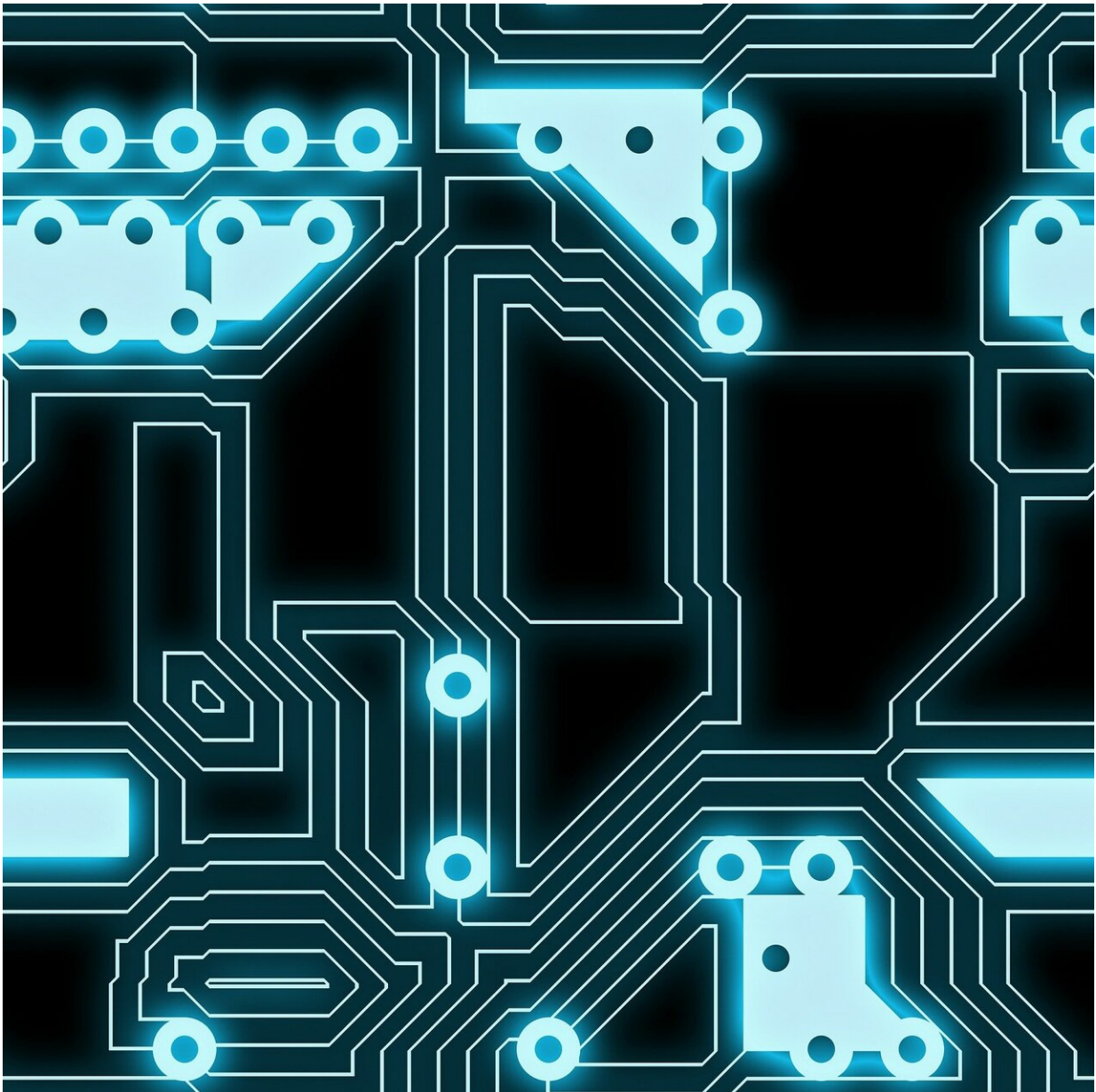


Red Hat to remove contentious terms like 'master' and 'slave' from its source code

June 30 2020, by Zachery Eanes, The News & Observer (Raleigh, N.c.)



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The technology company Red Hat said Tuesday that it would take measures to remove contentious terms like "master/slave" from its source code and other areas, in an effort to make its products more inclusive.

The world of coding and software, in which Red Hat is an influential institution, is rife with industry jargon and terms that most people have never heard. Some of them, which have developed over the course of decades, are now under the microscope as examples of how unconscious bias can creep into the workplace.

In recent weeks, popular coding and development terms like "master/slave" and "whitelist/blacklist" have become targets of criticism again, though there has been some pushback to replacing the terms.

"Master/slave" refers to how things like databases or devices have control over others in a system or code. "Whitelist" and "blacklist" are terms used to delineate what items or devices are allowed access into things, like what IP addresses can enter a website or what email addresses are accepted or denied.

The terms have been a topic of debate in the tech community for more than a decade. But in the wake of the death of George Floyd and a larger national conversation around race, companies and software developers have revisited the topic in earnest.

Earlier this month, GitHub, a prominent software development platform owned by Microsoft, said it would remove the term "master" from its coding platform, Vice News reported. Other tech institutions made the

move away from these terms years ago. The "master/slave" terminology was removed from the Python coding [language](#), one of the most popular languages in the world, in 2018, according to tech news site Gizmodo.

Chris Wright, Red Hat's chief technology officer, said in an interview that he hopes the change will be the start of a more inclusive development community. He said while the conversations have been happening for years, the industry delayed making changes because of the logistical problems involved. Now, though, there is an understanding that the change needs to happen now.

"It's not just the change in language, but it's the notion of how we think about inclusivity and where we can recognize what I would call systemic bias, where you're just unaware, and you create an unwelcoming environment that was so not the intention," Wright said.

"We talk a lot about being able to take good ideas from anywhere in open-source communities. But part of that is being open to people being in the community."

Red Hat said it is reviewing all of its code, documentation and content for "potentially divisive language," and will have conversations with its employees and the communities that use its platforms on how to replace those words.

In addition to changing coding language, Red Hat has been holding town halls with its employees to discuss how to improve the experience of Black Red Hatters, and it recently gave a donation to two equal-rights organizations. The two groups that received donations, the Southern Coalition for Social Justice and Color of Change, were selected by an internal Red Hat group led by Black employees. Red Hat didn't disclose the size of its donations.

In a blog post, Wright told Red Hat employees that he has seen "all sorts of arguments" about why change to the language is unnecessary.

"Some view these efforts as exercises in political correctness. Others argue that the intent behind the language was not malicious or that they do not find the use of these terms to be offensive or racially-charged because they are not being used to refer to people," Wright wrote.

But "if any person or groups of people feel unwelcome because of the language being used in a community, code or documentation, then the words should change," he added.

Many software development communities and companies use platforms or source code from Red Hat. One platform called Ansible, which is owned by Red Hat, has already begun to phase out the use of "master branch," instead using "main branch." And instead of using "whitelist" or "blacklist," it uses the terms "allowlist" and "denylist," Wright said.

Because Red Hat's source code and documentation that employs some of this controversial language stretches back years, it isn't a simple task to replace the language. Wright said it is a process that will take months—though it will be easier for new projects.

"There's language in source code ... that include terms that we would like to change," Wright said. "But changing those (terms) could have a real impact on the functioning software, so if we just change it and issued an update, you could potentially break things."

Since there are companies whose software is based on that [source code](#), Red Hat has to be careful about how it updates the language.

"It could be over a year of work to slowly make all of those changes in a way that doesn't create massive disruption," Wright said.

Wright said that he hopes making these changes will allow tech companies and developers to move onto bigger issues.

"I'd like to get past (language) to a different set of discussions around where we can use technology to really support the evolution of our society," he said, "rather than propagate systemic biases."

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