

3 Alternatives to Drupal 9

DRUPAL 7 REACHES END OF LIFE IN 2023
AND DRUPAL 9 ISN'T THE ONLY PLACE TO
GO

OPTIONS

- 1 WordPress
- 2 Backdrop CMS
- 3 Custom Web Framework

A Brief History of Drupal

Drupal™

Drupal became a legitimately recognized content management system (CMS) for government in October of 2009. That's when the White House website, WhiteHouse.gov, moved from a proprietary CMS to Drupal.

At the time, this move had big implications, it legitimized the open-source CMS as a secure way to stand up a very visible, high-traffic, federal website. It's hard to imagine this now, but there was a lot of debate about whether open source was a possibility for the government back in the mid-aughts. At the time, government agencies and government contractors were pretty skeptical, resistant, and somewhat ignorant of open source software.

Fast forward to today and Drupal is one of the most popular content management systems in use for government agencies, universities, and member associations. In fact, Drupal dominates these industries. But it also lost WhiteHouse.gov.

WordPress Takes the White House

Under the Trump administration, WhiteHouse.gov moved out of Drupal and into WordPress, which is the single most popular open-source CMS on the planet. When the site moved, it was heralded as a cost-saving step. While it's true that maintaining a WordPress site is often less expensive than maintaining a Drupal site, the migration also allowed them to break away from the contractors who previously managed the Drupal site, because developing for Drupal requires a higher set of skills and abilities.

But cost savings and vendor lock-in were probably not the only considerations. Under the Obama administration, the White House put out a huge amount of detailed content, data, and reports. As part of the Open Government Act, the administration strived to be more transparent and forthcoming with as much information and as many details as possible.



WordPress Takes the White House, cont.

In addition, there were many different content managers putting up a lot of different types of content. Back then, WhiteHouse.gov needed a relatively complex CMS to handle the different types of content, roles, and permissions. Drupal was the logical choice.

Over the course of the next presidential transition, the Trump administration changed the content strategy. It focused more on pictures, videos, and press releases. Most of the complex data, reports, and content types were deprecated and removed. Also, fewer and more trusted content managers were involved in putting out this content.

The 2016-2020 White House also relied less on its website and more on social media and third party media outlets to get out its messaging. Simply put, the power and complexity of Drupal were no longer needed. The White House only used a relatively simple way of putting out marketing collateral by a few trusted content managers. WordPress was more than capable of handling the job.

Why the Move to Drupal 9 is Challenging



The move from Drupal 7 to the latest version of Drupal is a big haul for one main reason: Symfony. Drupal 7 was built on a proprietary open-source core based purely on PHP. And, if you want to get super technical, it was built using a procedural programming methodology rather than an object oriented programming (OOP) methodology.

Drupal 8 and 9 (and all future versions of Drupal) are built atop Symfony, an object-oriented, open-source framework, which itself was built on top of PHP. The custom, proprietary, procedural core no longer exists in future versions of Drupal.

There are many upsides to this change; past migrations from version to version in Drupal were very difficult and time consuming. But with Symfony, migration between versions of Drupal is significantly easier and requires less effort. Additionally, with the Symfony dependency, Drupal is more flexible and uses more modern approaches to programming.

However, for sites in Drupal 7, this means that the move to 9 and beyond is a large undertaking. The move is essentially a website rebuild or replatforming as opposed to a simple upgrade.

It All Comes Down to Purpose

As Drupal 7 reaches end of life in November of 2023, it's important to think about what is the best CMS for a site's users and maintainers.

Drupal's founder, Dries Buyteart, uses the term "ambitious experiences" to describe the use cases for Drupal 8 9. Drupal is one of the most extensible and customizable content management systems out there. But "ambitious experiences" often come with high maintenance costs.

So, if you don't need the complexity of a Drupal site, then Drupal 7 end of life presents an opportunity to spend the time and money migrating to a CMS or framework that is best suited for your needs.

3 alternatives to Drupal 9

1



2



3

custom web framework

WordPress

If you don't need the complexity of Drupal and your website strategy involves creating a lot of content that is consumed and not interacted with, it's seriously worth considering going to WordPress.

Now, you could do almost anything in WordPress that you can do in Drupal and WordPress VIP is used on some very high traffic sites like the White House, FiveThirtyEight, The New York Post, and Accuweather.

But those sites provide a lot of one-way communication. For the most part, they are great looking blogs. If you just need a great looking blog; consider WordPress.

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If your web site is more about publishing content and you have a few people who are going to be in charge of that, then I think WordPress is the way to go. It has a friendlier user interface, it's easier to manage and maintain as a non-technical person.

- Virginia Alvarez
Agileana Project Manager



Upsides and Downsides of WordPress

- + Easier for less technical team members to manage
- + Theme selection and plug ins save time and money
- + Less secure (which might be okay for you depending on your site)
- + A less complex set of user permissions

Upsides and Downsides of Wordpress, Explained

Easier for less technical team members to manage

Because WordPress is more intuitive, content authors are less likely to contact their web team for changes on a page. This will lower the burden on a web team, though it's possible that it will also require some immediate headaches as parts of the site are broken by inexperienced users.

Theme selection and plug ins save time and money

WordPress has an extensive theme library to build your site with. For the most part, themes cost money, but you will likely be able to find a theme that works for you without hiring someone for a custom design.

Plugins are pieces of code that add functionality to a WordPress website (similar to Drupal contrib modules). They usually cost money, too, but can add a lot of functionality for a relatively small cost. They also might present a security risk because they can be proprietary and not vetted by the WP community.

Less secure

Both Drupal and WordPress are free to install and stand up. But, an open source CMS can also present security risks. Users within these open-source communities are constantly writing and distributing custom code to increase functionality. In WordPress, these pieces of custom code are called plugins, in Drupal they're referred to as modules.

Compared to WordPress plugins, Drupal Modules are generally more secure. They're vetted by the community and updated often. There are many more WordPress plugins and most of them do not get the scrutiny and attention that the fewer Drupal modules seem to get. They're not as closely inspected by the community, which can identify and remediate security issues. And, because WordPress is significantly more popular than any other CMS, including Drupal, nefarious actors are more likely to hack into WordPress sites and inject malicious code into WordPress plugins.

Upsides and Downsides of Wordpress, Explained, cont.

A Less Complex Set of User Permissions

Let's say you're taking a flight. You go through multiple screenings to get on this flight; you check in when you first arrive at the airport, you go through a TSA checkpoint, and your ticket is checked again before you board the plane. There's no way to get to the gate without confirming your identity multiple times.

That's like Drupal's level of security. The CMS has granular control and a matrix of user permissions. You have the option of zeroing in and assigning users a specific role in just one tiny section of the site.

Maybe you want to make someone on your HR team an editor in the hiring section of your website and nowhere else — that's possible in Drupal.

Now, back to the airport analogy: if you work for the company that provides food for airplanes, you don't have to go through security checkpoints every time you access a plane. You likely go through some security when you start work, but after that, you have access to the tarmac and planes on it.

This is more like WordPress. If you have editor permissions, you are an editor across an entire WordPress site. You can't silo users into specific sections.

If an editor or admin account is compromised, it can make changes site wide.

BOTTOM LINE: WordPress is a great option if you don't use the complexity of Drupal and want a less technical user experience.

Backdrop CMS

Backdrop CMS is another Drupal alternative, though it's nearly identical to Drupal 7. You may be asking yourself how this can be. Well, about 6 years ago, a group of Drupal developers were seeing the direction Drupal was going in with the Symfony framework and how expensive that would be for smaller sites.

So, they forked the Drupal 7 code and called it Backdrop CMS. Backdrop CMS is essentially Drupal 7 code that will be supported past 2023.

“ *I just saw this as being inevitable, that we were going to have to rewrite every Drupal website in existence because of this drastic amount of change that was occurring. And I didn't think it was going to be possible for the Drupal community to accept. It was going to be an absolutely enormous cost for every Drupal website out there.*

- Nate Lampton
Backdrop CMS co-founder



On the reasons behind forking the Drupal 7 code:

“ *The price tag [on moving to Drupal 8] got to be where I did not feel good about going back to clients and saying this is how much it's going to cost to upgrade.*

- Jen Lampton
Backdrop CMS co-founder



Seems like magic, perhaps, that you could just stay in Drupal 7, right? It's not that simple. There are a bunch of upsides but one potential big problem if you move to Backdrop

Upsides and Downsides of Backdrop CMS, Explained

Forward compatibility

Backdrop CMS has been out for years and is still on version 1.19. Because the CMS came out of a frustration with Drupal style version upgrades, Backdrop has pledged to ensure backward compatibility with all versions of the CMS. Upgrades are small and manageable.

Open source community support

Like Drupal, Backdrop CMS is open source and community supported. Even though Backdrop's community is significantly smaller than Drupal's, the founders of Backdrop claim that there is enough support and contributors to keep your site up and running.

Non-technical approach

Backdrop is for average people. It has a graphical user interface for everything, you never need to use the command line if you don't want to, you don't need to get into the code if you don't need to, you don't even need to visit BackdropCMS.org. Everything you can do can be done from inside the application itself.

You can stay in Drupal 7 until you've planned your migration

Backdrop can also be used as a backstop. If you're in Drupal 7, looking at the end of life date and estimating you don't have the time or money to go to D9, Backdrop could be a stopover point. Your website will remain supported until you obtain the funds or resources necessary to migrate.

Upsides and Downsides of Backdrop CMS, Explained, cont.

Less flexible than Drupal

The big downside of Backdrop is that it isn't as complex as Drupal. It's a system specifically for making websites, so if you have a web system Backdrop is not a good fit for you. If you need a decoupled framework that includes components from lots of different systems, Drupal is going to be a much better fit.

BOTTOM LINE: Backdrop CMS is a great option if you like the feel of Drupal 7 and you aren't planning on implementing new features, like a site with decoupled architecture that uses APIs to serve content to multiple channels.

Custom Web Framework

Content management systems are an off the shelf solution that works great for sites that push out content. But, maybe you aren't publishing content and are instead just using Drupal's core for a system that does something else. You can do this with Drupal, it is a web framework. And Drupal has nice features like different permissions that could be of use.

However, by using Drupal, you are forced to play by Drupal's rules and use Drupal's database structure architecture. If you don't want this, you should consider dropping a CMS altogether and going with a custom web framework like Symfony or Django.

Remove unnecessary features and play by your own rules

In Drupal, you're forced to use the content management system's database structure architecture. There's nodes and forms and a way that those are pulled and presented to the end user. If you're not presenting content, there's no need for this added complexity. It will likely make things more difficult because you are not using the tool the way it was intended to be used.

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If you have a D7 website and want to move to a framework you'll have a hard time doing what you need and probably will be returning to Drupal or another CMS, you'd be reinventing the wheel. If you, on the other hand, have an application that doesn't heavily rely on the CMS features of Drupal, you may need to move to a framework.

- Lucas Torres
Agileana Senior Web Developer



Custom Web Framework, cont.

The performance of your system can improve drastically

If you build dedicated architecture for what you do, then you don't have underused or unused resources and components. Also updating/upgrading the system to a newer version of, say, Symfony is easier than a move between versions of a CMS.

It's not a CMS!

If you need a CMS, then a custom framework is NOT a great option. You'll likely end up coming back to Drupal (or another CMS). If you still need to publish content, then why build a whole new custom CMS for yourself? It doesn't make much sense when there are many great solutions already in existence. And Drupal 9 has a lot of flexibility to, say, run your CMS decoupled so you can publish your content on many platforms.

BOTTOM LINE: You can build anything in Drupal ... but should you? Moving out of D7 is a huge effort and there's no use getting the features of Drupal if you aren't going to use them.

Takeaways

There are a few of great options out there if you don't want to move your Drupal 7 site to Drupal 9. The main thing to think about is what are your needs, what are the needs of your end users, and where do you expect your site to go?

Once you are in Drupal 9, the upgrade path should be much easier. But the move is time consuming and expensive, so it's worth it to take the time to think about where you want to go before starting a big migration effort.

Need help?

Let's talk.

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