

Substack
Kirby (CMS)

On owning your content, complexity, platforms, elitism and a bunch of other related topics

A few days ago, while browsing Hacker News I stumbled upon a blog post titled, Have you “Moved to Substack”? by Raymond Hines, which I then sent to Jatan since the blog post touches on a topic he and I previously discussed. It turned out that Jatan had already written a blog post in response which you can read here.

Since this is a fun discussion, I'm gonna add my opinion into the mix just because why not.

My experience when it comes to blogging is not a complex one. I started out with a custom site I coded for myself that was just a collection of static pages. I then moved over to Kirby which is an amazing CMS I use professionally. That was it. I didn't bounce between dozens of different platforms, I didn't have to move my domain from place to place. I needed something, I knew how to code it, and I coded it.

This is obviously not a typical situation that people find themselves in when they want to start a blog. Most people don't even know how to buy a domain let alone code a site. Which is absolutely fine. That's precisely why there's a market for platforms like Substack or Wordpress.com or Squarespace. People need a way to get online easily and it's not reasonable to expect them to either learn how to code or to pay for a developer to code a site for them.

I personally don't use Substack but I am starting to get a bit worried by how prevalent it's becoming. I'm hearing more and more people saying "follow his Substack", which to me is kinda scary. Because centralisation of this kind is never good.

Substack is growing fast: they now have 1M+ paid subscriptions but apparently generate no revenue. Which is already worrying to me. Because it means that yes, they can keep running like this if they keep getting investments but at some point something has to change. What that means for your content on the platform, that's hard to tell.

What I can say is that so far they've been great to help people go online

and publish content even though, as it's often the case, the people at the top are the ones who are making money. According to some numbers the top 10 authors are making something like 25% of the total revenues. Which is not great for everyone else on the platform overall but I personally don't care.

What I do care about is the ability for people to go online and able to share their content with the rest of the world. Substack right now is good in that regard but so was Medium back when they started. I'm starting to believe that's the inevitable trajectory for most free services. You start with an idea that is awesome but financially unsustainable, and you slowly have to abandon that idea. Substack is free. Can it stay free forever? I doubt it, but I'd be more than happy to be proven wrong.

And what would happen if they decide that all free blogs/newsletters are now private? Or what if they decide that you can only send them to 100 subscribers? Those are things that can easily happen. When you're using a service like that you just have to take whatever comes next.

As Jatan pointed out in his post, Substack so far is doing a great job: they offer custom domains, ability to export your content, RSS integrations and a few other neat features. So they're definitely doing good things. But this is the tech world. We've seen plenty of companies doing good things one day and awful shit the next.

Does that mean you have to go full custom and code your own site from scratch? Absolutely not. I think this constant push to create custom complex systems to run sites is just a byproduct of us developers being vocal online and thinking that coding sites is the most important thing. Developers love to build complex systems because it's fun. But it's also unmanageable if you're not a developer. Normal people want to post their content online and forget about it. Which, again, is totally fine.

I do see Raymond's point though, and I do believe it's important to own your piece of internet real estate if you care about sharing content online. Because trying to move your first steps into this weird internet world also means you're doing your part in the fight against the tech giants. Because it's all fine and good if people move away from Twitter and Facebook and Instagram but if they all then land on Substack then we're back to square one.

So, what I think I'm trying to say here is that if you want to have a space online where you want to share your content and don't have any other way to do it, Substack is perfectly fine to use. The same is true for write.as or micro.blog. But also keep in mind that really owning and controlling your content means moving beyond that.

the process of creation and putting ideas forward