

Open Minds ... from Creative Commons

Episode 7: Matt Mullenweg of Automattic

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[Music: “Day Bird” by Broke for Free]

Ony Anukem: Welcome to *Open Minds ... from Creative Commons*. I’m Ony Anukem, CC’s Campaigns Manager. We’re celebrating Creative Commons’ 20th anniversary this year, and one of the ways we’re doing that is with this podcast, a series of conversations with people working on issues we’re involved with and subjects we’re excited about. Speaking of subjects we’re excited about, the 2021 CC Global Summit is just a few short weeks away, taking place virtually from September the 20th to the 24th. This year’s summit will be one of our biggest and boldest events yet. Join us from wherever you are for a week of discussion, collaboration, and creativity from all over the world. You can find the registration link in the episode description. Now, let’s get back to the show. On this episode, Anna, CC’s Director of Products, speaks with Matt Mullenweg. Matt is the co-founder of open source blogging platform WordPress, the most popular publishing platform on the web, and the founder and CEO of Automattic, the company behind WordPress.com, WooCommerce and Jetpack. Matt is a long-time supporter of Creative Commons and the open movement. In fact, earlier this year, we announced that CC Search, the search engine we built for openly-licensed content, found a new home and is now part of WordPress.org. Enough from me. I hope you enjoy this conversation with Matt Mullenweg.

Anna Tumadóttir: We wanted to start by giving our community a bit of an opportunity to get to know you better and explore your background in open source. Can you tell us a bit about how you were first introduced to open source and the free culture movement?

Matt Mullenweg: You know, when I was learning computers and the internet, it was around the time of kind of lots of web scripts, like forums, like phpBB, so I actually probably started with proprietary software. Like there was one called... Gosh, what was it called? vBulletin. But I kind of quickly migrated, because I had no money, to the open source alternatives, and then began to get involved in those communities, whether it was PHP-Nuke, which was kind of like a Slashdot clone in PHP, or phpBB, which was kind of like a vBulletin clone or a

forums clone, and that was kind of my first taste of it. When I was a kid as well, [unclear 02:48] not having money is, I would always like pirate things or crack video games or something like that, but that never really sat well with me, so as I grew up, I think, began to search for either paying for things or finding things that were meant to be free. So I sort of grew out of that pretty early ages as well.

Anna Tumadóttir: Interesting. Yeah, that's a good point about the desire to do things right, and open source allows for that. So did you experience much of an intersection between the free culture movement and those sort of early days of getting into open source, or was it primarily just on the sort of software, web side?

Matt Mullenweg: Well, you would probably know this. What year did Creative Commons start?

Anna Tumadóttir: 2001 is when we were incorporated, but the licenses were first released end of 2002.

Matt Mullenweg: I feel like a lot of the folks I was following at the time, like, gosh, Aaron Swartz, Lawrence Lessig, probably Joi Ito, were talking about Creative Commons, and it was, definitely the blogger community around then, was very, very, very prominent, so it was on my mind. I feel like I had a sticker that said "Free the mouse" on my laptop at one point. So because I was kind of a Slashdot open source zealot, I would, yeah, follow that sort of thing, but I probably might... You know, I... Yeah, I guess actually that "free the mouse" campaign might have been which Lawrence Lessig worked on, maybe Cory Doctorow as well, was maybe my first sort of getting to know how like copyright worked and the extensions and public domain and other things, and I always found it fascinating that for content, unlike software, there wasn't like a great way to put things out there.

Anna Tumadóttir: Right. Right, right. Now, that's exactly... That sounds like the early crew, and that's what they set out to solve, for sure. So continuing on the open source line, what is it today that continues to inspire you to support and contribute to these sorts of projects?

Matt Mullenweg: Oh. Well, it's just the world I want to live in, you know. I think it's great that there's proprietary versions of everything, and I definitely support people's rights to do that and sell that and do whatever they want, but in terms of what I personally work on and

personally contribute to, I want to contribute to things that increase the commons, that increase the collective wealth of all humanity, and the ability and access. And so pretty much everything I do or contribute to has some element of open source to it, and I think it's so exciting to see when open source gets applied to areas other than software, whether that's, you know, kind of human knowledge with Wikipedia or finance with Bitcoin and Ethereum, and so many things there. And so, like it's pretty exciting to see that when like people start working together in an open, transparent, collaborative manner, what we can do, and yeah. That's what I plan to do the rest of my life.

Anna Tumadóttir: Well, we will hold you to that. [laughs] Bold words. Outside of your WordPress contributions, obviously, are there like specific projects that you contribute to or follow really closely that you see contributing to the broader commons on the software front?

Matt Mullenweg: Well, I mean, one that we were able to work with y'all on is this idea of the Creative Commons Search, the open search, which I believe we've branded it as "now lives on WordPress.org," and we're hoping to build it up quite a bit. I also really want to make it easy for people within WordPress to license their images in a way they can be accessible to others. It was funny, because, you know, we... WordPress has always included design and themes, and we wanted... It was almost impossible to find like images that were, we could, you know, we could say were GPL. GPL's not really designed to apply to images anyway, but there just wasn't anyone out there who was saying that, and so I ended up just taking... I have about 30,000 photographs on my site that I've taken myself and just saying, "Hey, you know, these are all... Consider these all completely open," and, you know, the theme team can use any of them they want. And so it was just kind of my photography in a lot of the early themes for WordPress, and now it's exciting to know that there's going to be open-source-compatible images across any number of, [accessible 07:20] to any number of people building things for the web, whether that's on WordPress or something else.

Anna Tumadóttir: That's really interesting that that was one of the motivations behind bringing open content into WordPress. You essentially spearheaded that with your own collection. Are there media types that you see a lot of use for in the blogger community that you want to support in Openverse?

Matt Mullenweg: It's not the blogger community, but so many of my friends who work in film or music really appreciate some of the open licensed assets that are available there, and so, you know, I, as a creator, someone who does film and music and photography and code and writes a lot, like I really get jazzed and rewarded by seeing people experience that work and use it, and I love when it gets remixed or modified, and... But that's me. You know, that's

not right for everyone, and I'm not even saying it's better than the alternatives, but it's just what I want to, you know, support there being more of in the world.

Anna Tumadóttir: Yeah. Definitely. I hear you there, and it'll be interesting to see how the reuse and remixing potentially accelerates with the increased discoverability through Openverse and what you find people sort of building on each other's creations.

Matt Mullenweg: Things like TikTok are kind of amazing there, even though it's not open licensed per se, but just giving users the ability to really riff on each other has created just such incredible, you know, from the sea shanty to many, many other... The way they do like remixes and duos and everything else. I think it should provide a lot of, maybe a proprietary start to something that I hope really becomes a big part of open culture in the future.

Anna Tumadóttir: Yeah. Absolutely. It'll be really exciting to see how it develops. TikTok is the wild world unto itself. [laughs] But so, like WordPress already has a really good reputation for being this, you know, collaboration hub for, you know, open source contributors, you know, — engineers specifically — but can you tell us about community engagement for folks who aren't engineers?

Matt Mullenweg: You know, it actually is a challenge still for us where on the engineering side of things, there's just so many decades of history of people, you know, maybe in nights and weekends or maybe as their main job, like contributing code to the commons, or their work and effort to the commons. And in design, it's just not as common, and I think that's true for some other areas as well. We have no issues with, no issues with translation. That appears to be a very collaborative field. No issues with volunteer support or documentation or... But when it gets into like more the realm of marketing or design, I don't know if those communities have had as much of a history or tenure of contributing to some sort of community or commons project.

Anna Tumadóttir: So one might say that WordPress is a sort of like a great place for individual creators to publish their works. I'm thinking through mechanisms that exist that let those folks be brought together for collaboration through the current ecosystem, so less about like contributing to WordPress, but working potentially with each other on what they're putting out creatively. Is there anything like that that exists at the moment?

Matt Mullenweg: I don't know.

Anna Tumadóttir: Or do you think there's an opportunity? It's like you're talking about like, you know, TikTok folks come together and build on the things that others do, and, you know, I'm thinking about like a blogger community. Do you see folks sort of moving between their sort of own, shall we say, like sites and spaces on WordPress to work together, talk together, collaborate, or is that something that is maybe less tracked?

Matt Mullenweg: I do think a lot about... Less about collaboration and more about community, and blog comments in particular and that kind of idea that every blog post was actually the start of a conversation, not the end of one, I think for myself and many others was one of the most compelling things about blogging. I mean, just this idea that the collective intelligence of the internet would come to your front door on whatever topic you would write about was just so cool, and then the people you meet through those comments and those shared interests. It was really special, and especially I think, for me, growing up in Houston, Texas, where the technology community, the folks who were passionate about open source and Linux and Wi-Fi and other things I was into at the time, was relatively small geographically even though it's a very populous city, but online, I could connect with worldwide enthusiasts. So I've been thinking a lot about how to reinvigorate that comment space, because I think a lot of the conversation has moved to social networks, which kind of dilute it, right, because they ultimately have a model where they want to get your attention and change your mind on something, usually something commercial, like "vote for this candidate" or "buy this thing." And so, just by nature of their business model, they're somewhat conflicted on, you know, surfacing the random replier to you, you know. And I even noticed on Twitter recently, like I'm not seeing a lot of the replies to my tweets, and I'm not even sure why. I used to...

Anna Tumadóttir: Oh.

Matt Mullenweg: ... pride myself on replying to almost everything. And the web interface, at least, is not coming through. I spun back up Tweetbot, which is their desktop client, and that appears to be a cleaner feed. So that's something that's been on my mind. Something else I've been dealing with — and if anyone's listening to this and wants to contribute to it, I'm happy to work with you — is this concept of combining like a blog and a wiki so that... You know, so many websites powered by WordPress are, outside the comments, like really one-way, so like if you saw a typo on my post, you can't just click the edit button and fix it, and I feel like there's something kind of in between like a wiki or Wikipedia where [edit 13:42] just goes live immediately and like something where you have no access. That could be pretty

interesting. You know, WordPress, by default, the first time you make a comment, it goes into a moderation queue, and I can see that and approve it or deny it. And so I've been thinking about, what would it look like that if you suggested an edit to one of a page or post on my site, that would go into a moderation queue, and I could approve it, deny it, you know, or send you an email, or whatever it might be that... It could be the start of a conversation — not unlike submitting a pull request to code. So if we're able to bring that kind of more, you know, edit button to everything, kind of like everything on like a GitLab or GitHub has, I think that could be pretty interesting. You know, I'm not sure... Nice for creating more like community-oriented knowledge sites that might be specialized or niches or... So I don't know. What do you think of that idea? Would you use it?

Anna Tumadóttir: Yes, I would, actually. I appreciate you already having an articulated notion of how you would encourage more of this sort of community collaboration across it. So slightly switching gears on this, but one of the things that we find that often surfaces in the open movement is this sort of perceived tension between supporting free and open knowledge or culture or open source software — you know, you name it — and then conversely building sustainable businesses. So, like from your standpoint, you're obviously like a, you know, co-founder and supporter of WordPress, but you also balance this with running Automattic. How do you balance that, and do you run into any tensions there?

Matt Mullenweg: You know, I think the experience of WordPress businesses is hopefully a counterexample there. I don't know if I can make any promises to people. Like, yes, it's true, all our code is open, and sometimes people rip it off and resell our stuff and compete with us and all those sorts of things, but I have found throughout my career, the more I've given away, the more I've gotten back. And even though at certain points I was very frustrated that someone was, you know, not pirating our software, but like taking our code and competing with us, and that still happens to this day — so what I found is, it sort of, one, forces you to be good. Right? You aren't going to have a market just by dint of being the only person with some feature or line of code. Anyone can have the line of code, so you have to figure out like what really distinguishes you, like what makes you different, and what value are you providing to people? And so that, I think, can be humbling, frustrating, but then, you know, in the long term, incredibly rewarding. And the WordPress ecosystem is, you know, has a strong community norm and license of being like 100% GPL (which is, you know, a very, very permissive license; that's a GNU Public License), and still is driving — you know, not counting e-commerce — still 10, 12 billion dollars of revenue per year across all the players there, would be my estimate. And so yeah, you can do quite, quite well, like as large as some of the largest, you know, unicorn, decacorn, centicorn companies, while taking a completely open approach.

Anna Tumadóttir: It's an inspiring example. So folks who are interested in supporting openness, but they also want to balance this with sort of financially sustainable ventures, you know, any lessons learned the hard way or the good way or other good models that you're aware of or have looked at in finding this balance?

Matt Mullenweg: I definitely, you know, underappreciated the importance of marketing and sales early on in our journey, and I think this was because since I had a background in like web design and, you know, we were very close to customers, like we got some things right and lucky in terms of our positioning and branding for WordPress and all that sort of stuff, but yeah, now, I really, really appreciate the sort of wisdom and experience that folks with more of a dedicated marketing or design background — well, marketing in particular or, sorry, marketing and sales background, can bring to the evolution of our products. And then for sales, I think it's like, it's kind of learning from your customers through a different lens. And, again, resisted having any salespeople for the longest time at Automattic, and now it's a source of a ton of learnings for us about like what real customers in the field are struggling with, what they want, what they're getting to, and so that... Yeah, you know, I think I had this kind of like misshapen idea that engineers can do everything and should do everything and follow that for many, many years. And later, I've really appreciated the beauty of a specialized team with great experience coming together to work on a common goal.

Anna Tumadóttir: I like that, thinking about sales almost like your front-line user researchers and getting in the minds of the customers that way. Of course, you got to hope that the salespeople and the engineers get along pretty well to be able to filter that into what is appropriate to build next and how to support it, but no, that's a good way of looking at it. We talked about the fact that you're bringing Openverse — or formerly known as CC Search — into WordPress. Your core motivations for doing this, you said, are sort of enhance what people can work with on the design front and, you know, foster reuse. Were there other things you were thinking about when bringing this in, or had you considered just building this on your own?

Matt Mullenweg: Yeah, we had started work already on an open directory, so basically like a place for people to upload things, and yeah, so that was definitely on our mind. And then the opportunity to not just have what people contribute directly on WordPress.org, but actually indexed a World Wide Web of this great content people are putting out there is really powerful. And then also we can tie that into WordPress itself. So I love the idea of systems being as distributed as possible. You know, it's a big mantra for me is distributed companies, distributed work, distributed collaboration, and I think the fact that people can distributedly publish on their own websites content which they want to be part of the commons is so

powerful, and I want to support that. A search engine is, as Google has shown, is a really fantastic way to do that.

Anna Tumadóttir: Yes, this is true, and it'll be interesting too to see, you know, assets from cultural heritage institutions side by side with, you know, assets from professional photographers, amateur photographers, pictures of people's puppies. There's nothing wrong with that. Like, the world needs more pictures of puppies; I will tell you that.

Matt Mullenweg: I'd say it's one of the big challenges is, you know, for particularly our directory, like how do we surface what people are looking for when they search for images inside of WordPress (which is a little closer to stock photography, to be honest)? And then we're also — and you probably have some expertise on this, so I'd love to continue the conversation, but how do we navigate things like model releases in a Creative Commons way, or I understand certain buildings or art on buildings, like the twinkles on the Eiffel Tower, are copyrighted in a way that, so... But I don't know how you navigate that, but I'm sure you have some expertise and some thoughts there.

Anna Tumadóttir: We definitely have legal experts on staff who I'm sure have thoughts and can guide you on those matters, but yes, they are extremely tricky. There's also trickiness in frankly just folks taking photos of something that's under copyright and making their photo of them openly licensed, whereas like the actual thing they took a photo of, you know, not just on buildings [or something 21:52], but like, "Oh, look at this great cartoon I just read." You know, "Look at this poem that's in this book. I'm going to take a photo of it and pass it around the internet," and not necessarily think through what it means to have openly shared or openly licensed this thing. I'm curious if you've thought about, because you obviously have, you know, a really solid community of contributors to your underlying software, if you've thought about harnessing, you know, users to help with that discoverability component, like to help generate new metadata, you know, film descriptions, add tags, you know, add geoinformation, things like that, to either the content that they are contributing to this, you know, new Openverse of content, or when they go to use something to sort of be built in this option of the sort of like, you know, like just this virtuous cycle where you can improve the thing that you found by making it more discoverable for the next person — is that something you've thought about for the future of that project?

Matt Mullenweg: Yeah, and if this were 10 years ago, we'd probably approach it with like all of the tagging or metadata or things being manually created and maybe manually translated as well but, you know, some of these image, vision APIs and cloud APIs with machine learning are kind of incredible, so now we're thinking more of like, well, the first pass for

tagging or identification or other things, whatever like a Google Vision or Azure Vision API can give us back, let's put that in there and use that to inform search, and then we can use search interactions, so what people search for, and then what they choose to drive ranking, and then, you know, sort of wiki-like make it all editable. So if, you know, so if it thinks something's a hot dog that's not a hot dog, someone could go in there and tag that, but I think for things like translation, we'll be able to do that completely driven by the algorithms and APIs, because things like tags, you know, one or two words I think are, would be things that like the machine translation is really well suited for. You know, it's not like poetry or complex [syntax 24:05] or something. It's more almost like a dictionary translation, and if that could allow us to make these resources discoverable in more languages, that's really, really exciting. And I haven't decided what's the right way to do that. Maybe like it's, you know, English is our canonical backend language, and when someone searches, we do a translation of that on the fly, the match to English, or if we end up kind of storing metadata for every language that we operate in. Probably the first one is a little bit more efficient, but I don't love having English as a necessary canonical language. [chuckles]

Anna Tumadóttir: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. I hear you there. It's also, we did run into some interesting things around language searches and translation on our side, words that like translate directly into another language but might end up meaning a different thing, so like contextualized. Yeah, for instance, the word for "elephant" in Icelandic can mean either an elephant or a type of bird, and so if you just translate it straight to that without any other context, you may get a completely irrelevant search result. Yeah. It was one of the unlikely scenarios that we ran into, but, you know, if you've got me testing our image results, that's what you're going to find.

Matt Mullenweg: I forget the name, but there's a beautiful website which is like a dictionary or a list of words that only exist in a single language and that there's not something for in other languages. Its name's escaping me and the examples are escaping me, but the good news is they're mostly not physical objects or things that would be in a photo, as an example. They're mostly like concept.

Anna Tumadóttir: Yeah, they're cultural concepts, yeah.

Matt Mullenweg: There was a beautiful Brazilian Portuguese one which was like "the longing for something that isn't gone yet but you know will be." And I was like, "Ah, such a beautiful idea."

Anna Tumadóttir: That is a good idea. If only we had a word for it in our language. And I agree, it definitely makes sense to go the route of sort of large-scale processing to get enhanced data on the images. We did a run-through with AWS Rekognition and that was fantastic. It does what human hours cannot really compete with in a short amount of time, but it definitely is warranted. I think there's two things that's warranted. One is sort of human QA just for good measure because you want to make sure that, you know, this is representing the images the way that you are comfortable with, but then the second that occurs to me when you talk about like a wiki-like editing experience is, it's not dissimilar to the idea you're noodling on for the wiki meets blogs, so a way to interact, for instance, with the creator of the image on helping them describe their image better, but you could put the onus of sort of approving those descriptors on the creator to an extent. And “onus” probably isn't even the right word. You could give them that power because they may have something specific and contextual that they think is important to represent in that description that may be, you know, lost on somebody doing it in like a rapid or automated fashion, so...

Matt Mullenweg: I like that.

Anna Tumadóttir: Yeah. I think it could be your wiki meets blogs idea could be a pretty fun one. Also for folks who don't create but like to contribute. You know, I think that's probably why you're looking at the power of something like Wikipedia, like you've got your heavy, heavy contributors, but then, you know, there's also folks who are like, “I'm going to add a link here. I'm going to just translate this. You know, I'm not going to do it from scratch, but I'm still going to help build this thing,” and there's something really powerful in that collaboration. Switching gears just a little bit as we prepare to wind ourselves down, so you've been around for a while. You've seen things change on the web. What is it that you're like most nostalgic for from the early days? Did you ever have a GeoCities site?

Matt Mullenweg: I did, I did. I actually... I think I still pay Yahoo to redirect my old GeoCities site to a domain because I like the idea of things not breaking. Right?

Anna Tumadóttir: Yes.

Matt Mullenweg: I should check if that still works, actually, but it is on the web somewhere. Yeah, I think the thing I'm nostalgic for... We talked about comments already, so I won't reiterate that, but do you remember the idea of a blogroll?

Anna Tumadóttir: Yes, I do. Yeah, like a bunch of folks in a similar category, and then you would, you know, join a blogroll, and you could... It's like being part of a group.

Matt Mullenweg: Yeah.

Anna Tumadóttir: [unclear 28:57] Yeah.

Matt Mullenweg: Yeah. I'll describe it. It was very simple, just kind of a... If you had a website, you would... It's kind of like a follower list like you put in your sidebar or a subpage a list of the bloggers that you followed, and WordPress actually built something in (it's kind of a very random feature, I think might even still be in the code somewhere) that it would reorder that list based on who had most recently updated, so if you came to a site or a post you really liked, you kind of look in the sidebar and see like, "Oh, here are people they like that recently updated," and kind of use that to surf and explore in like a web-like fashion, like web like the metaphor, not even like the World Wide Web. So that discovery process, I think, is pretty neat, and I... You know, some of this happens through retweets, and reblogs, and Twitter and such stuff like that, but I kind of want to bring back the idea of that, because just things you follow isn't quite the same. I, in fact, follow people I disagree with or that I wouldn't recommend people go to because I like to have that in my personal stream. I like to have lots of different viewpoints, but that kind of like "Here's the folks I really recommend you check out" I think would be neat. And I also think it's just something that I like to do. Like there's a few blogs, a few newsletters, I think are just such high quality. I want to tell everyone about them.

Anna Tumadóttir: Yeah. Absolutely. I think the feature I'm thinking of was when you would join... It's called like a blog circle?

Matt Mullenweg: And that was like a link circle. Yeah, what was that called? A link something.

Anna Tumadóttir: But yeah, but you would have like, you know, we're like these, you know, 10 humans who have this shared interest, and we've all agreed we have this shared interest so we're all going to link to each other. And you would see them sort of along the bottom of the

blog so you would know that you were sort of popping between like similar content themes, shall we say, but yeah.

Matt Mullenweg: So that reminds me of one more thing is, you know, combined with blogroll or — and there's still this feature in WordPress through something called pingbacks — but letting you know when someone has mentioned you or linked you on the web is not really there as much anymore. You know, even referrers.

Anna Tumadóttir: No.

Matt Mullenweg: The idea that when a page clicks, you see where the person came from, for privacy reasons, is much less of a data source than it used to be, which, of course, has pluses, but I think has minuses that you don't know if, you know, someone blogged about you or put you in their blogroll or you're on something else, you know. And that was, I think, a very, very exciting way to kind of like start a conversation or start an online, you know, paying attention to each other was that idea of linking to someone.

Anna Tumadóttir: This is true. This is true. That is taking out that sort of element of sort of like spontaneous and sort of semi-anonymous community, you know. like you could build these relationships with folks that you would never even know their real name. That's true.

Matt Mullenweg: I call it pseudonymous, right? Because...

Anna Tumadóttir: Pseudonymous.

Matt Mullenweg: ... there was definitely [consistent identity 32:02].

Anna Tumadóttir: That's true. Yes. That is much better than "anonymous." "Pseudonymous." So with, I mean, the various things that have changed and like some of these things going away, you know, what is it you feel that is important that has endured or remained constant? What is still true?

Matt Mullenweg: The technical underpinnings of the web itself. Right? [chuckles] No matter how hard companies try...

Anna Tumadóttir: [laughs] Hey, now.

Matt Mullenweg: Just plain old HTML, and CSS, and DNS, and domains and websites and like still is, I think, the creative heart of the internet. And although mobile apps have taken some of that away, I think we're really starting to see now companies and people grapple with the sort of Faustian bargain they made to be part of these app stores and choose that to be their only method of distribution versus the freedom that you have if your customers come to you through the web. I think also something that is sometimes missed is like how much time people spend inside Facebook or Twitter actually in a web view, so they're reading a link to a webpage or clicking something through. And, of course, pretty much all commerce is happening still through web views or the web. So that's pretty cool, and I like that it's still there, and I like that it's evolving. You know, we have this new editor called Gutenberg is our humble title for this new editor, and basically it's taking the idea and what I would call the beauty of HTML and trying to make it more accessible to a layperson to someone who doesn't want to learn how to code, so without using any code, they can create really rich layouts, really cool effects or widgets or functionality on the website, whether it's, you know, a YouTube embed or Google Map or something like a really, really complex, you know, layout that has like images and pictures and... You know, one feature that's coming right now that's kind of enabled by modern CSS is, we call it duotone, so it allows you to take any image and essentially using CSS transforms turn it into like a really cool stylized two-color one, so like a black-and-white photo but where the black and white might be like red and green. So it creates like really, really cool effects. The design is so fresh. It's so cool-looking. I'm like, "Wow, this is so neat that with a few clicks, this is now going to be something in every WordPress user's hands," and I'm just excited to see what kind of... You know, we build like canvases and paintbrushes and paint, you know, and it's really our users that create the masterworks, the art, with it. And so whenever we find like a new color of paint that people can use, I'm just, I always get kind of giddy with excitement to see what they're going to do.

Anna Tumadóttir: Yeah, no, I bet, because I think people are often a lot more creative than one knows because a lot of the tools to show that creativity require a certain technical expertise that not everybody has the sort of fortune of having been exposed to along the way, and so this sort of removes that barrier for people to be able to put things together the way they want to see them. I actually saw this after Gutenberg with WordPress sites, sort of small

businesses, friends who were running them suddenly just had just these incredible web presences that, you know, I know they didn't pay a professional to put together, and they still looked amazing, and use like some of the features you were mentioning to really, yeah, drive awareness of what they were doing and made it more about what they were doing rather than how it looked, if that makes sense, because, yeah, it's so easy to be distracted by something that one would perceive to be poorly put together. So yeah, those are some powerful paint brushes with your humbly named editor.

Matt Mullenweg: [laughs] And we're still just scratching the surface. We're about five years into Gutenberg. I expect it to be the foundation of WordPress for another 10 or 20 years to come, and that is exciting to be working on that thing that both feels like it has... It's done a lot already, but feels like it's something that we could spend really, you know, the rest of our career focused on.

Anna Tumadóttir: So any other interesting new projects that you've heard about that you want to share, any that you think are like solving problems that you see on the web or just cool, neat technologies? They do not have to be in the WordPress ecosystem.

Matt Mullenweg: You know, one that I've been really enjoying with everyone on Zoom and on calls all day is called krisp.ai (K-R-I-S-P dot AI), and it's basically like a 50 or 60-dollar utility that basically turns any microphone into like a studio where it'll eliminate room echo, eliminate background noise, dogs barking...

Anna Tumadóttir: Oh, wow.

Matt Mullenweg: ... clapping. [unclear 37:35] And I guess this is going to be built into the next versions of macOS and iOS, but in the meantime I think it's actually, even for the next few months, it's worth getting if you find yourself on a lot of calls and in uncertain environments, you know, whether that's the lawnmower going by or whatever it is in your household. And I find that really high-fidelity audio gives you so much of the value of being in person, so like you and I being able to hear each other, have a real-time conversation, the people who are going to be listening to this on headphones, and it'll sound really good. You know, that's incredibly intimate and an incredible connection.

Anna Tumadóttir: That's true. I like how you talk about a potential uncertain situation that this could help alleviate. Yeah, working from home has been nothing but a series of uncertain situations, I think, for...

Matt Mullenweg: Yeah, people like working from home, but they forget that their home also comes to their work, whether that's family, kids, dogs, lawnmowers, workers, whatever it might be in the house. It can sometimes be... Well, I actually really like it because I feel like people are literally bringing their whole selves to work.

Anna Tumadóttir: This is true. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, and you've obviously been running the organization distributed for forever? Automattic has been distributed from the word "go," or did you try folks together in the beginning?

Matt Mullenweg: Yeah. Really, we've always had people... I think the first hire, actually, was in Cork, Ireland.

Anna Tumadóttir: Oh, right.

Matt Mullenweg: So even the very first employee at the company was pretty far away. But to be honest, early days, we didn't do much audio or video, so we didn't really notice the pluses or minuses of those mediums. It's only the past few years I feel like since the advent of Zoom that that we've done a lot more of that, but, you know, we were primarily text-based interaction and communication, first probably like AOL, then IRC and then, you know, more recently Slack and moving to something like Matrix, which is, by the way, a very cool program. It's like an open source Slack. I encourage people to check it out. So, you know, in that evolution, the text has kind of been the same as it was 20 years ago, but the audio and video capabilities (particularly video) has evolved so tremendously.

Anna Tumadóttir: Yeah. Yeah, there's a lot that can happen on a video screen that you could never possibly capture through text. Those uncertain interruptions that I think the comic value of those is pretty impossible to put into words sometimes. Oh, that's really neat. And interesting that you mentioned Matrix. So are you switching to using that?

Matt Mullenweg: That is the plan, yeah. We don't have everything finalized yet, but, you know, we try wherever possible to patronize open source solutions, and when they get as good as the proprietary alternatives, we're like, "Well, okay. It's time to switch over."

Anna Tumadóttir: Definitely. That's exciting. I'll be excited to hear how that goes. But I do have one more very important question for you: best barbecue in Texas.

Matt Mullenweg: Ooh, that is a good question, and this actually ties a little bit back into things being more open. So it used to be that there were only a few good places for barbecue, and actually, where I grew up, Houston had almost no good barbecue.

Anna Tumadóttir: Really?

Matt Mullenweg: Now, what's changed is the top pitmasters, including this guy who runs Franklin's — his name, I think Aaron Franklin is his name — started sharing their secrets and talking about the process, essentially open-sourcing their methods for creating amazing barbecue. And so now, if you go to Texas, there's a ton of great barbecue, actually, and I would say the average quality of barbecue throughout the world, I've had amazing barbecue in Paris and Seoul, South Korea, and like Texas barbecue, but to give you some names: if you're in Austin, Franklin's is amazing, Terry Black's is really fantastic (I was just there last week); and then in Houston, probably my go-to would be obviously Killen's if it's a little bit outside of town is maybe the best, and inside of town, like going to Pit Room.

Anna Tumadóttir: All right. That's a solid roster you got right there. I realize that it's a really dicey question when you ask for the best, because, you know, people feel very strongly about their barbecue there, so you don't want to [unclear 42:08].

Matt Mullenweg: Even the worst barbecue is pretty darn good.

Anna Tumadóttir: Yeah. Yeah. This is true. Even gas station barbecue in Texas is pretty solid on a national scale. Great. Well, thank you so much for your time, and is there anything that you feel like we didn't cover that you were like, "This is something I really would have wanted to say"?

Matt Mullenweg: We covered a lot. I would just say that I'd encourage people to follow if you'd like some more of this, so I'm photomatt on Tumblr, Instagram, and Twitter. That's P-H-O-T-M-A-T-T, and, of course, please come to my blog and leave a comment. It's at ma.tt.

Anna Tumadóttir: That's a great domain. Well, thank you so much for your time, Matt. It's been a pleasure chatting.

[Music: “Day Bird” by Broke for Free]

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