

Podcasting Hacks, by Jack D. Harrington
Reviewed by Susan Helfand

Podcasting Hacks, by Jack D. Harrington, has a great deal of information on how to listen to podcasts and how to create a podcast. However, because of the organization of the book, I would not recommend it for people new to podcasting.

The book is organized within chapters by “hacks”, defined by the author as “clever ways to get things done”. Although the hacks seem to be arranged within general topics such as “Tuning into Podcasts,” or “Starting Out”, the structure makes it difficult to get sufficient information about a topic as it is introduced. For example, the second hack in Chapter 1, “Rebroadcast Your Favorite Feeds,” opens with the code from a script. Not until later in the chapter do we learn that the script is Perl, and at that time we get a brief description of what Perl is and how to install it. Many of the hacks move very quickly from introductory explanations to very complex discussions of a topic. Some explanations are not given at all until later in the book. RSS is mentioned in the first hack, but not explained until much later, in hack 37.

Some of the individual hacks can soon become very technical; novices may become frustrated when the introductory material does not provide a context in which to place subsequent information. Also, we are accustomed to books that become more and more complex in subsequent chapters. Therefore, the reader might assume that further chapters would be completely impenetrable, and give up. Actually, chapters later in the book are frequently less technical; they deal with topics, such as interviewing guests for a podcast and choosing an appropriate format, that are interesting and informative and require very little technical knowledge. Even basic tips such as how to speak into a microphone correctly are included.

Another problem is that general information that could be used by many people could be missed because it is included in a hack dealing with a narrow topic. For example, in hack 24, “Build a Great Political Show,” Harrington gives examples of what he calls format elements, such as interviews, book or movie reviews, and call-in games that can add interest and novelty to a podcast. But someone not interested in a political format might not read that section, and would therefore miss these tips that could apply to other formats as well.

Harrington notes that many people, whom he names at the beginning of the book, contributed their “hacks and knowledge”. This technique of using a great many sources allows much information to be included, but is probably also the reason for the book's rather unwieldy organization. The index is not always helpful, since some subjects could be mentioned on 10 or 15 different pages. But realizing that an extremely technical hack may be followed by a less technical one, readers can skim the parts they are not quite ready for yet, and pay more attention to the other sections. Later, after becoming more familiar with the other areas, they can go back and read those chapters more carefully. The best approach is to first read some introductory material on listening to and creating podcasts, and follow the instructions to get hands-on experience with the processes. Then you will be better prepared to take advantage of the many helpful suggestions that Harrington makes.

This article is solely the responsibility of the author and does not necessarily express the views of the Philadelphia Area Computer Society, its board of directors, or anyone else.