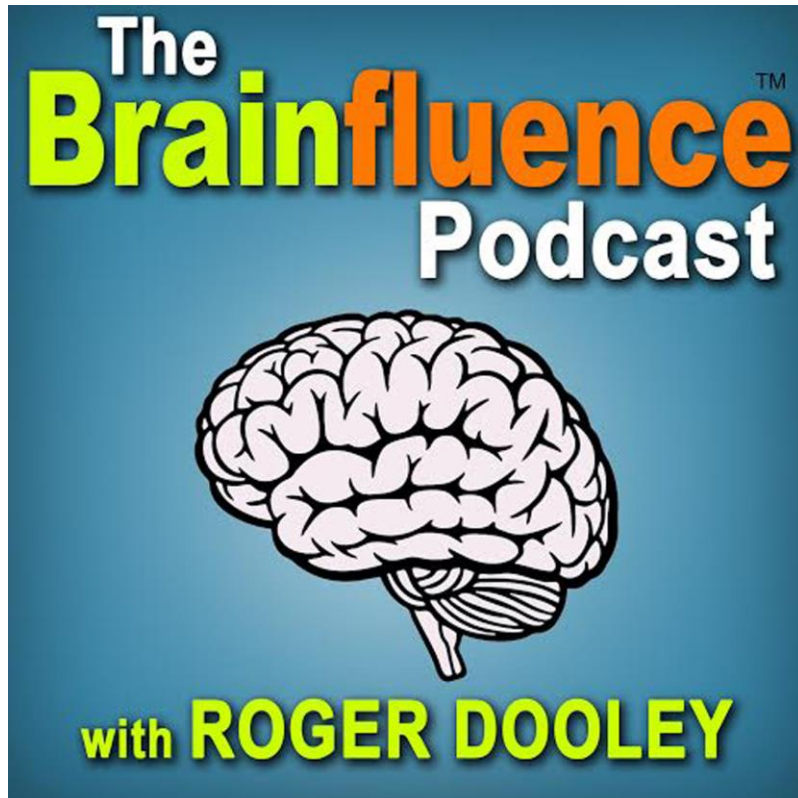


Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave



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Roger Dooley

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Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

Welcome to *The Brainfluence Podcast* with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to *The Brainfluence Podcast*. I'm Roger Dooley. My guest this week is the CEO of Media Shower, a content marketing company. He may not be exactly what you're expecting.

At one point, he was called the “King of Dot-Comedy” as he was the editor and chief of Zug, which claims to be the world’s humor website, or it did. His work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Entertainment Weekly*, MSNBC, BBC, and now to complete his bucket list, *The Brainfluence Podcast*.

He’s also the author of a new book, *Mind Hacking*, which is about how to reprogram your mind and change your life. Welcome to the show, Sir John Hargrave.

Sir John Hargrave: Thank you, Roger. It’s good to check this one off, *The Brainfluence Podcast*. I can now die a happy man. This is good.

Roger Dooley: Indeed, indeed. Well you know, actually, this is really a first for us too because we’ve had various famous authors on the show, John. We’ve even had one Nobel Prize winner. But you’re the first one with the prefix “sir.” So did that come via the queen? Or is this just a demotion from the “King of Comedy” to mere knight status?

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

Sir John Hargrave: [Laughs]

Roger Dooley: Why don't you explain about that?

Sir John Hargrave: Yeah, indirectly it came from the queen. I actually wrote the queen several years ago and I said, "Your Majesty, I would like to be knighted." Because I just thought "Sir John Hargrave" sounded so much classier. Don't you, Roger?

Roger Dooley: Definitely, definitely. Yeah, we would not be doing this if you were a commoner.

Sir John Hargrave: [Laughs] That's right. So she wrote me back. She said, "We would be happy to knight you but you really need to something honorable." And I was like, well that's a lot of work.

So I called my local county courthouse and asked, "How do I get my name changed?" They said, "Well, you come down, you pay a small fee, you go before the judge." So that's what I did and here I am today standing before you, Sir John Hargrave. Kind of a name hack, if you will. The easy way of getting knighted.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, since I deal with a lot of academics, I thought about changing my first name to Doctor because I think that Doctor Roger Dooley would sound certainly more impressive, get more respect, and maybe even get some better speaking gigs. What do you think?

Sir John Hargrave: Yeah. Why not? Why not? Then put the Ph.D. as a suffix.

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

- Roger Dooley: Oh, I didn't think about that. Wow. Is there an extra charge to add a suffix, I wonder?
- Sir John Hargrave: No, I think it's a package deal. You just change your name once, get the whole thing done.
- Roger Dooley: Wow. Boy, this is why people tune into *The Brainfluence Podcast*, to get great hacks like this where you can increase your credibility and your status overnight for maybe 50 bucks or something. So that's great.
- Sir John Hargrave: Without all the cumbersome, time-consuming education.
- Roger Dooley: Right. Or actually having to perform some significant good work that would catch the queen's attention.
- Sir John Hargrave: [Laughs] Instead of doing something noble to change the world, right?
- Roger Dooley: [Laughs] Okay, why don't you explain a little bit about your journey? I guess another first is we haven't had a major comedy site person on this show before. What happened to it?
- Sir John Hargrave: Yeah, I started my career back in the early days of the internet. While I was working for a large content company called Ziff Davis, they're still around, ZDnet, now owned by CNET, big computing sites. What a fantastic place to be at the birth of the internet because they were so passionate about creating good content and that really was just a core value that was instilled in me.

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

On the side, I started this humor site, Zug.com, and it really grew to be a successful business over the years. As we continued to grow and I started making that my fulltime career, I created this company, Media Shower. So Zug really morphed into Media Shower, which is our content marketing company.

Today, we have hundreds of writers. We work with clients like Walmart, and Intuit, and Yahoo, and Canon and many, many others. We create great content for their websites that help them build more customers, more traffic to their site, and grow their businesses. So I really understand marketing as well as this idea of creating great content really deeply.

Roger Dooley: Right, you say morphed into Media Shower. I looked at the Media Shower site, that didn't look all that funny really. It looked kind of like serious business. What happened to all the content from Zug?

Sir John Hargrave: [Laughs] Yeah, the revenue model for Zug, and this is interesting for people who create content, which was you need people to sponsor the content. What we started specializing in were these kind of large-scale pranks or stunts and they really lent themselves well to publicity stunts.

So we would do these crazy stunts for credit card companies and insurance companies and pharmaceutical companies. I know these don't sound like really crazy, wild, and wacky companies but we found a way ...

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

Roger Dooley: Yeah. Stunts for an insurance company, that sounds like something that they would try to avoid.

Sir John Hargrave: Stay away from, right, exactly. But, we really successfully did a lot of this great content for these companies and as we continued to grow, it became clear that what they really want is content for their own sites. They don't want to sponsor it somewhere else. They want good content that's going to bring in traffic directly to their own website.

So as the company continued to grow, we continued to build out that writer network to create content that's not just humorous but also can be serious. It can be in all of these different verticals that our clients operate in.

Roger Dooley: Very interesting. The actual content on the site pretty much went away?

Sir John Hargrave: Much of it went away. Some of it kind of aged out. Some of it exists in the form of my first two books, which is, *Prank the Monkey* and *Mischief Maker's Manual*. Many can still be retrieved from the Wayback Machine if you want to go there.

Roger Dooley: Right. So I see you still have the Zug.com domain which is got to be a pretty cool property. A three-letter dot-com that actually says something, even if it's not exactly an English word is pretty cool. Have you thought about creating a business around Zug.com? Like a totally different business? Like a train company in Germany or something rather different than the comedy site?

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

Sir John Hargrave: That's right. In German, zug is the word for train. We do get periodic inquiries from the canton of Zug in Switzerland, which is a little town in Switzerland, saying, "Could we please buy that domain name?" But so far, I haven't been able to come to an agreement with the Swiss government authorities [laughs].

Roger Dooley: Well, maybe you ought to put it back up, throw some AdSense on it. You never know what you might get.

Sir John Hargrave: You never know.

Roger Dooley: So, let's move on to your book. This is kind of a bit of a departure from your content marketing business and your humor business and so on. For starters, why don't you explain to our listeners what you mean by mind hacking, John?

Sir John Hargrave: A mind hack is basically a tip or a technique to help you reprogram your mind. The basic premise behind mind hacking is that your brain can be reprogrammed and if you're willing to accept that premise, this book shows you how.

We use hacking in the original programming sense. So not like malicious hacking, but the way the early programmers use it, which is to solve a problem. It was like a clever tip. So *Mind Hacking* is a collection of these hacks or techniques that we can use to reprogram our brains. It's kind of like a user manual for the mind.

Roger Dooley: Actually, I think the word hacking is being rehabilitated because now you've got growth

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

hackers and all kind of hackers out there that aren't necessarily involved in malicious hacking.

Sir John Hargrave: Yeah, life hacking ...

Roger Dooley: So the word has come full cycle which is actually, I think, kind of uncommon. Often words start off with one meaning and then they take on another meaning and then they're kind of discarded after that but fortunately perhaps for hackers and hacking, that seems to be on the upswing now.

Sir John Hargrave: Yeah, I agree. You think of life hacking and time hacking and as you said, growth hacking with businesses. We're starting to reclaim the original meaning of the word.

Roger Dooley: So what is the sort of overview look at mind hacking in your book? Obviously, you've got some great individual techniques and anecdotes from famous people and so on, we'll get into some of those. But what's the 50,000 foot view?

Sir John Hargrave: Basically, there's three steps to the mind hacking process. The first one is to become aware of the mind. In other words, to understand what your mind is and be able to see it objectively. So approaching it kind of like a programmer.

The second one is debugging the mind. So just like a programmer looks at faulty code or a program and figures out what's wrong, we've got to figure out what's wrong with our thinking.

The third thing is reprogramming that to help us feel great and achieve everything we want, whether

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

that's health or wealth or success or self-esteem. So those are the three overviews.

I'll give you an example, which is this guy John Sonmez, who runs this great podcast called *Simple Programmer* gave me, he said, "I used to be really upset every time I got in traffic." He lives in L.A. I think, so he's always in traffic.

Roger Dooley: Bad location for that.

Sir John Hargrave: Yeah [laughs]. He said, "I'd just get all worked up and one day I realized, this is crazy. I'm spending so much mental energy on something I can't control." So that was the first step. He became aware. One day, somehow, he became aware of that loop going on in his head.

So he said, "Whenever I see this in the future, I'm going to see this as a positive opportunity." So now when he's in traffic, he thinks to himself, "Well I can listen to a podcast or I can try to solve a problem I've been working on. I can call somebody. I can use that time constructively."

By doing that again and again, he's really reprogrammed his mind to see that situation as actually a positive instead of a negative and therefore, he's freeing up all of this mental energy and making himself so much more mentally productive because he's got his thoughts headed in the right direction. That's mind hacking.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. I've discovered how to deal with traffic. Fortunately, Austin has bad traffic but I don't have to commute very often so those strategies are less

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

important than when I was in Indiana and went to Chicago a lot, when you could easily get stuck in traffic for an hour. For me, audiobooks then were the solution. It got to the point where you actually didn't want traffic to clear and arrive at your destination because you were at a particularly interesting part of the book.

It totally changed my attitude toward traffic delays and even just time in the car, where it had previously seemed like totally unproductive downtime. So even if there was no traffic, you're still trying to squeeze every second out of the trip because it's just not fun and it's not productive. That changed my attitude totally.

Sir John Hargrave: We're recording the audiobook right now for *Mind Hacking* and it's been so much fun because I'm really just acting it out. Because to me, that's when I like to listen to audiobooks too, is like when I'm commuting or stuck in the car. So I'm like, I want to make this really fun for people. And it has really, it's been fun. Or listening to your podcast. This is a great way to pass the time when you're commuting as well.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. Now I do most of my audio stuff when I'm at the gym. So I don't have that much time but I log some hours per week, usually listening to podcasts now. Audiobooks take too long when that's all the time you've got to spend on them.

Sir John Hargrave: Right.

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

Roger Dooley: One of the people that you mention in your book is Thomas Edison. What was his approach to mind hacking?

Sir John Hargrave: Yeah, that's a good question. You can go the Edison museum in New Jersey and every geek should go to this museum. It is fantastic because you get to see how this great genius innovated.

He had this lab, sort of like a Google of his day, because he had this little office where he would come up with ideas and then he would go right across the hall where he had these draftsmen, as they were called. There were no women, they were draftsmen.

So these guys would all be sitting there with their drafting tables and he would say, "Hey I got this idea for this invention." Then he would get these guys to work. They would start drawing out the specs for this thing that he had just envisioned.

Then from there, it went down to the next floor where they would build the machines that would build the thing that he had invented. So in other words, it was like a tool fabrication shop. It was a shop that actually made tools.

Then once the tools were built, they would take it down to this larger place, and it's this enormous room that's filled with pulleys and levers and cables, but it's all like wooden and metal and steel. You got to go there. It's totally cool. Then that's where they would build the final product, is on that final assembly line.

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

They bragged that they could make anything from a lady's watch to a locomotive in this factory. So it started as an idea in his head and then they wrote it down, they put it on paper, then they took it into reality from there.

It's such a beautiful way of articulating how whenever we want to accomplish something, it has to start in our head. We have to write it down first. We have to get it on paper. Then we have to make the steps necessary to get that thing into action, whether it's a business that we're building, it's a new product, it's losing weight, it's making more money. Whatever that goal is, that's such a beautiful process to follow.

Roger Dooley: Writing it down combined with repetition too is one of the points that you make. Explain about that.

Sir John Hargrave: Yeah, repetition is key. The story in the book is from Scott Adams, who's the guy who draws the *Dilbert* cartoon. So back in the day, he started out his career as kind of a low level office drone working at Bell Labs.

He got up every morning at 4:30 in the morning to draw *Dilbert* while he had a day job. At the time, he was kind of unknown. He started this technique where every day, he would write down on a piece of paper fifteen times a day, he would write "I, Scott Adams, will become a syndicated cartoonist."

Roger Dooley: Sounds almost like a punishment in school but in this case apparently it was effective.

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

Sir John Hargrave: Yeah, not on a blackboard though, in his notebook. And he would do this day after day after day. Then he'd start drawing *Dilbert*, then he'd go to his job. He tells the story in his book, which is terrific, about how this unlikely series of coincidences happened to actually land him not only becoming a syndicated cartoonist but arguably today the most successful syndicated cartoonist in the world.

He is careful to say, "I don't attribute this to voodoo or magic, or even the power of positive thinking." It's much more about when you repeat this kind of thought loop, as we call it in the book, you're more likely to notice opportunities. In other words, your brain is then being wired to look for those opportunities throughout the day to get you toward that goal. That's one of the reasons why that repetition technique is likely so effective.

Roger Dooley: Right, that makes a huge amount of sense. I certainly wouldn't discount that thinking positive is somehow helpful to achieving your goal. But at the same time, I don't know that you can actually demonstrate that scientifically.

But it does make a lot of sense that if you frequently bring up a specific goal or thought process that when an email comes in that is consistent with that goal in some way, you're more likely to notice and act on it than if it's just one of these things that's sort of in the back of your mind.

I don't know about yours, John, but the back of my mind is pretty cluttered and I'll lose stuff in there for days or weeks at times before it finds its way out

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

again. But if you are forcing yourself to keep these things front of mind, then you will be more likely to act in a way that achieves those.

Sir John Hargrave: Let's put it this way, if somebody comes up to you and says, "Let's sign up for this salsa dancing class." You're likely to say, "Well that's a ridiculous idea and I'm never going to succeed at that." So, say no.

However, if you're writing down every day, "I'm going to lose 25 pounds by February," then you're more likely to see that as an opportunity to actually get some exercise and to say yes. So that's the kind of thinking that you want to encourage every day and why that repetition technique works so well.

Roger Dooley: Makes a lot of sense. So we talked about Edison and before we get a bunch of nasty emails from listeners who say that Edison was actually an idea stealer and so on, leaving that question aside, let's talk about Tesla who is also mentioned in your book.

Sir John Hargrave: Yeah, Tesla, also a magnificent genius. You know, Edison and Tesla were bitter rivals, isn't that fair to say?

Roger Dooley: Oh yeah.

Sir John Hargrave: Yeah. You know, whereas Edison saw things as like, remember he said ninety-nine percent perspiration and one percent inspiration, so he was very much about test and iterate. Tesla was very much about make the thing fully formed in your mind and then bring it into reality. So Edison was

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

experimentation, experimentation and Tesla was just like vision it and then bring it into being.

Tesla was also extremely gifted with visual acuity and in fact, he had what he called a severely debilitating problem growing up where he would hallucinate things. Visually, he would see things and literally not be able to tell them from reality. It was only after many years of experimentation that he was able to figure out what our shared reality was versus what was just going on in his head. But this idea of simulating things in your mind is something that we can take away from Tesla.

There was a great experiment run where they had two groups of students and one of them they said, "Listen, we just want you to imagine getting good grades at the end of the semester." And the second group, they said, "We want you to simulate the process of getting good grades."

In other words, the second group had to think through all the steps. So they would have to think through like, "I'm going to study. I might be asked out to a party, I'm going to have to say no. I'm going to stay in. I'm going to go to the library." Seeing themselves taking the test, doing well, getting sleep the night beforehand and then getting the good grade. The whole process.

Well, the group that simulated consistently did better than the group that just visualized it. In fact, sometimes they would get up to a full letter grade higher. So the takeaway for us is that we're more likely to achieve our goals when we simulate the

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

whole process of getting to that goal. I do this in the shower in the morning. I'm sorry to give you that visual image by the way.

Roger Dooley: [Laughs] This is audio only. So we're safe there.

Sir John Hargrave: [Laughs] Fortunately it's not a camera. So I actually see the goal but then I see, what are all the steps that I'm going to need to get there? What are the problems I'm going to run into? Then how am I going to overcome those problems? It makes you incredibly resilient when you actually run into those problems for how you're going to overcome them. It gives you confidence.

Roger Dooley: Here in Austin, water is too expensive to do a whole lot of thinking in the shower but it's a great idea and I'm sure you could do it outside that or even stand in the shower with the water off if necessary.

Sir John Hargrave: Or go bath in the river going through Austin too.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, I suppose that would be possible. So we've had as a past guest on the show Steven Kotler who is the most prolific author writing about flow and certainly one of the world experts in the topic. It seems like flow is the ultimate mind hack or at least I think he'd probably say that to be true. How does that fit into your system, if at all?

Sir John Hargrave: It does, very much. So much of mind hacking is about developing our powers of concentration. When we talk about flow, what we're talking about is developing the power to concentrate. I believe this is the lost art. I believe that we are severely limited in our ability to concentrate, Roger.

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

If you just look at your behavior throughout the day, if you're working on something and you get a text message on your phone, almost all of us stop whatever we're doing. We break the flow and we go to answer that text message. So in the book, there's a number of techniques that we can use to actively strengthen our powers of concentration.

But there are also tips on how to cultivate your environment. In other words, how to hack your environment so as to limit those distractions that break us out of flow.

So for example, there's this hack called the one hour investment. You take one hour, today, to just go shut down as many of those interrupting alerts and statuses and apps and messages as you can. So you put your phone on vibrate, you turn off Skype by default, you unsubscribe ruthlessly from as many email lists as you can. You take an hour to do that.

That's investment in your time, in your concentration, and your flow that's going to pay off. It's going to have compounding benefits far into the future for you.

Roger Dooley:

That's a relatively modern phenomenon but it certainly affects us all. I've switched, after being a PC user for, boy, since the computer was invented practically. Or actually, after I graduated from a Commodore 64 and a TI-99/4A to the PC.

Finally, about a year or two ago, got a Mac and it's been a good experience. I like a lot of things about it

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

but in terms of interruptions, it has this kind of nasty little feature that all of your applications are right across the bottom of the screen in a bar and when there's something important happening in one, they start either showing an indicator or bouncing or something.

It's almost like your phone in that respect, where you get these notifications that are a potential distraction. Now there are technical solutions for that, to go full screen, and do some other stuff. But it seems like technology really conspires to break our concentration.

Sir John Hargrave: It does, they bounce, I know what you mean. They bounce like they've got to go to the bathroom on the Mac system tray. So you've got to turn that stuff off.

So app developers, it's in their best interest to get you to use their programs but it is not in ours because it breaks our flow. We've got to reclaim this. We've got to reclaim the ability to concentrate for ourselves. We've got to ruthlessly shut down that stuff and be conscious, be aware, of when those interruptions are happening.

Roger Dooley: You're right about the app developers. My friend Nir Eyal, who's been on the show and has been my co-panelist at South by Southwest, and will be again this coming South by Southwest, wrote this great book called *Hooked* and it's all about how app and software developers can make their products habits for their customers.

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

There are four elements in that and one is the trigger. That's exactly the sort of thing that you're talking about, either the little bouncing icon or that little number that appears showing that you've got two new messages or the vibration or whatever the particular mechanism is. But shutting down those triggers is essential if you want to stay focused.

Sir John Hargrave: Yeah, so that's the first piece of reclaiming concentration, is shutting that off. The second piece is strengthening our concentration. The simplest exercise here, you may know it as meditation or mindfulness. We call it concentration training because that's what it is. It's basically taking 20 minutes a day and focusing on the breath.

So you find a quiet place. For the first few minutes, you just relax your body. Then you focus on the breath. When you notice your mind wandering, our trick is you award yourself what we call awareness points. We kind of gamify meditation.

So you get an awareness point when your mind is wondering and then you return your focus to the breath. By doing that, what you're doing is giving yourself a little dopamine hit every time you notice your mind wandering.

That's the point that you want to become more proficient at. You want to notice when your mind is starting to wonder. Our minds are so restless and they are so easily distracted and all you have to do is try this technique once to get a feel for how restless and noisy your mind really is.

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

But with practice, with training on this, I do this every morning, it really does become something that pervades every area of your life. You notice yourself more focused and able to not only just keep your concentration, but to get more useful stuff done.

Roger Dooley: Very good. Let me ask a question about the publishing arrangement on your book. The book is available for free online, right? But then paper and audio versions are coming out from Simon & Schuster?

Sir John Hargrave: Yeah, it's available everywhere, in bookstores, on January 5th. You can preorder it right now on Amazon. It's an amazing book, beautifully designed. But we're also making it available online for free. So the experiment here has been kind of like open source software.

The traditional publishing model, Roger, is you write your manuscript and you send it to your publisher and your publisher gives you some feedback and you send it out to like a dozen family and friends and they all tell you it's great, because they're your family and friends. Then it goes to print. And that's it.

With this, we've gotten literally tens of thousands of people reading through the book beforehand and they've given us so much feedback on the mind hacking process, on the tips, techniques in the book, that it's allowed us to make it so much better.

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

So by kind of crowdsourcing the book, it's been so great. You know, our belief is that even as we're giving it away for free, if people find it useful, they're going to buy a copy to give to a friend or for themselves.

Roger Dooley: What did the publisher think about that?

Sir John Hargrave: Well, it took some selling [laughs].

Roger Dooley: Yeah, no doubt. Wiley was happy to give away maybe one chapter of my book if I wanted, but I think that was where they were drawing the line.

Roger Dooley: Yeah and I give my publishers credit. They are super, just really innovative, and I think everybody is trying to find a new publishing model that works. But this has been done before with other folks. Cory Doctorow wrote a book called *Big Brother* that he gave away for free at the same time that he published it.

It became a *New York Times* bestseller and he had this great line where he said, "Listen, my goal is to widen the tent to get as many people under the tent as possible. Not to make sure that every person under the tent has paid for a ticket." And I thought, well that's just a great way of looking at it. The more we get this mind hacking program out there, the more people who can benefit from it. That's really our goal.

Roger Dooley: I think from the author's standpoint it makes a lot of sense because it's unlikely that you'll get rich off the sales of the book copies anyway. So getting your ideas out there and spreading them more widely is

Ep #85: Mind Hacking with Sir John Hargrave

great. It's just surprising that a publisher would buy into that though, so congratulations on that.

Let me remind our listeners that we are talking with Sir John Hargrave, who is the author of the new book *Mind Hacking*. John, how can people get in touch with you or find your content online?

Sir John Hargrave: You can go to the *Mind Hacking* website. Again, to download it for free, download our app which has the 21-day program to teach you mind hacking. That's at mindhacki.ng. That's like mind hacking but with a .ng, no .com. I also blog on our company website at MediaShower.com.

Roger Dooley: Great, we'll have links to the book downloads and the other resources we mentioned during the course of the show on the show notes pages at RogerDooley.com/Podcast. We'll also have a text version of our conversation there. John, thanks for being on the show.

Sir John Hargrave: Roger, thanks for having me. This was really fun.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of *The Brainfluence Podcast*. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at RogerDooley.com.