

Substack's promise to be different than a newsroom is getting messy

By most measures, *Forever Wars* should have been a Substack success story. The newsletter, which documents the war on terror, began last year after Substack cut a deal with a seasoned reporter to write on the platform, build an audience, and – if everything went well – launch a reader-supported venture that made the switch from newsroom to newsletter worth the gamble. Substack's usual promise applied: if a writer wants to leave, they can, and it will be easy to do. And, in late July, a day after the expiration of a year-long deal, that's what Spencer Ackerman did, moving *Forever Wars* to the newsletter platform Ghost as seamlessly as possible.

But the switch became far messier this week when Substack barreled through its standing promise to stay out of editorial decisions by firing *Forever Wars* editor Sam Thielman from other editing work he had been doing for various Substack writers. The offending action, per Substack, was that he edited Ackerman's newest post on Ghost that was critical of Substack and the deal they struck. In other words: Substack was reacting not so differently than a disgruntled newsroom boss.

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This kind of tension has been at the heart of debates over Substack's place in publishing and journalism for the past two years. Substack, which positions itself as a cure for many of the ills plaguing the media industry, has vowed to moderate writers as little as possible, offer monetary and other

benefits that eclipse what's offered in most newsrooms, and provide the kind of stability for writers that is becoming increasingly rare. With Thielman's firing, the image of safety and protection Substack offers writers is losing its sheen.

"It was a big hit immediately, and scary," says Thielman, who initially didn't publicly share news of the firing. "I was just kind of going to duck my head and apply for jobs and hope that they didn't bad mouth me [behind closed doors]."

Substack sells itself as a powerful tool and platform for work that people want to read. But to entice journalists and writers to use the platform and publish regularly, Substack started making deals with select writers that offered some of the protections of traditional newsrooms. The most straightforward was a guaranteed income, often much more than what they could make at media outlets. Other perks included a dedicated editor, healthcare benefits, and legal support. The program was labeled Substack Pro, and the company formally announced the deals in March of last year.

In the case of *Forever Wars*, Ackerman arranged an editing deal independent of Substack in which he would pay Thielman to edit the newsletter out of his lump sum Pro deal money. Thielman would go on to be paired with other writers through Substack, creating a solid gig for himself editing Substack writers that were a good professional match.

Writers worry about what else could be on the chopping block
Some benefits were extended to writers without a Pro deal. Substack provided editing, design, and audio support to writers who weren't part of the Pro cohort but that the company wanted on the platform, according to a person familiar with the matter. In addition to editorial support, the company announced last November that it was creating a new program open to more writers in which they could apply for a one-time \$500 health stipend.

“Health care—or lack thereof—is just one more stress that an independent writer really shouldn’t have to deal with,” Substack co-founder Hamish McKenzie writes in a post announcing the expanded program. “So we’re trying to do something about it.”

The Pro deals and their many perks seemed to signal a commitment to a narrative Substack tried to present at every turn: *we know what’s wrong with journalism and what writers need to break out of the grind*. The company was, of course, careful with defining the relationship. Though it was offering many of the material benefits of a full-time journalism job, writers were not employees, even if Substack had effectively poached them.

In places, that is starting to break down. Earlier this month, newsletter writer Anne Helen Petersen said on Twitter that Substack had cut off her healthcare subsidy after two years and questioned how it was different from “a newspaper chain cutting insurance benefits.” McKenzie responded with a far less idealistic tone. “We are not the writer’s employer,” he wrote. “A writer builds their own business on Substack.”

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Substack spokesperson Lulu Cheng Meservey says the company would honor existing healthcare commitments but didn’t respond to repeated questions about whether health benefits were ending for other Pro writers and whether its public-facing healthcare program will continue. But writers still worry what else could be on the chopping block, with Substack laying off its own employees in June, blaming “market conditions.”

Perhaps Substack’s biggest source of pride – and cause of most of its criticism from the public – is the promise of hands-off moderation, including allowing content that is banned on other platforms, like vaccine misinformation and anti-trans writing, in the name of free speech. In blog posts and other public

communications, Substack's founders have defended their approach, emphasizing that even the views founders disagree with have a right to exist on the platform.

"We started with this really strong commitment to free speech," Substack co-founder Chris Best told Joe Rogan last week. "We came up at a time when not everyone believes in that, at all."

But in the case of *Forever Wars*, Substack reneged on its assurance that it wouldn't meddle in the editorial business of writers without offering an explanation of how it happened. The post written by Ackerman, edited by Thielman, and published on Ghost drew the wrath of someone at Substack, so much so that the resulting action became its own media cycle.

"This is about punishing Spencer by making him feel bad, because something he did resulted in them hurting me," Thielman says. "This is punishing someone for criticizing Substack on another platform."

Substack's pitch to writers rings hollow for Thielman

Meservey at Substack did not respond to questions about how the decision to fire Thielman was made, or by whom, and directed *The Verge* to tweets from McKenzie and Thielman when reached for response.

"Hamish wouldn't want to throw any colleagues under the bus and he is personally taking full responsibility for all of it," Meservey says. The day after Thielman publicly spoke about his firing, McKenzie wrote on Twitter that the company had "fucked up," apologized for overstepping, and promised to pay out Thielman's remaining contracts with Substack writers, though he would not continue his editing work with other writers. (Thielman didn't ask for that and Substack didn't offer.)

Substack's pitch to writers – that it's substantially different from the places they've worked before and free from

many of the pitfalls of the industry – rings hollow for Thielman. So, too, does the initial promise that Pro deals and other funding arrangements were a no-strings-attached chance for writers to build their own business without interference from company heads, strict terms of service, or failing business models.

“When people are like, ‘It’s seed funding for journalists’ – no, it’s a shitty newsroom with one managing editor,” Thielman says.

<https://www.theverge.com/2022/8/17/23309877/substack-forever-wars-editor-firing-moderation-hamish-mckenzie>