Really Specific Stories: John Gruber

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SPEAKERS
Martin Feld, John Gruber

Martin Feld 00:21
Thank you so much for joining *Really Specific Stories*, John; it's really a pleasure to have you on the show.

John Gruber 00:26
Thank you, uh, I think...

Martin Feld 00:30
We'll see how we go. Maybe you'll be thankful (maybe not) at the end.

John Gruber 00:33
Yeah, ask me at the end!

Martin Feld 00:35
That's a good idea. First question, as is the case with every guest, is: how did you first get into podcasts?

John Gruber 00:42
Ahhh.... well, I don't remember the year exactly. You probably looked it up and know when I started the first version of *The Talk Show* with Dan Benjamin. It was, uh, Dan's idea, and he, I guess, it was very early (I don't know), I'm gonna guess 2006. Am I correct? Do you know? Am I, is that right?

Martin Feld 01:08
It sounds right, but...

John Gruber 01:09
Alright!

Martin Feld 01:10
...I deliberately do less research than what you think.

John Gruber 01:12
It was Dan's idea. He was very, very... I will have to give him, uh, full credit for very early in when, when the word 'podcast' was even a niche term, but just what, you know, it existed, it wasn't called Internet radio anymore, uh it was called podcasting. People in our tech circle, people who read *Daring Fireball*, people who read Dan's *Hivelogic* weblog at the time, were the sort of people who used their iPods to do this. You know, there was, it all seems convoluted but it seems so convenient at the time, because nothing happened over the air! Our iPods, none of those original iPods had networking at all, so everything you did was hooking up USB to a computer or FireWire, if it was an old-enough iPod, which really, really dates this whole conversation. You would download your favourite podcasts to your computer, and then you would sync them over to your iPod and then you would have these shows that were actually of interest to you, unlike what's on terrestrial FM radio. And he was very keen on the idea that we should do one talking about the sort of stuff we write about: nerdy, Apple, Mac. I mean, it was all pre-iPhone. So when you talked about Apple at the time, it was mostly about the Mac.

John Gruber 02:33
And it was popular-ish... We went through fits and starts over a few years. I mean, the first run of the show was maybe 20 episodes, I forget how close to weekly it was. And I don't think we ever once had a sponsor, you know? And my website, for people who are out there listening (I don't know who's listening to this), but my website, *Daring Fireball*, I've turned into a professional full-time writing job almost entirely through weekly sponsorships, advertising. I had a membership system around that same time (2006), you know, way before the current trend of Substacks and other subscription-driven publications. But sponsorships have worked out very well for me on the Web. But at that time, it was all, that was even new! And it... I don't even know that there was anybody who was thinking about paying to sponsor podcasts, so it kind of petered out on that front. I mean, it's, it seems a little... gauche to say that the only reason we were doing it was money. It wasn't, I mean, it was, you know, and our, most people who were blogging in that decade weren't doing it for money either. Almost nobody was. But it, you know, just sort of petered out, and then we tried it again, and we did have sponsors. (I forget when it started up again.) And then it just sort of took off from there, maybe 2008, 2009 or so (I think). I don't know, I'm not good with years.

Martin Feld 04:06
That's fine, I'm after that general flow of the story and how you remember it. So, what I really like in what you said there was that you were listening to what you wanted, or there were interests that were for you, beyond what was offered from terrestrial radio. What was your impression of the medium at this time when you were experimenting with it and listening to shows for the first time? How did you feel about this audio on demand?

John Gruber 04:30
I guess one of the things that struck me right away was that much like the Web itself, you could do it with what I thought were extremely high-production values for a totally reasonable layperson's budget and without any sort of real technical acumen. I mean, it was basically... I forget what the go-to mic at the time was, might have been the Blue Yeti. It was just a USB microphone. I think Amazon carried it for somewhere between 100 to 150 US dollars or, you know, somewhere in that, and you did, that was it! You just needed your computer, a little bit of software, you know? So for a grand budget of, I don't know, 150 dollars in hardware and software, you could make a show that sounded really, really good when you listen on an iPod, which was very different from even just a handful of years ago. I mean, one thing about that whole decade that it's, if you were trying to do a podcast at the time, I mean, the big problem was: where do we h-..., where do you put the files? Because even with MP3 compression, and we compressed, (I'm sure we did compress) those original shows far more than most shows would compress today but they still sounded really good. I mean, for spoken audio, you can get away with pretty high compression, and most people's ears won't tell.

John Gruber 05:55
But even then, if it was, I don't know, 50 megabytes per file, putting it somewhere, I mean, most of the time, like, wherever you hosted your website, at the time, was all metered. And a reasonable amount of popularity and you'd start bumping up against, you know, if you had a 15-dollar-a-month web hosting plan, if you put a 50-megabyte MP3 podcast file there and had even just a few 1000 listeners, you'd run over that limit very quickly. Things like AWS weren't, I don't think, were around at the time or if it was, it was so new, you know? It was all just a big question: where can you put these 50-megabyte files so that thousands of people can download them? Video was a thousand times worse, because video's, I don't know, 100 times bigger than audio. And that's the whole problem YouTube originally solved for video, but this was all getting worked out. So I remember that being a big problem, but you know, we figured it out somehow and it felt, you know, it was just cool. It's like, 'Hey, this show actually sounds pretty good. We sound like we know what we're doing'.

John Gruber 07:04
And I think the same thing was true of the weblogs at the time. And still, still now that you, if you were really a smart reader, and you really had any kind of expertise in a field, you could find far more interesting, better-written, better-presented (visually) things on people's personal weblogs, then you could on professional corporate media websites at the time, which, and it's still true to this point, where they use ad tech or ad layouts that pop up over the text. So you know, that's always been of interest to me, in my career, is doing it independently but doing it with, not just, 'Hey, that's pretty good for an independent one-person effort'. It's, I would like it to be better than what people expect from a bigger corporate publication, if that makes sense. And I thought, right away, I thought it was pretty clear that podcasts could do that.

Martin Feld 08:04
So you were committed to high quality from the beginning...

John Gruber 08:08
Right.

Martin Feld 08:09
...and this word, 'independent', it's really interesting you've brought it up so early, because this is a kind of common theme in this tech-podcasting community. How did it feel to be working independently, moving into podcasting? Did you feel a kind of shift in identity? What did it mean to assume this role or new persona?

John Gruber 08:31
Well, I, I've always had that independent streak and it, it always felt (it still does to this point in 2023), it still feels like a sidecar to my main motorcycle, which is writing my, uh, website. And, like, I often say, like from my accountant's perspective, when I do my taxes every year, it ebbs and flows the last few years, my income from my website and my income from podcasting, which one's, you know, but it's pretty close to 50/50 average over the last few years, but there've been a couple of the years the podcast's sponsorship revenue was a little over 50 per cent. So from my accountant's perspective, I'm a writer/podcaster. In my mind, though, I'm a writer who podcasts on the side and I'll never be anything but, and even if the sponsorship revenue went more 60/40 or two thirds/one third in favour of podcast sponsorship revenue, in my mind, I'd still, I'd still think of myself as a writer who podcasts on the side. It's who I am; it's what I feel I'm better at; it's what I enjoy doing more.

John Gruber 09:43

But it felt like a natural way to keep growing what I had started doing a few years earlier at *Daring Fireball*, like, rather than write somewhere else, or start a second weblog with this second domain of interest, it felt like going from having a website where I write about certain topics, to adding a podcast where I talk about the same topics, and, you know, clearly, I mean, you know this from from following my site and the podcast, they, you know, the slogan for my podcast now is 'The Director's Commentary' for my website, which is still how I think about it, where it's a way for me to sort of talk about what I've been writing about. And it felt, it's always felt very natural in that way.

Martin Feld 10:31

It's interesting that you've brought up that you've always had that independent streak and that writing is the main part of what you do, or the main part of your identity. Reaching back, how did (or where did) your passion for writing really start? What's your early memory of that?

John Gruber 10:49

It's a good question and I've thought about it a lot, because a lot of people, and in hindsight, it seems a little surprising to me that I can't say this, it seems like a lot of people who devote themselves (their careers) to writing can say that they knew it from an early age. And I don't, although I don't know that I ever thought... it wasn't, it wasn't like outside my imagination of things I might want to do, but I never, I didn't latch on to it young. And I didn't, certainly didn't, I went to college and majored in computer science and thought, I guess, going into college, that the most likely thing I'd come out doing professionally would be programming of some sort. But as a teenager, you know, I certainly I did get more into reading. I mean, and that's, I've never met, there's no writer I've ever enjoyed, who has written about the act of writing, whose first advice isn't to read as much as you can, you know? It just gets repeated over and over and over again, and all of the, 'how to become a writer' or 'how to improve your writing' literature.

John Gruber 11:56

You know, so I guess it started as a teenager when I became more of a voracious reader. But I wonder too, how that would work out doing it all over again, because when I was a teenager, there was no Internet, I didn't have a computer at home. My parents, I've told this story before, but a lot of my friends couldn't get a computer at home, because their parents would look at the price of, you know, like a 2,000-dollar Apple IIGS system, or a more expensive Macintosh system in the '80s and say that, 'We're not going to spend all that money; you're just, you're not going to use it enough'. My parents were like, 'We're not going to buy you a computer because if we buy you a computer, you're never going to leave the house'. And I think they, I do think they were, I was very frustrated by that. Uh, I suppose if I were more industrious, I would have somehow committed myself to getting a job so I could have bought myself a computer, but I had the insatiable, passionate desire to own my own computer, but I did not, I did not have the industrial

streak to go work enough to actually buy it on my own. And so left, you know, in my own room with my own time, really all I, you know, had to do, I could listen to music, and I could read. And so I read a lot.

John Gruber 13:07
Really, it was college, I guess, where I became... it was like, 'Oh, this is what I want to do', where I got involved with the student newspaper at Drexel University, and year after year, worked my way up the ladder to become the editor-in-chief and learned graphic design and all of the stuff that went into making the newspaper and it didn't take very long before I got there before I realised that, 'OK, I'll finish my degree'. And, you know, Drexel doesn't have a journalism program, I don't know, might have been too late to switch anyway. But I didn't really want to study journalism, I just, you know... but writing for the student newspaper, designing it, the thrill of seeing my stuff in print. At some point in college, I realised that's really the only thing I wanted to do long-term.

Martin Feld 13:52
I'm interested to delve into your writing further, but before that, I'd like to know a bit more about your reading, given how much emphasis you give on it in terms of fuelling writing, and writing passion and skill. What sorts of thing did you enjoy reading back in those teen years or when you were at college?

John Gruber 14:11
In teen years, I read fiction voraciously. I read like, at one point, I think I was completely caught up on the works of Stephen King, you know, which even in the late '80s was a mountain of books, uh, Isaac Asimov, classic science fiction. Those are two, two who really stick out, but anybody, you know, that whole section of the bookstore with science fiction, and horror and pulpy fiction like that, but you know, Stephen King and Isaac Asimov are, you know, it's King in particular, I think, even though he, he's a genre writer in terms of subject matter, he's just a terrific, terrific wordsmith. He really, really is, and of course, famously prolific so that if you are, you know, you're lucky if you're a fan of, of him because you can, you know, he keeps writing multi-100-page books. So lots of, lots of science-fiction-type stuff, novels, short story collections. I always, I always had a soft spot for short story collections, too, because I always, you know, maybe a sort of early hint that my particular bent as a writer would be towards short-form writing. You know, I've never even attempted to write a book. Uh, article-length writing just seems very natural to me, you know, the way that, you know, for some track-and-field athletes, they're, it's very obvious that they're a sprinter and not a marathoner. You know, never say never, that's what, when people ask me if I've ever thought about writing a book, I mean, I'd never say no, but I've never really like teetered on the brink and thought, 'Ooh, this is a good idea, maybe I should outline', you know? It's, it's never gotten close either. Uh, but that, that changed a lot. I don't, I don't know, college, I guess? I guess I my fiction reading dropped off significantly in college and sort of changed a lot more towards... periodicals? You may know magazines, article-length-type things, I... a voracious reader of the

newspaper, my whole life, or until print newspapers ceased being much of a relevant thing. And, you know, my years in college, you know, 1991 to 96, coincided with the rise of the Internet, and obvious source of reading there...

Martin Feld 16:37
I think it's easy, when people hear that people who are interested in computers that they like science fiction, that's a bit of an easy thing to dismiss. Oh well, of course! But burrowing into those themes a bit, that's formative stuff: Stephen King, Isaac Asimov, as you said. What was it about science fiction and the themes in science fiction that really gelled with you, or that informed the way that you thought about technology or even went into writing?

John Gruber 17:02
I don't know. Uh, I guess, maybe it's true for even very realistic, contemporary-setting fiction too that this is how good writers come up with a plot. But you know, the question, 'What if?' (or the starting phrase 'What if?') is so infinitely rich, right? It's, it's sort of, to me a defining characteristic of imagination, you know, in that this is where, whether it's a solo project, or whether it's a collaborative effort with the team, 'What if?' is how ideas get built out. And that sort of genre of fiction is filled with more what-ifs, because it's not just the character backgrounds like, oh, you know, like, what if the main character is a school teacher, and they're recently divorced, or the, the... it's a woman whose husband just tragically died? You come up with what ifs for all of the cast of characters, but then it's: what if it's 100 years in the future and such and such has been invented by that time? You know? You just keep piling, it seemed (to me) more engaging at every level of the story, to have every aspect of it the plot, the characters, the setting, be more... less grounded in the world around me.

Martin Feld 18:39
That's a great point you have there about 'What if?', and reminds me of my own story of technology, becoming interested in the Mac, which then led through to tech podcasting and now speaking to someone like you, When you think of the what-ifs of your own life, can you tell me about that initial fandom with technology, that, 'What if that computer didn't come home with your family?' What was the story of getting into technology at that time?

John Gruber 19:06
Well, and I should to add, you know, that we weren't like a Luddite family. And we had, you know, at very early, you know, in the late '70s, we got the Atari 2600 video-game system, you know? And my, and my mom in particular, uh, enjoyed playing a bunch of the games too. So, I cannot remember not being instantly fascinated and gravitating towards the computers. My mom's brother, my uncle, was into technology and had... I don't even know what it was called, but it was like a pre-Atari 2600 home video-game system. I don't, it might have only played Pong, or it might, I forget, I don't even think it at cartridges. But it was, I remember being at his house and

being very, very young. I mean, I don't know, three or four, but you could hold the thing in your hand and make the thing on TV move. You know, it's like TV itself was fascinating, of course, and, you know, is a famous source of children being captivated for hours at a time. But to actually have like a rectangle on the screen that you could make move up and down, you know, instantly seemed fun, but instantly made me wonder: 'How, how is this possible?' 'How is, how does this possibly work?'

John Gruber 20:23

I don't even know how to start with how captivated I was by computers at every step of the way, you know, from childhood to adulthood, they just, they just constantly seemed utterly fascinating and utterly... just machines to make the sort of things I imagined possible, you know, in a way that just opened up ideas for creativity, whether it was writing, you know? Like, it seemed very clear to me early on, and it was frustrating, you know, growing up, you know, I had like, a, in high school, a word processor, which was a, sort of a glorified typewriter with like, maybe 30 characters at a time on the LCD. So you know, if you misspelled a word and caught it immediately, you could backspace, it would like print the line, it was like what like a one-line-at-a-time text editor, and you'd hit Return, and then that line would print on a paper.

John Gruber 21:16

It's a roundabout way of answering your question, but flash forward to, like, my high school years, where I would write have to write papers this way, but I knew because I'd used computers at school that I could be using a proper word processor on a computer, where, if I thought about changing the paragraph order or thought of a paragraph to insert earlier, that instead of having to retype the whole goddamn thing, or you know, some kind of ugly scotch tape, literal cut, literally cut-and-paste job. I mean, people forget, I'm sure kids today, really, really don't think about the fact that 'cut, copy and paste' in our computer lingo was, was not like an analogy! It was literally what, what you did for editing before! You literally would take scissors to it and if you wanted to reorder the paragraphs or something you wrote, and cut them apart and paste them back on a piece of paper. Um, the potential of a computer was always so obvious to me, and wherever the current state of personal computing was, however, crude by our current standards the computers of (you pick a year from my youth, you know) 1987, 1993, the, even the late, you know, '90s, I could always see, 'Oh, but imagine in a couple of years from now, when everything's faster, and there's more storage and networking is faster, what we'll be able to do then'. I've always been able to see (to some degree) ahead the potential of a couple of more years of the sort of progress that we've just seen.

Martin Feld 22:56

And let's move to that growth or that potential, I suppose, as you've put it. As the Internet was coming up, and you were exploring this new world of potential, of possibilities, what was it like to kind of find your voice in writing, after you had moved on from your time at college?

John Gruber 23:16

Again, I, It's hard for me to justify or explain why it took... I graduated college in June of 1996, and I started writing *Daring Fireball* in August 2002. Why did it take that long? I mean, 1990, or immediately after college, the word 'weblog' wasn't a word, let alone the shortened 'blog', but somewhere in between there and when I started, you know, it ha become a thing. And I was reading Dave Winer, who's, you know, he writes all over the Web, but his home has always been at scripting.com. Certainly one of the first bloggers, certainly one of the longest-running, but also some of the earlier ones, if you want to get in an argument over who was first, a lot of the earlier ones I forget his name, I think his name was Jorn... *Robot Wisdom* was his weblog. But it was more like a list of links. It was just sort of like headlines and articles he'd seen throughout the day, and he would just update it and it had the right form, where the new stuff went at the top and the old stuff got pushed down. But Dave Winer was a writer, or still is, in then in addition to, 'Hey, here's like three things I saw elsewhere, and here, I'll put links to them and you can go read them', he'd just write entire columns with his thoughts on something, and the appeal of that was huge.

John Gruber 24:41

But I guess the thing, one thing I figured out was that I never really stopped writing in between being in college and writing for this, the newspaper and starting *Daring Fireball* because I was so active on Usenet newsgroups and mailing lists at the time, which were sort of very, very similar and, in form, just different delivery methods. And writing about this sort of stuff, you know, Apple-type stuff. There's a publication, you know, by far, almost certainly one of the longest by definition, one of the longest-running publications possible on the Internet, *TidBITS*, which started in the early '90s as a HyperCard stack, that would be distributed over Usenet. And, you, you, I mean, it was actually really innovative! And it made it much richer than just about anything else that you could do at the time. And then every week, you would just download a new copy of their HyperCard stack, which would, you know, in addition to having all the previous issues would have like the new issue, but they had, like, a mailing list for the readers. And it was super-super-high, high quality, it wasn't, like, edited or moderated, but there was just an expectation that it, it effectively came across as moderated because the overall quality of the discourse was so high, you know? It was assumed that you were going to proofread your work and be thoughtful.

John Gruber 26:10

And you know, I was very active there, all sorts of other places, um. You know, at some point, I thought, you know, and I saw Kottke and other people who started their blogs ahead of me, and I thought, 'I could do that', you know? I knew that I could do it, I just, I have a very, very, very strong procrastination streak, which I guess is ultimately a short way of just saying: why did it take me so long? I mean, from some people's perspective, you could say, I, at this point, I've been blogging for so long, so consistently, 'Wow'. But in my mind, I still feel like I got started later than I should. And I can't really explain it, but it's like, when the time was right, I was like, 'OK, now I'm ready to go'.

Martin Feld 26:53

And as you got into these forums and groups and were discovering these people, this sounds like the foundation or the building blocks for what was to come, or the, or the people that we know (connected to you) now. What was it like to be entering or learning about this community online? This broader tech or maybe Apple-centric community?

John Gruber 27:13

I think it's probably true for any field but it was, I remember it was, it was a bit of a thrill to go from being a voracious reader of the print periodicals of *Macworld* and *Mac User*, being the two big ones here in the US, for the Apple nerd community. And to, you know, go from recognising people's bylines from those magazines to being on mailing lists, uh, or news groups where they're participating and having like a back-and-forth with them. At first, it's a thrill. It's like, 'Wow, I'm talking with, you know, so and so who I, you know, is on the staff at *Mac User*', and then quickly becomes more like, 'Huh, it's a small world', you know?

John Gruber 28:00

But I will say, I guess the other thing, I think I sort of left this hanging on your last question, but it's related, is: the other thing about me and my personality is... to say it had, it was unappealing is the opposite or not strong enough. It's like the one thing I just had no desire to do is sort of work my way up any kind of ladder. You know, and it's good, at the time I did internships here in Philadelphia at T*he Philadelphia Inquirer*, our big daily newspaper, which is still around, thankfully, but you know, it's a shell of its former self, but at the time in the '90s, was enormously profitable, enormously successful journalistically, there was a stretch over the late '80s... there's some kind of maybe like a 10-year stretch, where *The Philadelphia Inquirer* won more Pulitzer Prizes than any newspaper in the United States. It was up there as like a, just one tier below, like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. And I worked there, but not in the newsroom. I worked in the promotions department, which is sort of like their in-house ad agency, doing graphic design work, not writing, because that was just something else I learned in college and I had a keen interest in design, but the thing I had no interest in is like becoming, you know, somebody who's, I don't know, reporting on city hall meetings, and then working my way up for years to get the columnist job where I get to write the sort of things I want to write later. I just wanted to do it myself.

John Gruber 29:35

You know, and I just did... I'm not good, I've never been good, I've never held a job where I answer to somebody for very long in my entire life. And so, the desire to carve out my own thing, working by myself, uh, I just was very self-aware of that at an early age. It just seemed clear that that was the path for me, you know, the, becoming a staff writer at *Macworld* or something like that and waiting until I could get the back-page column. It never really was something I cont-... contemplated. And I could just see it, I could see, you know, my weird mix circa the early, very early 2000s, when I started *Daring Fireball*, having a computer science background, doing

freelance, you know, creating website... I knew how to create web-..., I mean, it's what I kind of did, I didn't really have a full-time job doing it, but just took freelance project jobs, building websites for small companies. So wanting to write, having the desire to self-publish, and then having the technical acumen to know how to make that happen circa 2001, 2002, it just felt like all of the planets were aligned, like, clearly, this is what I, I should do right now.

Martin Feld 30:47
And when you took that plunge, and started to write and work for yourself and develop this following online, what was it like to start receiving reactions from people from the broader community? How did it feel to be building that following in the early days?

John Gruber 31:05
I guess, a little bit of a thrill but more of a relief. Just because, I've always felt this way about sports too, where I love to play sports; I used to, I, now that I'm older, I play less, but I like to observe them, but I, I take losing harder than I enjoy winning, which you would think might drive someone to, well, if that's how you feel, if you if you derive more displeasure from losing than you get pleasure from winning, then why compete at all, you know? But yet you're, I still feel driven to watch and participate in sports. And in the same way, whatever satisfaction I got early on, or still get now when somebody says they, you know, find out somebody's a regular reader, or somebody says they're a big fan, is gratifying, but it's smaller in my emotional self than my fear that people won't be interested or will lose interest, or that I won't have an au-.... I mean, certainly in the early days that I wouldn't get an audience at all. Now, you know, that I am not writing things that will keep the audience that I have engaged or you know, hopefully still keep growing it and keep gaining new, younger readers. But I'm driven more by that than by any kind of patting myself on the back for any sort of acclaim or, or praise for, for what I do.

Martin Feld 32:36
That motivation is really interesting to know, so sustaining interest. So, as you developed the site, *Daring Fireball*, and you started to grow your podcasting presence, what was it that you think enabled you to sustain people's interest? How did you start to think about your writing and your recording and how you would attract and keep your subscribers?

John Gruber 32:58
Well, the writing part is, I can answer better. And I know that this show is supposed to be more about podcasting, but like I said, in my self-identification, I'm a writer who podcasts on the side, and I, and I feel like I understand it better. And my answer to the writing part has always been very, very simple. I, I write for a hypothetical version of me who's out there, an exact clone of me who just isn't the one who's writing this stuff. And from the beginning, until today, I'm as certain as I could be that if there were, if there's somebody else out there who's exactly like me, that their favourite website is mine, and their favourite writer is me, and that if I keep that up, if I could keep,

if I keep writing what I myself would enjoy reading, that there must be some number of people out there, you know, who also will and so far that's been true.

John Gruber 33:57
Obviously, the subject matter that I choose to write about is to some degree, a niche. I mean, some of it is obvious luck, you know, that I started a website, mostly focused on Apple in 2002, and the success that that company has had and their rise and just the number of people who are interested in them in the years that I've been writing. Very, very fortunate, but it's not entirely luck. It's not like I picked their name out of a hat; it's also the fact that I could see that this was a company worth writing about, you know, that to some degree predicted their success. But you know, I guess where I'm going with this, though, is that it's never, it's always been clear to me that if I'm, you know, what I write about at *Daring Fireball* is never going to make me Stephen King, right? It's not going to make me and, a household name for the mass market, because they're just not, they're not not even going to understand some of the stuff I write. And that's just never been what motivated me, you know? I mean, I'm very, very glad. So I've never been motivated by trying to write whatever it would be to have the biggest audience possible or the most popular weblog, period, or to make the most money from self-publishing on the Internet. None of that has ever ever vaguely motivated me, it's, you know, I would like to write this stuff, I would just like to write the stuff that I would like to read, even though I know that what I like to read isn't what has mainstream appeal. And the fear is just: is that too small to sustain, you know, a career? Because it was, eh, the early years of it, where I wasn't making any money at all and then the next couple of years where I was making some money, but nowhere near enough to support a family... that fear still feels fresh in my mind, that: what if this never actually becomes something that I can just say, 'This is all that I do'?

Martin Feld 35:54
And as you moved more into podcasting, did that bring more of a feeling of security or more fear? How did that change what you do, what you create?

John Gruber 36:05
That's a good follow-up question I would have covered if I, if I could keep more, more of your question in my head at a time. Uh, no, and where I'm going with that is: I don't have a sense of that with podcasts. And part of it too, is I'm not a voracious podcast listener, because I just don't have time, I don't have, I've carved up this life for myself, where I don't have a commute. You know, my commute is coming downstairs to the kitchen and making coffee. and then going down one more flight of stairs to my office to work. I do listen to podcasts. I live here, right in Center City, Philadelphia and drive very little, most of my, you know, errands I run are on foot, and so I listen to podcasts while I'm out and about running errands or just taking a walk in the city on a nice day. But overall, I listen to very, very few podcasts. And so it's completely against... I would,

and I also think I don't think I'm very good at podcasting. I mean, I realise I have an audience and that there's many, you know, I'm grateful for it.

John Gruber 37:06
And it is a, like I said of roughly 50 per cent of my income but I don't have that sense. I'm not quite sure, so for example, I don't know that my podcast would be my favourite podcast, if I weren't the one listening. I don't know! Maybe? I might... I, it's very hard for me to know, though. And I just don't have that sense about it like I do my writing, like, I'm very certain that I would be an enormous fan of my own writing, as a reader. I don't know that I'd be listened to every episode of *The Talk Show*. If I were just a listener out there. I think so...? I mean, I certainly don't think it would be something I never listened to, but I just don't know, I just don't, it doesn't come as natural to me. And so, and I don't feel like I have a sense of why my listeners like the show as much as they do, you know? I mean, but it is still ultimately what I do. Once I, you know, me and my guests sit down and do what you and I are doing and we start talking, I do try to just be as engaging as I think I would want to listen to, but I just don't have the taste to know.

Martin Feld 38:17
I'm interested in that dynamic that you have with your guests. And it's interesting that you say that you don't think you're great at podcasting, or it's not the natural thing for you. When you are speaking to guests on your show, how does it feel to be a presenter? Naturally, it's different in this dynamic because I put you on the spot to answer all of my narrative questions, but how do you feel being a presenter of an audio show to basically an invisible audience?

John Gruber 38:43
Uncomfortable, always, because I mean, you know, the show is edited, but I don't do the editing. I, because, I won't say I can't but I don't listen to my own show. I just can't bring myself to do it. When I was a kid, I remember, uh, watching late-night talk shows and it's like a recurring question over and over again would come up, I don't know, a couple of couple times a month for some actors promoting a new movie, and it would come on and it would come about the some actor hasn't seen the movie and they're like, 'I can't watch myself on screen'. And I used to think, 'Ah! Come on! That's not, your, that's fake humility! Of course, if you're a movie star, you love watching yourself on-screen!' And now I get it, I don't like watching myself in videos. Uh, I don't know why. There's something about listening to myself that, just, I don't know. I, I, it makes me very uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable here even trying to describe it.

John Gruber 39:49
So, it just, it none of it comes naturally to me and you know, it's my show; the guests are on, I want to be as gracious as I possibly can, I want them to be comfortable. I want them to, by being comfortable, I hope that they'll be more entertaining and, and engaging and make the insightful points that I hope that they're there to make about the topics of the day. But it all just seems to

run by so fast to me, you know, as opposed to writing, which is where, you know, and and famously, what I write about it *Daring Fireball*, while sometimes I'll cover breaking news if something happens, and I happen to see it flash by and I'll link to breaking news, you know, very shortly after it is there. But for the most part, people don't come to my website for breaking news. I can sit there, and whether it's a short post or a long one, take as much time as I want and it's all just there on my own time. And then when I'm ready, OK, publish. Whereas, OK, we've started the Zoom call, or the Skype or whatever it is, and we're talking, even though the show is going to be edited in post, for the most part, it's like, you start recording, and you go through, and you've got to do it live. And I'm not a fast thinker, I'm not a fast talker.

John Gruber 41:10
Uh, even after all these years and hundreds of episodes, and I guess, at this point, thousands of hours (or close to it), you know, or over a thousand hours of podcasting, it all still, I'm sure that I'm better at it than I used to be, but I still feel that dialling in the right mix of listening to what the guest says and responding to that, as opposed to, OK, they're going, they're on to something, but there's this point that I've jotted down that I wanted to make five minutes ago, and I want to come back to it. And I want to make my point. You know, the people who are the very, very best at it make it seem so seamless and natural, and just the easiest thing in the world. And it's, never, never feels that way to me. It always feels like it's just rushing past me and I know that there were points. 'Oh, man, there was a point I wanted to make 10 minutes ago, but it's, we've already moved on! Damn!' You know? And whereas in my writing, I can always go back and insert that in there. It could literally be the next day. And I think, 'Shit! I wanted to make this point!, I can go back and edit yesterday's article to insert a paragraph where I wanted to make this extra point, whereas in a podcast recording, just a couple of minutes going by, and sometimes it's too late. And I'm trying, you know, I do try to get better. I don't, I'm not trying to poor-mouth, my abilities here, but I still feel like I need to continue working at it as a craft in a way that I don't with writing.

Martin Feld 42:46
It's very cool to hear that kind of self-reflection and how you think you've maybe changed and remained the same. As time's gone on and you've built this following, you've continued your writing, built an audience around your podcasting, what are the ways that maybe this career, this independent writing and podcasting combination, has led to other opportunities? What other things have you been able to do as a result of your work?

John Gruber 43:12

Well, I guess the one that comes to mind is public speaking, you know, speaking at conferences, which everybody's been interrupted, you know, in this decade, with COVID. But I sort of stepped away from that. Off the top of my head, I'm not quite sure the last time I spoke in front of an audience like that. And I actually am dealing with a couple of pending invitations for next year. That's one, but it's also along the lines of podcasting where I don't think I'm very good at it. I think the amount of time it consumes for me, is not commensurate with what I get out of it.

John Gruber 43:51

One thing I figured out when tech conferences were much more of a thing, maybe about 10/15 years ago, people in a similar boat and a similar stature, people who might also get invited to the same conferences I was at (to give talks) would write a talk and then give it at three or four conferences for the next year. And I almost, I, I maybe like once or twice, repeated a talk at two different conferences. And a couple of people said, 'Well, that's crazy! You know what I mean? That's nuts! Like, the whole point is you work on putting a talk together, and then you can deliver it multiple times! It's, you know, it's not worth it, but it just seems, neither way does it work out for me; like, on the one hand, it feels not right to keep delivering the same talk over and over again, like, not interesting, but I can see how you get better at it. That's for... you know, and everybody said that, like, 'Oh my God, the first time I gave this talk, it was terrible! And now I feel like it's halfway decent'. And I was only giving the first version of a talk every time! And I'd stress over it, you know I'm not, I don't feel... I wouldn't say I have a phobia about speaking in front of an audience, but you know, I feel like I'm smack dab in the middle of how, how stressed I feel about getting standing up on stage in front of an audience of people. And it just consumed so much of my time that I think I'm happier not doing it.

John Gruber 45:19

What else have I had the opportunity to do? I guess, I don't know if this answers your question, but I consider myself fortunate that I've gotten to meet and know so many of the sort of people who I wish that I would know, whether they're people who work at Apple, or people who used to work at Apple or people in the independent developer community, you know, who write the Mac apps that I'm most, Mac and iOS apps that I'm most interested in, you know, that I can exchange email with the people who write all of my favourite apps... is something that I would have always wanted. And, you know, it's, it feels like an incredible privilege that I know the people who, and, and also the people who write the other websites in the sphere that I'm in, and that I consider almost all of them to be not just acquaintances, but friends, you know, is just an enormous, enormous thrill and an incredibly gratifying.

Martin Feld 46:19

That's a fantastic point, I'm actually really glad you brought it up, because just then you've basically explained how perhaps you sit between all of these independent people who you admire and follow and have befriended, but then also you have these connections to those who run or work at Apple. Is that something that you think about much? How do you balance this sitting between this larger corporate entity and this large, independent community?

John Gruber 46:47

I think it suits me well, that I have, and I'm sure there's some people out there who, you know... you can't be as strongly opinionated as I am without irritating some people, you know? I wouldn't say I have a large number of haters but there's obviously some people who I rub the wrong way. And I wouldn't, you know, I don't think I could do what I do, and it doesn't bother me, and you kinda have to have some thick skin to get into this, if you're going to let your opinions hang out. But I think that I have a humble streak that is very natural, that comes very natural to me, probably instilled from my parents a little bit, a little bit of nature, a little bit of nurture. But I think I have never not underestimated how influential I am in the sphere that I write, and including, you know, being read by people, who, at every level of Apple, you know, from the engineering trenches to the executive ranks, you know, that they read what I write and care about it. I know that they do! I mean, and you know, and obviously, one of the higher-profile things I do every year is, for the last, I don't know, close to 10 years (or maybe it's 10 years and counting) but at WWDC, having a live-audience version of my podcast with executives from Apple onstage and getting to interview them in front of people.

John Gruber 48:23

There's a part of me that doesn't really quite believe how influential I am in that regard. It really, I think I really do in my mind underestimate it, and I think the reason that works for me is that it keeps me closer to the mindset that I had right at the beginning, when very few people knew my name, and I was writing in obscurity, and you could, I could sort of let fly with my honest opinion as opposed to being worried, 'Well, but I know, you know, here I am criticising such and such aspect, and I know so-and-so works on this at Apple'. You know, you cannot be an honest critic and be worried about such things. Um, it's funny, I was just read-..., just yesterday, as we record, was reading about a longtime restaurant critic at *The New York Times*, Mimi... oh, I forget her last name now, but she was a restaurant critic at *The New York Times* in the '70s through the '80s. And, A: she was the first woman restaurant critic at the time, so that was groundbreaking in that regard; but the other thing she did, which seems crazy in hindsight, was she was the first restaurant critic, who, she, she'd make her reservations under a fake name. She would sometimes wear a disguise (mild disguises) like a wig or funny, or a different pair of glasses or something when she'd go, so that the restaurant wouldn't know that it's the food critic, the restaurant critic from *The New York Times* because she realised she was, if they did, she was getting an entirely different class of service that wasn't representative of what the public would have, and that she

just, you know, the only way to do her job was to just let it fly, you know? And if, you know, if she knows the chef and, and, you know, I'm sure, you know the case of a New York restaurant critic, by the time she's established, she knows the people who are starting high-end restaurants. And if she doesn't like the restaurant, you know, she's got to pan it in a review, even though she's gonna have to, you know, she knows she's gonna get a phone call from them, complaining about it, but you have to be like that.

John Gruber 50:26
And I think it sort of comes naturally to me where I under-..., because I underestimate my influence, I'm freely honest with my feelings about the things I write about, and then I'm surprised when I get pushback on them from somebody involved, you know? It's like, 'Ah, ha, I wasn't even sure you'd read that, but OK, now we, you know, let's have a back channel about it'. But it keeps me from preemptively holding back with my honest opinion... both ways too! Where I think it would be so easy to get neurotic about what I do, and knowing that, you know, the obvious criticism against me if you don't like my writing, or if you're on the technological side of the fence, that's more like on the, you know, an Android enthusiast who thinks that the iOS platform is locked down in a way, you know, and that you're in Apple's walled garden, and, you know, that's not for them, and that I'm in the bag for Apple because I, you know, my reviews of the new iPhone are effusive, you know? I'm finding all these good things to say about the the latest iPhone or whatever... that I also I don't, it would be so easy to get caught up and think, 'Well, if the number one criticism against me is that I'm too favourable towards Apple, and look at the last three iPhones I reviewed', I, mostly, I had very, very good things to say about them, it feels like I'm due to say something, find something to really criticise about this, just to make it look like I'm being even, I feel like that's the path to ruin in what I do. Because you're just overthinking it and you're not being honest, you know? If five or six consecutive iPhones get five or six consecutive effusive reviews, but they, I can look back at them in hindsight and say, 'Yeah, I feel like that was an accurate description of the iPhone from four years ago, I don't, no, no regrets, I don't feel like I missed a glaring problem with it'. That stands the test of time, that... having a mindset where I'm not really that concerned, because I don't see myself as that influential, I think helps me do that without overthinking it.

Martin Feld 52:40
And with that kind of pushback or feedback, or the compliments that you receive that reveal that influence that you're talking about, you've very comprehensively described that path that you've had, from those early groups on the Internet, through to starting your website and podcast through to today, with this, probably very frequent feedback that you receive. How do you think about the change in interaction with the audience and how do you hear back from people perhaps differently from when it was just through RSS subscriptions and website visits through to social media today? How does the technology and the way the medium is delivered influenced that?

John Gruber 53:20

Twitter was a huge boon to that. I mean, one thing, and again, it's uh... well, podcasts have always been a little weird in this regard, where there's never really, to my knowledge, been a consistent way for the listeners of a podcast to have (form) a community. Whereas with blogs, it's the comments section on blogs, and I never had comments on *Daring Fireball* because it always, the trade-offs involved always seemed to me outweighed against having them at all, from the beginning, even before spam, even before they got bigger. And yet at the time, it was alm-..., literally, I know, it seems funny now because the comments have gotten so toxic overall, and the amount of moderation that goes into it. Most people, you know, if somebody were to start a new blog, it would be surprising if they had comments on every post. I mean, I know there's, still are blogs that do it, but it's, it's now less common. Whereas when I got started, it was very unusual that I didn't have comments at all, especially since if you're using, you know, some kind of CMS software that could have them, like I was, I just didn't enable it.

John Gruber 54:33

Podcasts never had that really. I mean, I know some some podcasts will have like a Reddit community or something like that. But Twitter was a huge boon to me in that regard and Twitter coming around, you know, as my website was still getting more popular, it became a sort of, hey, this is almost as good as, or, honestly better than having comments per post. Whereas instead of me being in control of them, here's this neutral ground. And it's one place where people could go, and you know, @gruber or @ my *Daring Fireball* Twitter account and chime in with their comments in a public way, as opposed to sending me email. I mean, the other, you know, the two main ways I've communicated with readers for 20 years are email and Twitter. Doing it in public is more fun, maybe? And it's more useful, because then if somebody has a point to add, or criticism, an astute criticism to make or a common question, you know, one person asking me a question on Twitter about, 'Well, what about "blank"?', with regard to this article I just posted, that one person who asks me on Twitter might be asking the same question that 500 readers were also thinking, but just didn't bother to tweet. And then I could answer on Twitter and somebody who's following along at home could be like, 'Ah! That, you know, it's funny, I was going to ask, I was thinking about asking Gruber the same thing!' And I, you know, it sort of worked out better than, I think, comments on my website ever, ever could have. You know, but then there's always email. And, you know, I certainly understand the desire for many people not to, um, just not to post publicly on something like Twitter, not Twitter, of today, but even to the Twitter of the quote, unquote, good old days, 2008/2009, just wanting to stay under the radar publicly. You know, I certainly welcome people to send me email.

John Gruber 56:39

There was sort of a heyday there, though, where Twitter was just, it was just so obviously, the place for public interaction with my readers. And it still is, to some degree, I mean, I'm not, but I use Twitter, so much less in the last year since Elon Musk's takeover. And now that whole sphere is so fragmented with Mastodon, and Bluesky to some degree, and now Threads. And it's like, you know, I think it's overall healthier, I guess... and in a long-term sense, to have, you know, a bunch of sites that have the same idea. And it certainly wasn't healthy any more for Twitter to play an outsized central role in that sort of discourse with the direction that it's gone recently. But, for me, personally, the fragmentation means it's, it doesn't seem anywhere near as neat, as it used to be, like, and where I mean by neat is, it felt like for years, I'd say, a full decade, maybe, maybe even a decade plus, you know, circa 2009/2010, when Twitter really got bigger, the iPhone was out, and Twitter is so, the short-form nature of Twitter is so suitable to the phone. And there's just no way to separate the rise of the two things. And it's not just Twitter in particular, but just social media in general, the fact that social media posts are nuggets that typically, whether they're videos like TikTok or whatever, or text posts or personal family updates on Facebook, or whatever, they fit on a phone screen, and you just sort of scroll through in such a natural way.

John Gruber 58:31

I'd say there was a decade though, where it, it felt neat to me, where I felt like I was 100 per cent certain that I could, hey, once a day check in with my mentions on Twitter, scroll down from the newest to, 'OK, I remember reading this one yesterday', so now I know I'm caught up and I've seen every single thing somebody is at @gruber-ed me on Twitter, and replied to all the ones that I've you know, either want to make a joke or just want to say 'Thanks', or they have an hon-... you know, an interesting question. And that's it, I'm caught up. And the completionist in me can feel like, you know, time, you know, I can put this away and come back tomorrow. Whereas now, it's so fragmented. I just, there's just no way to get that sense of, like, I sort of have to live every day now thinking like, 'Uh, there's probably something on Mastodon that I've, somebody's asked me a good question and I've missed and I'm never gonna get to it', and, and I feel a little... there's like a mild OCD streak in me that is irritated by that.

Martin Feld 59:32

Well, would you like to see more centralisation or...

John Gruber 59:35

No...

Martin Feld 59:35

...choosing of a preference, or what would be your ideal future?

John Gruber 59:39

I, I don't know what, I think this is heading, I think it's more ideal overall, to have this sort of, to have it the way it is right now and have Threads continue to grow and Mastodon (too) continue to grow because it's the most open and most independent, and the fact that there's no longer one central place, it works out worse for me but I think it's better for the world. And, and you know, the world changes, you just have to accept it, it's... there's no way to stay relevant without going with the flow of the way the world is changing, of course, it's changing. But it's just, here's one case where I feel like for my particular needs of having a loose, unofficial community around my work, my writing, my podcast, it's worse that Twitter no longer is the place, the one place where everybody would know to go to do it. But I think it's better for the world, so I don't have a wish for any one of these things to, either Twitter to come back to its centrality or Threads to become that big and central. I don't think that would be good for the world. So, you know, it is what it is. It is... that having three apps to check is way more than three times the work, and I don't know why that is. Maybe that's a good topic for an article.

Martin Feld 1:01:02

The way you've characterised that, I really like that, that kind of difficulty of all these fragmenting things to keep track of but trying to see where all this information is being funnelled, and questions asked of what you're writing what you're recording. It's an interesting kind of connection or parallel to draw to the world of RSS and blogs, operating in all these different places, but being available through readers or directories or other tools. How do you think about that environment of RSS and the Web and how it's fuelled or helped your career?

John Gruber 1:01:36

It's one of the, or perhaps the most interesting thing about podcasts, is: it's the one area where the open, completely decentralised stuff has won, and continues to win. I think Spotify is clearly the biggest threat to that, in terms of both the nature of their platform, and the strategies that they seem to be taking by signing big, big, super-popular podcasters like Joe Rogan and uh, Bill Simmons in the sports world, and his whole Ringer network of pop-culture stuff. But I think it's super-telling, especially with The Ringer, uh, the Bill Simmons network, how much of their stuff is still just open in a regular RSS feed that you don't have to use the Spotify app to access. They have some exclusive stuff but all the stuff that I listen to from The Ringer is still just there in open RSS, where you can just pick whatever podcast player you want and listen to it.

John Gruber 1:02:52

I think it goes under-remarked upon that podcasting is the one way where that's, it, that was sort of the vision for the way the whole Internet would work, and it hasn't, really. Writing with blogs is still a thing but it's nowhere near as popular as it was 20 years ago. And that's bananas to me! It really is, I, I don't understand it. I find it crushingly disappointing, I really do, that having a personal blog and putting time into it. And even if you don't, you know, and so much of blogging,

the nature of it, and people still do it, but people who are full-time, especially in the stuff I read, people who are full-time software engineers working, you know, either at a big company or working on independent apps or something like that, and then just blogging about what they're doing, or it's something else, something that's unrelated to their programming work... but just having a blog, where they write about something with no aspirations to do it for money, or income, or have ads, or, or members or anything like that, but just, you know, writing 1000 words, 2000 words a month across a couple of posts.

John Gruber 1:03:59
So many good thinkers are good writers, even if they're not writing as their main vocation, and yet, it's so much less popular because so much of what we write has gotten, what we read has gotten sucked into these large corporate sites. And the Web has just gotten so much worse with the ads. I mean, that's the whole reason, the best news on the reading front is the resurgence in email newsletters and Substack, of course, is the commercial company that is making that happen, but there's all sorts of open-source platforms that do what Substack does, Ghost being, I think, the best and most well-known one. And that people c-... do aspire to either do it as their main job or as a side job can do it for money and instead of selling ads, you know, sell five- or 10-dollar monthly memberships to get it, but the reason that these newsletters are so popular and resurgent, it's so obvious and yet it goes under-remarked upon, it's because it's the one place people know where they can go read something and not have frickin' ads pop up every two paragraphs or cover the text. When you get an email newsletter and you think, 'Oh, there's an email newsletter from one of my favourites who I subscribe to!' and you start reading it, and then you just read and you hit the spacebar to scroll down, or you sit there on your phone with your thumb and you scroll, and then you get to the bottom and then you're done. And there was no interruptions and it was a pleasant reading experience. Well, you don't get that on the web any more, or you get it so much less often. Whereas podcasts is where you do, right?

John Gruber 1:05:35
Podcasts are as good as they ever were. They haven't gone downhill and you still have this choice in clients. And there's a thriving market for independent podcast players like Marco Arment's Overcast and Castro. It's, it... podcasts are working out the way the Internet was supposed to work out, which is openness and clients that can communicate over published APIs to a thing. But R-..., you know, and I, RSS for reading, uh, is still a thing. And I, you know, every couple, it's it's frustrating. I'm very good friends with Brent Simmons, who's the, now it's an open-source project: NetNewsWire, I, it's my favourite RSS reader for both the Mac and iPhone. I love it. I'm so glad, it's a rare case of something that was a big, big hit product around 2000, you know, the early days of *Daring Fireball*, really, and then he came back to it and resurrected it and got the brand back from a company he'd sold it to and it passed it around. And now it's an open-source project.

John Gruber 1:06:38

And it's so frustrating for these developers. It's popular and thousands and thousands of people use, there's other, you know, Reeder, (R-e-e-d-e-r) is a super-popular RSS reader for iOS, I'm sure lots of people listening to this have heard of. There's lots of popular RSS readers. It's not as popular as it used to be, though. And then, so, what's frustrating is every year or two, there's a rash of articles like, 'Hey, RSS was dead, but now it's back!' And it's like it well, it was never dead. And it's not really, you know, whatever you're thinking made it come back, it's, it never went away. But it could be grist for a dissertation, like why podcasting is so relevant in the true mainstream sense, where millions, hundreds of millions of people listen to podcasts and the number of people who get their reading material through a reading RSS reader is so much smaller, I mean, orders of magnitude, you know, maybe 100 times smaller, not just 10 times smaller, I don't know. It's still big and but it does seem permanently nerdy for, for reasons that escaped me, but it's a thrill to me and and I would have it no other way that I you know, everything I publish at my website is in the RSS feed, and if you don't want to read it on my website, which I hope is a pleasant way to read it, but you want to read it your way in your RSS reader, I'm happy, happy to do it.

John Gruber 1:08:08

To me, it's defining, I mean,, it comes back to Dave Winer, who invented RSS and certainly, you know, deserves the lion's share of the credit for establishing it as the standard that it is, that all of this came out of his work, including podcasting, and using the same format, this technical, you know, XML format, RSS, to distribute podcasts, in addition to reading the written word. It really is, it's just so aligned with the original vision for the way the entire Internet would work. And I'm, you know, happy to be a part of it. And you know, and I feel that by embracing it, it's, it's, it's not like, oh, well, the, all these reasons that the big companies don't embrace it and don't put the full content of their articles in RSS reads [feeds], uh, that I'm being like an idealist by doing it. No, I think that for me, in my career, by embracing it, it's fuelled my success, not like, oh, I'd be doing even better if I kept stuff behind a paywall or something like that.

Martin Feld 1:09:14

Talking about paywalls, for example, or paying for access to RSS content. You also have other shows or other content that you work on, like *Dithering*.

John Gruber 1:09:25

Mmm.

Martin Feld 1:09:26

What was that like to negotiate something being available on RSS but paying to have access to it, which is different from what you've done before with your main show?

John Gruber 1:09:36

Yeah, that's it's funny. I don't know why, I didn't expect you to bring it up. It's, *Dithering* still feels new to me. We start, Ben Thompson and I do it together. He writes *Stratechery,* which is a paid weekly newsletter with a, you know, a free article every week, um. It was more his idea than mine, but I don't, as I recall, I don't think it, I didn't need to be talked into it too much, it seemed like a good idea. There's a Bob Dylan line, he, um, uh, it's criminal that I can never exactly remember quotes, but, 'He, he not busy being born as busy dying', that you kind of have to keep moving forward. And um, you know, I've got a great thing going with *Daring Fireball* and *The Talk Show*, and I'm not looking to revolutionise how I spend my days. You know, for the second half of my career, I'd like to think hopefully, that I can go from here to whatever the end of the line is, decades from now, doing what I do, but it feels like, it always felt like there should be new things every couple of years. It just feels like that's the right way to not be busy dying.

John Gruber 1:10:48

And clearly in the last few years, the paywall subscription sort of thing, I talked about it with newsletters, um... I probably am leaving money on the table by not having some written thing that is paywall-only, and again, never say never. I wouldn't say I'd never do it, but I like the fact that everything I write is just there for anybody to link to, and you're not going to even have to click through and hit one button to close a thing that says, 'Hey, by the way, do you want to subscribe?' You know, the worst is when you hit a paywall that doesn't even let you click a button to actually just read the article, where it's like, 'Nope, you either pay or you don't read'. But I am so annoyed by just having to click a button or two just to get to the damn thing to read. I'm, it makes me very happy that everything I write people can just open it and start scrolling and reading. But it's clear that my idea, 2006 or so, when I had a membership system, and that was one of the things I tried back then, was having the RSS feed for non-members would only have excerpts of the articles and then you'd have to click through from your RS[S] reader to go to my website where I had little banner ads, you know that, that was where the money came from. So if the ads were on the website, and you were a free reader, in RSS, you'd have to come to my website to read the article. But that felt conv-.... and you know, there were other reasons I switched to just putting a spot, a once-a-week sponsorship in the RSS feeds, so that I can have everybody just on the same thing and have all the content in the RSS feed.

John Gruber 1:12:31

But clearly, there's something going on with memberships and readers wanting to support it. The independent writers, podcasters, YouTubers too, right? Even YouTube people have Patreons and stuff like that and membership systems. And it's, it's sort of a, I think, a very natural reaction to just the incredible consolidation in the very, very, very largest tech companies, the Apple, Facebook, Google, you know, that so much of what Amazon (did, I mention Amazon?) but, so much has been steered towards those companies that I think just typical people who maybe 10 years ago would have been like, 'Ahhh, I'm not paying for something on the Internet!', now feel like, 'Yeah, I pay for

so much stuff on the Internet, the least I can do is offer five bucks a month to my very favourite writers or podcasters', or something like that. How can I get my piece of that pie, right?! I guess?! I mean, that's, that's not really what I was thinking, but I had been thinking before Ben proposed it, you know, is there something I could do with *Daring Fireball* to rejuvenate, bring back a membership thing? What would it be? You know, I don't want to pay wall my articles, and then say, 'Well, then I can write like an extra article every week', and then that would be the one that's been, and then I'm like 'No...', because then if it's good, I'd want it to be out there for everybody, right? You know, that's the Hell of it, right? It's like, you could say, 'Well, I'll have one article a week, that's paywalled-only', and then I would lose either way, because if I if I got to the end of that one article that's for paying members only, and I felt like it was really good, it would really frustrate me that it wasn't out there for everybody. But if I didn't feel like it was really good, I would feel terrible, because I would feel like, well, these are the people who are paying me, you know, I don't know, 50 bucks a year or 100 bucks a year or whatever it is. And I feel like this one's a clunker!

Martin Feld 1:14:28
Mmm.

John Gruber 1:14:29
So *Dithering*, a totally new podcast, short-form, just two of us and making it paywall-only felt win-win to me, because it felt like I wasn't taking anything that I had previously made free of charge for everybody, my main podcast, *The Talk Show* or my website, and it's not writing, and I do feel I just feel a little differently and I'm less precious about my podcasting efforts than my writing. And having it only be paywall, so there's no confusion, there's no gating, 'Well, this episode will be free and this one's not', or whatever. It's like, 'No, you pay us five bucks a month, or 50 bucks a year, and you get two episodes a week of our, you know, 15 minutes on the button, every episode. And if, you know, if you don't like it, you're only out five bucks for the month and just cancel your subscription. You know, it's worked out very well. And, you know, for me personally, you know, it, the short nature of *Dithering* certainly helps, uh, in terms of just fitting it into my schedule, because it doesn't... here we are now, we started it in early April 2020, during the pandemic, and that sort of accelerated our, you know, we were sitting around with nothing, nothing to do, why don't we start the show that we've been talking about? Let's do it! Let's just start recording it and get it out there!

John Gruber 1:15:54
We were talking about it before COVID, but then COVID really accelerated. It's like, yeah, this is like a perfect, little pandemic project. Uh, here we are over three years later, and I don't feel the least bit resentful of it, which was my fear going in, my fear going in was that after the novelty wore off, I would start to feel like, 'Argh, God, it's Monday, I gotta go record *Dithering* with Ben again'. And, you know, and the resentment would come from, like, interrupting my work. You know, that's one thing I'm very precious about is, I really am, I'm the princess and the pea under

the mattress where it's like, it's very hard for me to get going when I'm writing, and then once I am going, I really don't want to be interrupted. *Dithering*, for some reason, doesn't do that for me. It, it just feels like, 'Yeah, this is fun'. I love having an outlet for little 15-minute conversations about something.

John Gruber 1:16:57
And I like, too, that because it's 15 minutes and extremely regular, on a regular schedule of two a week, it is really the polar opposite of *The Talk Show*, which is, you know, more or less the schedule is three times a month and episodes range from, I don't know, one-and-a-half hours to two-and-a-half hours, sometimes even longer. Instead of being irregularly scattered across the month, three times, and sprawling in length, very regular, very short to the point 15 minutes in and out. And so it totally feels additive to what I'm putting out in the world as opposed to carving out something I was doing before, and doing it in a different way. It feels additive, which is very, very gratifying. And it just sort of feels easily sustainable, right? Like I have as much enthusiasm for doing *Dithering* as I, right now, as I did when we started three years ago.

Martin Feld 1:17:58
That's a fantastic explanation. And over the course of all the stories and the experiences that you've shared, you mentioned the passion of people who write blogs and make podcasts, whether or not it's for money, you spoke about your own experiences, things that were unexpected, what you've found uncomfortable or surprising. I suppose what I want to ask you, as we kind of move towards the end, is: when you think about the old, the new, all the things that you've done in your career, whether it's big or small, what's the thing that you've done that you're perhaps most proud of?

John Gruber 1:18:29
Hmm... I guess the body of writing, you know, and it's a weird way, I do, you know, I did graduate with a degree in computer science, I do know how to program. I'm, what in the alternate multiverse fork of the world, universe, where I'm a full-time programmer, I'm not very good at it. I don't know, there might not be, there might not be a universe where I've reached the age of 50 and I'm still programming, because I think, I think my... especially how slow I am at programming, I think, was not conducive to being, to being a professional at it. But I did, I wrote up, I wrote a script I exported everything I've you know, from my my CMS at *Daring Fireball*, exported everything and then wrote a script to count how many words I'd written. I actually forget the number now but I know... was it a million or two million? I don't know, but it was a very big number. And the script was smart enough to not count the words that I block-quoted when I reference other articles, you know, when I say, 'Martin Feld, at such and such publication, wrote this', and then quote two paragraphs. Not counting those words, the number of words that I've written and put out there was enormous and you know, and you can divide by like, the average length of a book, and it's, you know, it's the equivalent of many, many books of writing, you know,

which would be daunting at the outset, right? If you'd say, you know, you start down with a fresh blog without a post, and get to the point where you could say you've written a million original words, you would say, 'Oh my God, forget it! I'm not even gonna start!', you know?

John Gruber 1:20:09
It, but it really is! It's, it's, that's one of the things about getting older too, is you realise how many old, trite sayings are so true. You know, the journey of 1000 miles starts with a step. You know,, just start walking, you know, take a step, keep going, keep your, keep your feet moving. Just keep moving. I, that's how I would answer that question. You know, we didn't talk about it, but I invented Markdown, which is, I, at this point because some people are like, 'Wait, you invented Markdown?'

John Gruber 1:20:40
I'm like, 'Yeah, I did!' Ah, you know, I'm pretty proud of that. And probably, you know, if I, you know, proverbially, but tragically, you know, come out of this podcast with you and step outside and get hit by a bus and die.

Martin Feld 1:20:54
I hope not.

John Gruber 1:20:55
I hope not, too, I, trust me! I hope not more than you! But uh, well, no, probably you too! Because then, what are you going to do with this episode, right? Oh man, you'd be really up, you know, you've got this great episode, but here I am dead and I'm making jokes about it. Ah yeah, you'd be in a real tough position, you'd have to think about whether to cut this segment out, but um...

Martin Feld 1:21:16
Only the highest ethical standards for this show, John...

John Gruber 1:21:18
Right! But the truth is, it is... not to get too philosophical about it, but because what I write about, is about technology, and technology is moving very quickly, my archives of writing isn't as relevant, as you know, well, fiction is the best comparison, because you know, the only other thing I could have imagined writing about would be politics and national-affairs-type stuff. And that dates poorly, too. You know, I mean, it's, you know, people sometimes will go back and read 10-/ 15-year-old articles of mine, and some of them stand up very well, uh, or, in terms of having relevance. Some of them maybe the subject matter doesn't, but somebody will read it and just say, like, 'You know, I don't know how I got there but I read this old article about brushed-metal user interface, and I just loved it'. So you know, but it is what it is, you know? I can't do what I do and worry about the fact that what I write in 2023 isn't really going to be all that interesting, even

in 2024, but especially 10 years from now. But if I did get hit by a bus, very quickly, I would suppose that my influence, my lasting influence on the world would be more Markdown than my writing, because that continues to have legs. But in terms of what I'm personally prouder of, I think I'd have to say my writing.

Martin Feld 1:22:39

That's fantastic. And I'm glad you brought up Markdown because that's a huge element of what you've done. Now, you kind of did that already in mentioning Markdown but is there anything that we haven't discussed or that I haven't asked you that you'd like to mention before we wrap up?

John Gruber 1:22:54

No, not really. I mean, you know, I don't know... I'm not, I hope I've made it, you feel like I'm as comfortable as I can be. But I'm not comfortable talking about myself and my work, and I don't know what to... I don't know how to answer that.

Martin Feld 1:23:10

That's totally fine. Well look, John, this has been an absolute pleasure. I want to thank you for your very generous time in contributing to the *Really Specific Stories* project.

John Gruber 1:23:19

Well, thank you. You've, you've been delightful and your questions are interesting, uh, or at least they interested me, so I hope they interested everybody who listened to me, uh, answer them as best I could.