White House opens Web site programming to public

October 25 2009, By PHILIP ELLIOTT , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- A programming overhaul of the White House's Web site has set the tech world abuzz. For low-techies, it's a snooze - you won't notice a thing.

The online-savvy administration on Saturday switched to open-source code for http://www.whitehouse.gov - meaning the programming language is written in public view, available for public use and able for people to edit.

"We now have a technology platform to get more and more voices on the site," White House new media director Macon Phillips told The Associated Press hours before the new site went live on Saturday. "This is state-of-the-art technology and the government is a participant in it."

White House officials described the change as similar to rebuilding the foundation of a building without changing the street-level appearance of the facade. It was expected to make the White House site more secure - and the same could be true for other administration sites in the future.

"Security is fundamentally built into the development process because the community is made up of people from all across the world, and they look at the source code from the very start of the process until it's deployed and after," said Terri Molini of Open Source for America, an interest group that has pushed for more such programs.

Having the public write code may seem like a security risk, but it's just

the opposite, experts inside and outside the government argued. Because programmers collaborate to find errors or opportunities to exploit Web code, the final product is therefore more secure.

For instance, instead of a dozen administration programmers trying to find errors, thousands of programmers online constantly are refining the programs and finding potential pitfalls.

It will be a much faster way to change the programming behind the Web site. When the model was owned solely by the government, federal contractors would have to work through the reams of code to troubleshoot it or upgrade it. Now, it can be done in the matter of days and free to taxpayers.

Obama's team, which harnessed the Web to win an electoral landslide in 2008 and raise millions, has been working toward the shift since it took office Jan. 20 with a White House site based on technology purchased at the end of President George W. Bush's administration.

It didn't let the tech-savvy Obama team build the new online platform it wanted. For instance, 60,000 watched Obama speech to a joint session of Congress on health care. One-third of those stayed online to talk with administration officials about the speech. But there are limits; the programming used to power that was built for Facebook, the popular social networking Web site.

"We want to improve the tools used by thousands of people who come to WhiteHouse.gov to engage with White House officials, and each other, in meaningful ways," Phillips said.

It's also a nod to Obama's pledge to make government more open and transparent. Aides joked that it doesn't get more transparent than showing the world a code that their Web site is based on.

Under the open-source model, thousands of people pick it apart simultaneously and increase security. It comes more cheaply than computer coding designed for a single client, such as the Executive Office of the President. It gives programmers around the world a chance to offer upgrades, additions or tweaks to existing programs that the White House could - or could not - include in daily updates.

Yet the system - known as Drupal - alone won't make it more secure on its own, cautioned Ari Schwartz of the Center for Democracy and Technology.

"The platform that they're moving to is just something to hang other things on," he said. "They need to keep up-to-date with the latest security patches."

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