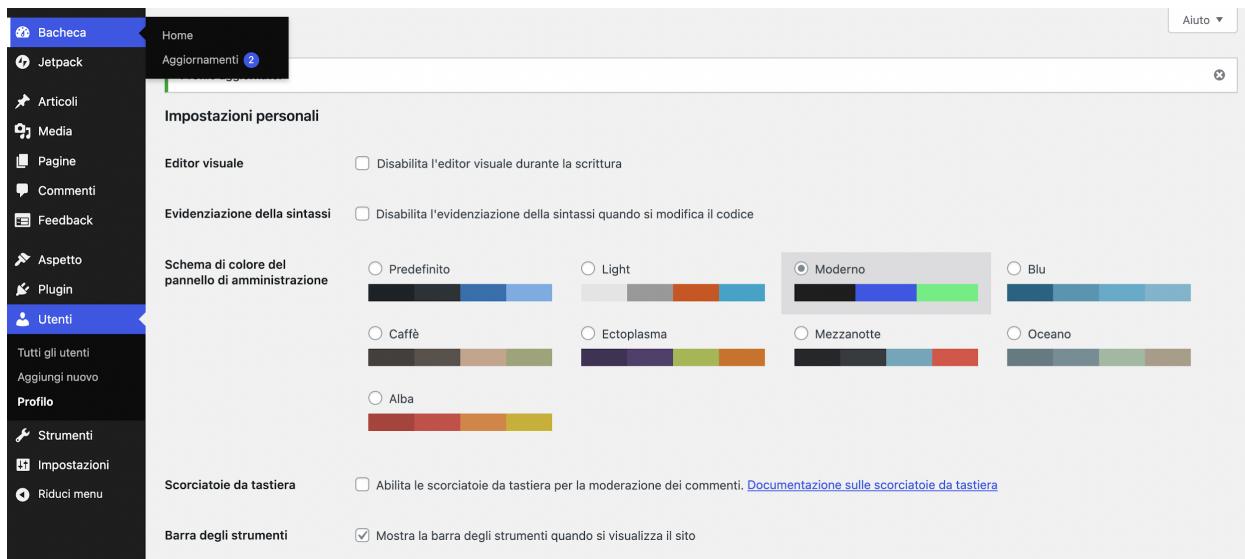
All these steps forward centered on translating the interface of the software. Pascal Birchler, a core contributor, wrote in 2019, "WordPress is still a platform that does not offer us a comfortable and unique solution to have a multi-language website. We have several plugins that solve many of the problems we are encountering, but it'll be a while until WordPress becomes a fully multilingual platform." This comment reflected the growing desire for a platform that supported multilingual content as well as provided multilingual access to the tools.

Increasing global connections were reflected in some other WordPress events around this time.

In 2020, WordCamp Spain took place online, welcoming Spanish-speaking visitors around the world. "We have consciously given a push to unite both sides of the pond thanks to this common interest: the growth of WordPress in Spanish," wrote Pablo Moratinos, the organizer of the WordCamp. Matt favors more language-centered WordCamps, too.

In 2021, a language switcher was added to the login screen in version 5.9. [Erica Varlese](#) proposed to translate [learn.WordPress.org](https://learn.wordpress.org), and by the end of the year, the training site was available in 21 languages.

The software



Changing the language of the admin area of a WordPress website is just a matter of choosing from a drop-down menu of nearly 70 languages, with the site automatically adjusting languages. Over the life of the software, more and more languages have been included. However, even for common languages that have been at the 100%-translated point for years, many elements of most websites are still in English.

Some languages pose extra challenges. Naoko Takano was one of the earliest translators of Japanese. She points out that how Japanese is written means that word counts differ between Japanese and English. Japanese words might be automatically divided by the software in unnatural ways. Languages may use different characters, be written in different directions, and have other special characteristics that must be handled in the programming.

And American English is the automatic default language. If a section of a given language has yet to be translated, English will display as the default. For Lao language users, showing Thai would make more sense. South American Spanish speakers would be better off with Spanish from Spain than English. The Preferred Language plugin allows users to set fallback languages, but WordPress doesn't do so natively.

In fact, plugins and themes picked up the slack for multilingual websites.

Jeff Paul pointed out that a high level of stability is required before it makes sense to translate software. Still. “Internationalization and accessibility are go-to areas,” he says. “Those are areas where the product could do better.”

WordPress continues to improve in this area with time, but challenges remain.

The content

The content of websites was controlled by the owners and producers of the websites, but an increasing interest in WordPress support of multilingual sites grew over the years.

Organizing a multilingual website can be done in several ways: multisite, all the languages on one site, with or without connections among the various translations, and so forth. These decisions are determined by the site owners and producers. WordPress doesn’t currently offer automatic translations or processes for building multilingual sites, though many plugins do.

“It’s tricky,” says Matias, because there are many different solutions.” Building the collaborative processes in Phase 3 will give greater insights into the needs of multilingual sites and the people who use those websites. “We’re going to see,” says Matias, “the things they wish would exist.”

Jeff Paul mentioned that people in the community would like to see multilingual support (planned as Phase 4) come before collaboration (planned as Phase 3). Matt mentioned that he gets that request often, and Courtney Robertson admitted that she’s one of the people who makes that request. A desire for global diversity is on the rise in the WordPress community.

However, from a technical point of view, the collaborative tools of Phase 3 will provide a foundation for Phase 4. The order of the two is not based on importance or urgency but on the infrastructure required.

Matt points out that localization of content goes beyond language alone. “You might want to have different imagery, or different testimonials, or endorsement celebrities,” he said. “I’m excited about supporting it.”

Localization and internationalization

Localization is the process of making a web page accessible to speakers from another locale or language community. Localization includes translation but also covers things like local currency, laws, and images that may carry different connotations in different cultures.

Internationalization is the process of making a website available for localization. WordPress technology keeps internationalization in mind as part of the project’s commitment to diversity.

Both localization and internationalization are essential for a global web solution.

The Polyglot team comprises volunteer contributors working to translate WordPress into their native languages. Languages are further divided by locales: French, as spoken in Belgium, is separate from French spoken in France.

Currently, 208 locales are at some stage of preparation. Contributors range from one for Icelandic to 3,959 for French (France). “It’s amazing WordPress is available in so many languages,” Yvette Sonneveld points out, considering that all the translation is done by volunteers.

“Most spoken languages in the world have a localized release at the same time,” Francesca reports. She found great satisfaction in working on localization as a volunteer and then as a sponsored contributor. “Contributing to my local community and to the global community,” she said, were among the primary benefits of her work with WordPress.

The role of AI in translations

Automatic translations are already available in browsers like Google Chrome. WordPress website builders and users often use Google's automatic translating tools for their websites. People can now choose what language to use to access any website. So could artificial intelligence take the place of human translators?

Matt expects that browsers will continue to improve automatic translations to the point where they can do a lot of the heavy lifting. But he also recognizes that AI is a tool to augment human creativity, not to replace it.

Polyglots like Francesca question whether there will ever be satisfying AI solutions for translation. So many local details go into the localization of any page, and automation can't be aware of all of them. "My heart is a lot more into people," she says. "I make sure the context makes sense to Italians."

AI has improved in translation to an impressive degree, and people have also become more tolerant of machine translations. Matias suggests that newer generations of users might have a different attitude to automatic translation. "There's some outdated mental modeling" of AI translations, he says. "We're coming from a time when that wasn't ubiquitous and we know the limitations, we know that it's rough, we know we're going to get the best experience in the original language."

Yvette agrees that people tolerate automatic translations but points out that there are consequences. "When it comes to branding," she says, "the only way to really build trust is to provide the content with the best user experience." Matt pointed out that WordPress already uses AI in the form of Akismet. Automation, in general, is used to replace human effort in dirty, dull, or dangerous work. Handling spam comments is a good example. Translation is not. Matt doesn't see AI as a threat to human translators. "Humans will be around for a long, long time," he laughed. As the 20th anniversary of WordPress neared, the software and the community were poised to extend the global language capacity of WordPress along with its global reach.

Chapter 15 — Together Again

Meeting in person

What was the most exciting thing to happen in 2022? Yvette Sonneveld answered that question without hesitation, “Getting to hang out in person.”

Contributors and other community members said that over and over.

“Community is what makes WordPress, WordPress,” Yvette continued. Her advice for anyone hoping to build a business in WordPress was, “Find a way to start volunteering. Meet other people, get involved in the community.”

“WordPress changed my life professionally and personally,” says Francesca Marano. “The people are really what interests me.” After experiencing lockdown in her home in Italy, she was more than ready to get back to in-person connections with her local WordPress community and the broader community.

As the world reopened, WordPressers, in general, took advantage of the opportunity to get back together again.

In 2021, all but one WordCamp took place online. However, 2022 saw 23 in-person WordCamps across Asia in India, Indonesia, and Nepal, in several European countries, in parts of South America, and around the United States. Flagship events like WordCamp Europe and WordCamp US returned, embracing vaccine mandates and relaxed guidelines for larger events. There were a few online events, but overall, people were excited to see one another again.

Tammie Lister, for whom WordCamp Europe in 2022 was not only the first in-person WordPress event she attended after the pandemic but also the first plane ride and the first travel she undertook, said she hoped the online events would continue. For her, there were more events during the pandemic because of the ease of virtual travel. She hopes to continue taking advantage of those opportunities as well as getting back to in-person events.

500 WordPress Meetup groups doubled the number of events they held in 2022 and volunteer time soared. There were 1,399 release contributors in 2022, including 652 first-time contributors, numbers Matt reported in his 2022 State of the Word address. He also said, “WordPress is one of the most loving communities.” Clearly, these figures support the claim.

Guidance

At the beginning of 2022, as in-person events were encouraged, the community team published [guidelines](#) for reopening. It was suggested that organizers still provide masks and hand sanitizer at all their events. Organizers were allowed to require masks or proof of vaccination and instructed to follow local regulations.

In the usual WordPress spirit of respect for individuals, stickers were created that helped people ask others to wear masks in their vicinity. “Wear a mask near me, please!” was the message.



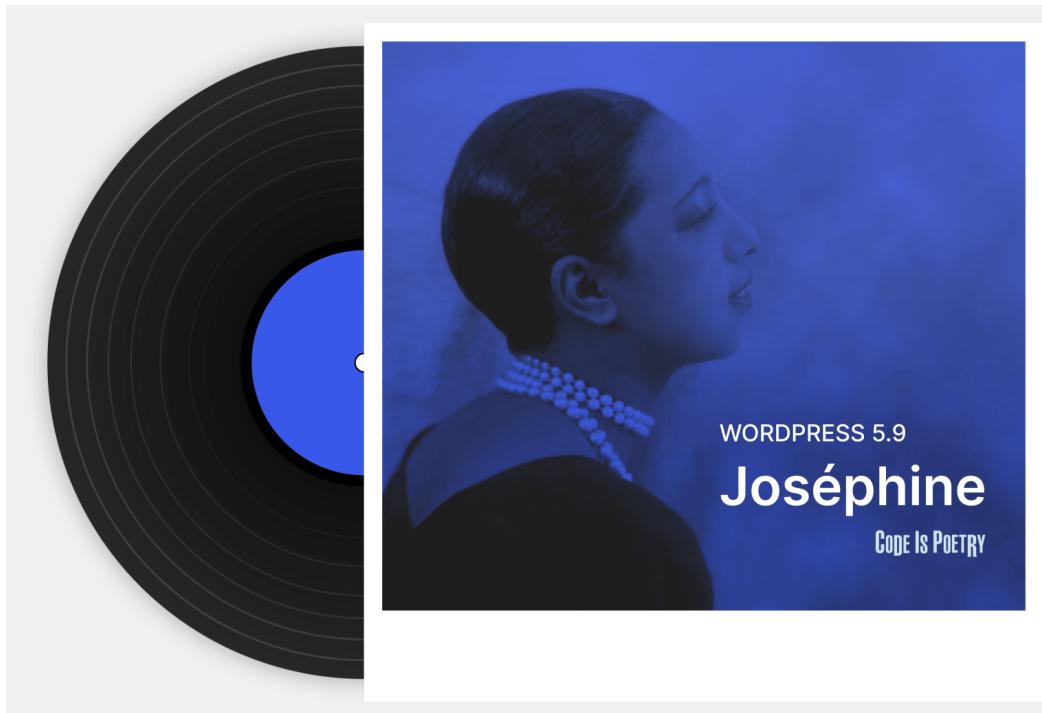
Ticket sales pages told attendees to respect the stickers asking people to wear masks, attend events only if vaccinated or tested negative, and to stay away if they were ill or had been exposed to someone ill.

The world was figuring out whether to hug or shake hands and how cautious to be. Online events were still an acceptable option, the official messages emphasized. But there was a high level of excitement over the return of face-to-face connections.

Jeff Paul expressed excitement about the Community Summit coming up in 2023. “I care a lot about the health, diversity, and vibrance of open source,” he said. “It’s the joy that’s unlocked by knowing that I’ve done what I could.”

2022 version releases

WordPress 5.9, "Josephine," was a significant release, in that it brought the Site Editor and Twenty Twenty-Two, the first default block theme. It launched on January 25t of 2022. Matt led the release, and it included the work of 624 volunteers.



The Site Editor, also known as full site editing, allowed users to make style decisions within the main editor. All design decisions could be made with blocks and for the first time, the Gutenberg block editor applied to a whole website. Design and editing for the entire website, not just a page or post, could be handled with the block editor. The Customizer, Widgets, and Menus, which previously had their locations in the Appearance section of the admin area, could all be replaced by the Site Editor.

This was true only when using a block theme like Twenty Twenty-Two. When using other kinds of themes or plugins requiring the Customizer, the older interface items continued to be available.

Patterns were accessible from the same editor, and the styles interface allowed global design settings for a full website. More than one stylesheet could be registered for each block. Even for users not using block themes, the controls became more flexible and robust.

Announced on May 24, 2022, WordPress 6.0, "Arturo," included work by more than 500 contributors from 58 nations. Matt was the release lead for a squad of 16.



Arturo brought improvements to the writing experience and fluid typography. "I'm in love with fluid typography," Paul Biron confided. Fluid typography allows fonts to respond seamlessly to different sizes of screens and viewports. Where previously, designers would need to specify styles for typography at different widths, with no adaptations between specified sizes, fluid typography allows appropriate font size and width at every size.

Writers could select text across blocks and keep existing styles when they transformed a block into another type of block. Block styles could be changed in new, simpler ways. There were new block themes as well as a streamlined interface. Templates such as the homepage template could be styled within the editor.

In addition, users could lock their blocks, ensuring consistent styling within their websites.

WordPress 6.1, "Misha," was released on November 1, 2022. Matt was once again the release lead, and more than 800 people from over 60 countries took part. The announcement included the news that WordPress powered 43% of the websites in the world.



Misha included the new default theme Twenty Twenty-three, an accessibility-ready theme with 10 style variations included. More than 60 adaptations to increase accessibility were included in this theme.

Version 6.1 offered more refined design and writing tools in the interface. It increased the flexibility of the block editor, opening its use to themes not designed as block themes.

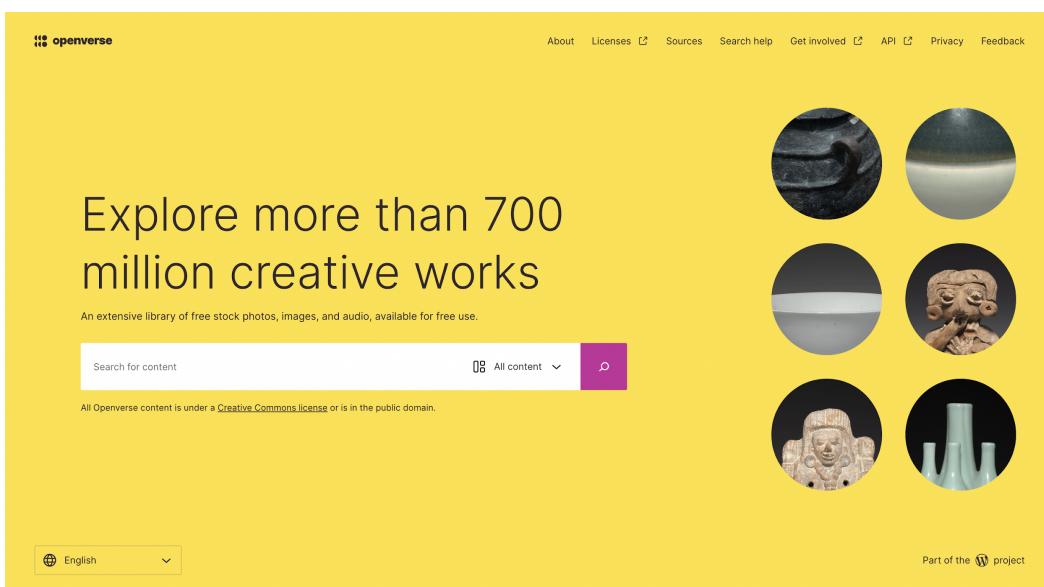
Matt summed it up in his State of the Word address, “You can create themes without knowing a lick of code.”

The releases of 2022 created an entirely new way to use WordPress, bringing Phase 2 of Gutenberg nearer to fruition.

Openverse

Openverse began as a project of Creative Commons called “CC Search.” In 2021, it was rebranded as part of the WordPress Project. WordPress called their new family member “Openverse.” As an open source image and sound file search engine, it moved toward the project-wide goal of providing open source alternatives for all site-building necessities.

By the end of 2022, Openverse had added 22 million images and 1.5 million audio files. In the 30 days prior to the 2022 State of the Word address, it had fielded an impressive 50 million requests. By April 2023, it was home to more than 700 million files, all free for use by anyone.



Zack Krida, Team Lead on Openverse, offers more on the project's goals. "Two of our very long term goals are to index all Creative Commons licensed works on the web – of which there are over 2.5 billion – and to allow WordPress sites to share their own media directly with Openverse, so that all WordPress users can become contributors to the global commons," he said. The 6.2 release will directly integrate with Openverse right from the inserter.

WordPress and Openverse are, Matt explained, "open ecosystems that feed back to one another."

In a podcast with Josepha, Matt acknowledged that creators might want to sell the rights to use their work. There are lots of places for artists to sell their products. "But we just want to make an alternative, so those who want to donate their work to the world, much like engineers and designers and translators of WordPress donate some of that effort to the world, they can do so," he said.

For website owners and designers, a safe space to find images and sound files to use on their websites—without concerns about inadvertently violating copyright—is an important step up. And complementary to the open source ecosystem.

Turning 20



May 27, 2023, marks the 20th anniversary of WordPress. The WordPress community is celebrating the 20th year milestone with various events, including limited edition merchandise and collectibles, a special edition Wapuu + a campaign to “color your own.”

There will be a video greeting campaign on social media with the hashtag #WP20 congratulating WordPress on the milestone. Social media content will also share WordPress memories from WordCamps and meetups over the past 20 years.

The cornerstone of all the campaigns is “24 Hours of WP20,” a day-long series of global community celebrations in nearly every timezone. WordPress users, developers, and enthusiasts will gather via their local meetup groups and virtually online to wish WordPress a happy 20th birthday, eat some cake, snap some fun photographs, and share it all on social media.

Because the essence of WordPress is the community, a 20th-anniversary celebration is a celebration of the community. This is what makes WordPress so special. Wp20.wordpress.net includes full details of campaigns and resources for the celebration.

"Taking a step back for a moment," says core contributor Dan Soschin, "WordPress is the community, the community is WordPress... the two require one another to succeed. Every so often, it's important to take a step back and look at the path we've taken together, reflect on wins (losses too), and celebrate the journey. We all love WordPress, but we love the journey we've taken together, too. Many thousands of people have helped get WordPress to where it is today – the CMS of choice for more websites than any other – and it will take many thousands more to sustain the open source project for the next 20 years and beyond."



Chapter 16 — The Future of WordPress

With Phases 1 and 2 of the Gutenberg project complete, WordPress is using its learnings to prepare for what lies ahead - Phases 3 and 4.



As Josepha put it, “Phases 1 and 2 of the Gutenberg project had a very ‘blocks everywhere’ sort of vision. And phase three and, arguably, phase four will have more of a ‘works with the way you work’ vision.”

Some members of the WordPress community have questioned why phase 3 – collaboration – precedes phase 4, the multilingual aspect of WordPress. Precisely this question came up in the [Q & A session](#) for State of the Word 2022.

Matt responded, “From a technical point of view, making WordPress natively multilingual is quite challenging. Adding collaboration tools in advance will help support Phase 4 technical’s implementation and provide tools to manage multilingual content out of the box, like translation and review workflows. So Phase 3 will not just “inform” Phase 4 but will actually create the infrastructure and features central to making Phase 4 possible.”

Beyond that, the future depends on the community. Speaking about contributor growth Tammie Lister says, “We need more people,” echoing the views of many contributors. Even though there are many active contributors to the WordPress project, there is always room for more.

Contributor recruitment and retention can be challenging. [Hari Shanker listed](#) some reasons new contributors sometimes leave the project. A lack of guidance was the foundation of many items on the list. Uncertainty about the definition of Five for the Future contributions was another of the concerns, but stronger onboarding and mentoring were the most popular suggested solutions.

The perception that developers are the only needed contributors may also be a misconception that needs to be cleared up. Translators, instructional designers, people with expertise in legal issues, and community leaders are also needed, among many more roles. Increasing awareness of all the possibilities may encourage greater participation in the future. Increasing awareness always requires communication, and the reopening of the world, as it rebounds from the pandemic, may make that communication easier.

With in-person gatherings rising and virtual gatherings as a continuing option, the number of new contributors is already soaring. Not only does this create optimism for the future, but it also provides successes to build on.

The future of open source

Josepha expressed the WordPress community’s devotion to WordPress itself and to open source as a principle. “Not only is open source an idea that can change our generation by being an antidote to proprietary systems and the data economy,” she said in a [recent podcast](#), “but open source methodologies represent a process that can change the way we approach our work and our businesses.”

Discussions about open source often acknowledge that the financial viability of open source software requires millions of users to benefit from the deep engagement and expertise of a small number of people, a sentiment reflected recently in [Forbes](#).

Building the WordPress community continues to be an essential part of supporting open source, but keeping the WordPress economy healthy is also a requirement. Without that practical piece, open source would be weakened.

The future of the web

With nearly half the websites in the universe built on WordPress, the future of WordPress is integral to the future of the web.

“I want the web to be weird,” says Tammie. “I want that freedom...Themes should be like clothes, not like bones.” Her vision of the future includes unforeseeable surprises.

WordPress may very well deliver just that.

Matt also speaks in favor of [weirdness on the web](#), admiring the idea of individuals being able to create their own highly personal corners of the web where they can connect with others who share their interests and visions.

The WordPress philosophy: The four freedoms

1. The freedom to run the program, for any purpose.
2. The freedom to study how the program works, and change it to make it do what you wish.
3. The freedom to redistribute.
4. The freedom to distribute copies of your modified versions to others.

Josephine reflected that we should “look out toward the horizon a bit more and up toward our guiding stars a bit more as well. Because we are now, as we ever were, securing opportunity for those who come after us because of the opportunity that was secured for us by those who came before us.”