

#136 - From Hacking to Hardcover (with Bill Pollock)

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[00:00:12] **G Mark Hardy:** Hello, and welcome to another episode of CISO Tradecraft, the podcast that provides you with the information, knowledge, and wisdom to be a more effective cybersecurity leader. My name is G Mark Hardy. I'm your host for today, and we'll be speaking with Bill Pollock from No Starch Press, but before we get going and talking about books and publishing and public charity and a whole lot of fascinating things. Let me share with you briefly a message from our sponsor.

Risk3Sixty is cybersecurity technology and a consulting firm that works with a high growth technology firms to help leaders build, manage, and certify security. Privacy and compliance programs. They publish weekly thought leadership webinars and downloadable resources like budget and assessment templates. You can check out some of their offerings at [00:01:00] risk3sixty.com/resources, that's risk3sixty.com/resources, and now of course, back to our show. It's my privilege to introduce you, a person that I've known for probably 20 years, and chances are you've met him more than once.

If you've been to any security conferences in the last couple decades. Mr. Bill Pollock, thank you very much for being a part of our show.

[00:01:20] **Bill Pollock:** Thank you for the opportunity. We've talked about doing this for a little while,

[00:01:25] **G Mark Hardy:** Yeah, exactly.

[00:01:27] **Bill Pollock:** maybe a year. I know,

[00:01:29] **G Mark Hardy:** At least a year, maybe more, but hey, could you tell us a little bit about yourself, a little bit about your background?

[00:01:34] **Bill Pollock:** So I, I started No Starch Press in 1994, but before that, so I studied political science at a college in New England. I never intended to be a political scientist. I intended to be a biologist. So, And to anyone who's thinking about making that shift, because political science was more interesting than science.

I say stay with science, but I chose that major simply because it was, I calculated, I've heard other people do this [00:02:00] too. They, I was told I had to choose a major, I added up the credits, I realized I had more political science credits, so I said, fine, pick that. That was not necessarily a good move. I ended up After college going into a post-bac pre-med program.

I was on my way to medical school. It was guaranteed admission. I dropped out the morning of my first organic chemistry test because I wanted to learn science and that's not what people were there for. So I ended up going into. A medical book publishing at a company called Spring River Log, which is this huge company now world Worldwide.

And I used to rewrite the books about things like mitral valve transplants. I used to read the books. They were easy to read. I'd never had a problem with any of the medical stuff, and I would just rewrite it because it wasn't good. So I've been doing that since I started that in 87. I went into textbook publishing after that, and then I worked at Treatment and Company.

I was a biology editor. I got back to my roots. Trying to acquire biology books in 1990. I'm very proud to say that I attempted to create [00:03:00] a software based molecular modeling kit, which would be very useful today because I got tired of building space filling, you know, I what? Building roller stick models. It's like, okay, that one took me 20 minutes to make.

So in 1990, there was a product called alchemy from Tripos Associates, which ran off of Floppy. And you could actually use wire frames and see, you know, structure and function. Which is what was key, but I got fired from Freeman. One of the, one of the typical things in my business, the book business, is that you have people who are fundamentally incompetent running a company and they put all the onus on their editors.

So they just go around and fire. Literally, would she, this person would fire one editor every few months and then just got around to me. One book that, one book that I really wanted to do, which ended up on the market is called Machinery of Life. Which has beautiful watercolor paintings of the interiors of cells.

So the first edition came out from spring of vlog. My old company looked terrible, was black and white. Beautiful. Four-color illustrations. [00:04:00] They made it black and white. The second edition they made color. That was a book that I really would today still love to have on my list, but I know more about biology probably than I do, but actually doing computer security.

Well, I'm, I dunno if this is true with today, but, Certainly I can actually, I've actually studied biology where I haven't studied computer security, but I have worked extensively through many of the books that have built people's careers. Or so I'm told books from my list, like Practical Malware Analysis.

I went through every line of that, or series cryptography or the MetaSploit book Hacking Art of Exploitation.

[00:04:36] **G Mark Hardy:** And you've really become sort of the guy that everybody sees at the security conferences. So you ended up starting No Starch Press 30 years ago. So congratulations. I mean, a lot of companies never make it past one or two years, but here you are three decades later. That's absolutely awesome. Now, when you started No Starch Press, where you're going to be focused on computer security, or was it, did it start in [00:05:00] biology and migrate over?

How did you end up being in this space?

[00:05:02] **Bill Pollock:** Oh, I forgot one important book publishing position. I, after Freeman, I went to Osborne McGraw Hill. Osborne was started by Adam Osborne, who wrote, who created the Osborne Luggable. But Adam was long gone and I was making computer books, so I actually was. And some people were envious in this.

I was making game computer game books in 1990, calling on Maxis, which was down the road in Alameda. Go see Will Wright over there. Now he's like this, you know, Sierra online games. So I made computer game books and I would edit these horrible big fat, you know, like documentation. The whole computer book business in the nineties was based around supporting piracy.

Essentially people would get early documentation, they would rewrite it and people would buy the documentation because they didn't get it, they didn't have the product. That changed, that's changed over the years. But that was really boring to me. So I tried to do some other interesting things. I did the same thing that I do today, which is I would [00:06:00] edit everything.

My biggest success, there was a book called Sound Lash for the official book, for lack of a better name. Basically people would try to put in sound watch or sound cards and couldn't get them to work. So we documented the tools that were in there, the software and such. And basically I think I lost five pounds editing that book because it needed a lot of work. I'm not exaggerating

[00:06:20] **G Mark Hardy:** No, I can believe it. I, that's your, I don't know if you'd recommend it's a diet program for people editing a book like that,

[00:06:26] **Bill Pollock:** It worked for me, but I didn't actually need to lose the five pounds I. I just did because I used, when I was younger, I used to work like, Nonstop. Now I probably work nonstop, but not in linearly. I just do a bunch of things so that, that, and when I got fired from that job I had a, the, when I was hired, they loved me.

Then there was a power vacuum, and then the new guy thought I was interesting to a point, and then after he was running around the office punching chairs telling me I should go see a psychologist, he can be, and it's like, great. I had a business plan. And I launched No Starch. So the plan was never [00:07:00] to do security, but to do tech books that had character.

And I started by doing books like the Needle Crafters, computer Companion that basically showed you it was way ahead of its time, how to use a computer for sewing and quilting. I did one on astronomy. I published the Guide to the Jewish Internet. I did a book on gardening and figuring everyone was using the web.

But really that was not happening in 1994.

[00:07:24] **G Mark Hardy:** I remember in the early days, even before there was a Google search that I knew one person who basically had one of his books he published or was really a list of all of his links, all the good cool stuff that he had organized and cataloged and things such as that. I think his name was Armen Moren, and he made a small fortune that way by just saying, Hey, I have indexed the internet, and here's a gigantic hierarchical directory that you can look for things. And of course, Google drove that out of business very quickly. But early on, I think those of us who weren't there in the nineties kind of assume that all the infrastructure that we rely [00:08:00] upon was there and it really wasn't.

And and so security books back then were say kind of few and far between. They might have been technical in terms of either here's how to do stuff. He said they were focused on piracy. Which I think was kind of interesting because I go back and look at some early books that we've had and I've got a few up here on my shelf.

And I think that. Some of those early volumes that came out, there were a bit of a risk, I think, not only for the author, but the publisher. It's kind of like the old

Abby Hoffman steal this book where it was a little bit of a counter-cultural where even the title of the book says, well go steal it. But were they that radical or were they really just technical people trying to make a point about here's how to use these new tools that are coming and how to be, make them more functional.

[00:08:43] **Bill Pollock:** Well, so one book that put us on the map early when it came to security and that actually brought me into the whole hacking slash security field, was steal this computer book, which I published in 1997, I rewrote the entire thing. The entire thing. And I collected all the software.

I had an [00:09:00] author, but it needed a lot of work. I did it. I almost canceled it. It went through two other editors. We, I put that out as an homage, Abby Hoffman, and people would say, what a great title. And it's like, not my title really. But anyway, that, that book gave me a really interesting introduction to a lot of, Kind of the hacking underground and also the kind of things that people do.

I think I followed one of, one thing that followed that was crack proof your software. I'd forgotten about that one. And that was someone who used the crack software. I used Hasta La Vista too. And he basically, and I learned about, you know, how people chop out the number gen, the generator, the code generators, and then you realize where the cracks come from.

It's like someone chopped out a bit of code and pushed it out there and made it into its own little application. That book didn't sell particularly well. Steel's computer book did sell very well and was actually on the publisher weekly bestseller list for a time. It hasn't been revised for years because it's, there's just a lot of work that has to be done.

But I would [00:10:00] say the book that really may have put us on the map was Hacking Art Exploitation by John Erickson. I met John at Rubicon, which was an interesting conference in Michigan. It was probably more black hat than anything. And John gave a talk on a matrix for password cracking, and I thought, this is cool.

This guy is the guy I want to meet. John had his own groupies. People followed John around. At that conference, everyone was ejected by the hotel the next morning. I didn't actually realize this by canine dogs and police. I got up in the morning, everyone was gone. It's like, what happened? I didn't get booted out because I didn't take a room under the hotel rate that, like the hotel showed discount rate.

So that's a lesson to everyone. Just maybe you don't want to use the show right. If you, depending on your conference and I had to go find them. They were scattered around the city, but but that book was the first book at the time. The books that people were buying were hacking, exposed, and not to take anything away from hacking exposed.

A lot of them [00:11:00] were foundstone people who've built their own businesses, very successful businesses, but a lot of those books were basically point and click, do this, and, you know, here's an attack. And I would look through these and it's like, I'm not real, really learning anything from them. So I published Hacking Order of Exploitation, which basically shows you how tax work with code and that book is only, has only gone through two editions.

The last one was 2008, and it's still usually in my top 10 Best sewers.

[00:11:27] **G Mark Hardy:** Wow.

[00:11:27] **Bill Pollock:** A testament to the way you can make technical books that don't date by focusing on core topics that people can learn over time. Practical malware analysis is probably 11 years old. It's still by far the best selling book on malware analysis.

[00:11:41] **G Mark Hardy:** And that's a very good point. I think I tend to be one of those people where people say, gee, mark, when are you going to get your book out? And part of me wants to say, well, I want it to be sort of evergreen. I don't want it to be. You know, windows XP Secrets or something like that. Or you know, going ahead in Internet Explorer eight are tips and tricks because those [00:12:00] obviously come already with a fuse that's lit, that's going to shorten it down.

But I think you raise a very good point that there are some general. Topics, how to think about things, how to go ahead and get the mindset around being able to look at a system, as you say is a hacker as someone who produces an outcome that the designer of the program, the code didn't think of you.

You go ahead and you look at a system and you go, wait a minute. I bet they didn't think about this. And then you pull something out. And it works. And that's, some of that's intuition. Some of that is I guess sometimes just who you are. because I've always been able to do that. And I think that's what attracted me to this line of work is ever since I had started working with systems, I could look at them and go that thing right there.

And do you find then that. In reading these books that they help to impart that ability to gain those insights? Or does it simply, is it like someone trying to read a book on playing the piano, but they don't know anything about music, so they end up just [00:13:00] pushing the keys in the right order?

[00:13:01] **Bill Pollock:** I always have made sure that when we mentor our authors that we're trying to we try to get, try to bring their voice out so you should feel like they're in the book. And we've, I have our editors focus on making sure that things are clear and we have editors in house and none of our competitors edit everything the way no one does edit the way that we do.

I mean, I used to rewrite six to eight books a year myself. I've not, I haven't done that since serious cryptography. And I, and when I say read write, I go through and read every line. I spend an hour a page on that book. But my basic directive to the editors is when your mind starts to undercut.

And if you're, and if you can't figure something out, try to puzzle through it. Editing. The editing process is a lot like writing code. When you're really dug into a book, you've got blocks of information in your brain that you're trying to reorganize to make sense of. I remember watching my son code.

It's very similar. It's a very intense it. It should be a very intense process. It's [00:14:00] generally two to three solid hours or just as with writing code, if someone interrupts you when you're trying to write a program, you basically have, you could spend an hour trying to get back to

[00:14:08] **G Mark Hardy:** Right. You lose the bubble and you got to go all back again.

[00:14:11] **Bill Pollock:** Well, the whole flow of the program, what you're trying to do, so it's the same thing with text.

If I would get interrupted, it's like, what? Yeah, give me half an hour. I'll get back to where it was. So I expect a level of engagement from our editors with the author where we're basically working with authors based on a series of notes that I've made over the years about things that we do when we edit.

Look, we want to make sure that code is explained. We don't want to over explain the code. We don't want to just load code, up code examples of something in, like in the case of our MetaPort book, which was by far the leading title, Metapod for years. Dave Kennedy has took the lead for the most

part. So that book we, Metis Wood is a very chatty product and if you want to have know how stuff works, you push a button, you'll get four pages of output.

So [00:15:00] when that book came to me after it was, it went through another editor's hands, I said, What is this? Why? Why do I need to read the output? I'll just push if I just want to get help, I just type, what is dash H and I have help. I don't need to print it in the book. So I paired that code down and focused on make.

It's not coded, it was just output. Focus on making it clear so you understand that there's an option. Take a look at the options. These are the options to use. We all have limited time. So why do I need a thousand page book on this product? What? So what? I think Mark Twain said the I would've written a shorter book, but I didn't have enough time or something like that.

[00:15:35] **G Mark Hardy:** I would've written a longer, I would've written a shorter letter if I had more time.

[00:15:38] **Bill Pollock:** Okay. Alright. Okay. Thank you. Someone knows, I mean, I should look it up, but anyway but that's the point. It's like it takes a long time to edit like that because you're editing like each line and basic overall structure. But that's what makes my book stand out in the market. I we, at least sales figures from Nielsen, which does TV ratings, they do book sales.

And you're [00:16:00] going to these markets and you look for what's selling's like? 300 copies, 200 copies, oh, 3000 copies or 6,000. There's the no starch book. And this happens consistently and sometimes it's 23,000 or it's 50,000. And in certain markets, there's a lot of over publishing going on right now due to the advent of print on demand and companies who they've seen their sales decreasing.

This is my estimate. No one's told me this, but they can see it. Their unit sales are increasing per title, so they just make more titles, which means less effort spent on making good books. I spend more effort on making good books every day I'm at every day I go to work.

[00:16:37] **G Mark Hardy:** And you know, it was interesting, I was reading something I think just last night about a generative AI tool that someone had open source. You said you just give it the parameters of what you want and it will write you an entire story and then you can. I'll publish it. And so now what we're going to see is the signal to noise ratio is just going to go through the floor

as all this [00:17:00] stuff comes out there and people have these Me too things when it wasn't even me.

But yet at no starch, it's kind of standing uniquely to say, no, this is solid stuff. And it represents not only well-written material, but extraordinarily well edited. And I personally I appreciate that because when I started working with Sands. Geez, more than a decade ago, my first job was working as an executive editor in some of the white paper program, and I was reviewing and writing and rewriting, and I still had my stronk and white that I can go look at and remember how all those little elements of style and the like.

But what was interesting is I found out that some people who were technically brilliant were quite honestly horrible writers when it came down to the English language.

And sometimes the reverse was true that people would write really tight prose, but they weren't saying anything of great Is that kind of what you find?

[00:17:53] **Bill Pollock:** Absolutely. Mean, I'm not going to give you a specifics

[00:17:55] **G Mark Hardy:** Yeah, exactly. We don't mention authors. never want to embarrass

[00:17:58] **Bill Pollock:** yeah. I mean, I can tell you, you [00:18:00] know, people said something like, I didn't realize that this person would touch a good writer. And it's like they're not, I mean, I rewrote everything but it's like good stage lighting.

I don't, I've never put my name on the cover of a book, even though in many cases people were actually reading mostly my writing

but

[00:18:14] **G Mark Hardy:** Yeah, I remember editing

a book, About, about. 14 years ago and I put an egg in there because for years I've been telling people about G Mark's law, half of what you know about security will be obsolete in 18 months. So I made sure that worked its way into print. So now you can go ahead and reference it.

Well say, go look at that book that was published way back when. And it's like, oh wow. And I never put my name anywhere on the book even though I had

done a lot of extensive work on it because that wasn't my job. And so, It's important that we stay in our lanes and as you think about that, as people come up with ideas and say, I really know a lot about something, or I think I know a lot about something, what's a good way to validate whether a person does or does not have a book?

And in their mind, can they come in there? Do they [00:19:00] write a little outline and you look at it and you go, meh? Or do you look at it and go, tell me more. What's the process? If somebody is thinking, I'd like to publish something, how do they go about doing that?

[00:19:09] **Bill Pollock:** One. One thing that I always keep in mind is that if you say you want to write a book on the topic, and I say, that's cool, that's only the beginning of the conversation because what you have in your mind may be completely different from what I think should be done. So I want, I. Every author to actually write a book proposal, A full plan.

Just like when you go to build a house, you don't just say like, I'm just going to build a three story house, looks like this. Great, let's start building it. Oh, we forgot. Oh, the beam doesn't go here. Or We have no beams. Well, there's no door out of the room. So, it's like an architectural plan. You're building a thing.

So I want to see not just the outline, I want to know the thought process. Like what? So I like people to write not just an A listing of chapters. I like to write what I call, for lack of a better term, a paragraph outline. Tell me in the paragraph what each chapter has. So you're basically writing essentially a synopsis of [00:20:00] the chapter you haven't written. Someone who I think has the best chances of success will be able to write that will be able to explain to you what's going to be in the book, and also paint a picture of what the book will look like. A book is a physical object. I mean, eBooks are not, but I don't, I start with always print book first.

So I say to authors, if you can picture the book in your mind and essentially turn the pages, you're well your way. If you can't, I'll help you get there. I'm on author calls all the time now. We went remote in March, 2020, so I mentioned to you before the call I'm spending probably five hours a day on video calls.

I used to reject every single one prior to March, 2020. No, I'm not getting on a call. I'm not turning on the video. I'm not getting on a call now. It's what I do all the time with my staff who's in 15 different states. And with authors, and I really enjoy the process of mentoring authors, helping people to kind of get to

the fun track, making sure they don't go down the primrose path that takes them off totally off course.

They write three chapters which they throw out, or they forget that [00:21:00] like if they don't write the outline, they'll be writing chapter six. This happens all the time and saying, oh, they should have been in chapter two, and everyone involved in the project is made crazy and authors lose steam. Another thing too is what I recognize with the book business is that you would see you've probably seen these super bibles that used to be published, these big fat giant tomes with nothing in them.

I mean, literally, like I, I'm very opinionated as you know, but I mean, but I'd look at it, it's like I remember looking at a book on networking and basically it was like, let's say a thousand pages long and 30 pages were useful. So think about the individual writing this. I mean, in the era of ChatGPT pt, maybe ChatGPT PT does all this stuff, I don't know, But take that person, like someone experienced like you and say G Mark, forget about all this basic stuff.

We're writing a book for experienced people right away. 500 pages don't get written because like, oh, I don't to give you all the basics. No, we are assuming that Rush REST Stations one, a book that I published is for experienced rust programmers. We [00:22:00] don't have to go through, cut and paste and turn the, push the power button.

That's how computer books used to be written. Start from the very beginning. Match the screenshots. Screenshots everywhere. And as an experienced person, you're like, I don't need all this. So start with, and I don't like to say intermediate because no one ever knows. You might say, I'm just kind of intermediate at this.

Yeah. And you've been doing this for 30 years or whatever. You're not intermediate, but in your mind the sharper you are, the more you know how, the more you know about what you don't know, like I'm i'll. So, so I think experienced, we all know where, if we're experienced, so write something through the experienced programmer or write something through the experienced security professional.

And there's, and more and more there's an overlap. You know, think back 20 years, people were not writing code security. You, when I published Python for Kids, that used to be my bestselling book at Hacker Cons.

It was

[00:22:51] **G Mark Hardy:** those are adults and.

[00:22:53] **Bill Pollock:** It was 40 year old guys. there were just very few women, especially back then and I'm, I keep trying to do what I [00:23:00] can to bring more women into this field, but it's like 40 year olds would just be picking up Python for kids.

And I say, oh, you must have a kid. No, it's for me. My son gave a lecture on Python at SchmooCon one year, I think he was 15. All these people surrounding him listening he's a computer scientist now. It's like, oh, your kid really knows this stuff. He did, and he actually was the tech reviewer on Python for kids.

But the, we know that there are 10 year olds who can run circles around us. Right. But back then, people were not coding, you know, and they would learn about writing extensions, writing stuff for mepo and HD more was coding. HD Moore was the wizard who could write code. And actually used it, but, and it's not that people who couldn't, weren't more any more equally brilliant, but it's just, we all have different skills.

But now there's this real merger,

[00:23:50] **G Mark Hardy:** It's interesting. Yeah. Now as you look at the books that you've published over these years, and there's been a lot of them are there. You mentioned a couple of best sellers. I think that was great. You almost kind of want to ask on the [00:24:00] backend, are there some books that you published that you kind of wish you didn't?

And not to necessarily insult or dis an author, but just simply because a lesson learned it missed the mark. Maybe the market had moved beyond the point when the book was addressed. Is there any lessons you learned on that as to what not to do?

[00:24:15] **Bill Pollock:** I learned one lesson when I published the book on Overclocking. I used to be into Overclocking. I had all the kits. I actually never used the kits. I didn't need to, I knew what they needed to do. Sorry, that's my nest speaking to you. So, one thing I left out of the Overclocking book was a section on cooling.

It's actually Keith Overclocking.

[00:24:33] **G Mark Hardy:** Yeah, I would hope so.

[00:24:34] **Bill Pollock:** But I didn't notice it because I knew all about cooling. So one thing is it doesn't, it's not necessarily helpful to find an expert to edit a book. It's often better to have someone who doesn't know who's learning from it. So that's one thing I learned from that.

I've released books. I know I've hit, oh, I did a big fat book called the eBay Price Guide years ago. I'm talking big fat book. Took a ton of time and I was so late to market. There were tools like it was [00:25:00] basically, A directory show, it made sense. It would've made sense five years before basically like what sold for what's, you get a feeling for what kind of targets?

I mean, in today's world it's like, why would you ever do that? But at the time you didn't necessarily have the kind of search tools. But by the time I released the book, there were great ways to find out what that information and the book was useless and we spent so many count countless hours on that.

I published the book.

[00:25:22] **G Mark Hardy:** yeah, please continue.

[00:25:24] **Bill Pollock:** No, I published a book called The Computer, phone Book. This what seems Laughable today. But basically and the whole companies have built businesses around this, basically like ways to dial companies, reach a live person. This was probably pre, this might have been pre-web, I don't remember.

No, I don't think so. But anyway, it was a cool idea. I, but it just didn't really, the market wasn't there, there was no need for it. And I was, and I didn't see. Well, I predicted the demise of the internet in 1994, I think. Or the web. I just said the web, it's just like a public library. It's going to go nowhere.

So I'm not a future by any means. [00:26:00] But I've, I was early to market with certain books like the Gardener's Computer Companion. Now people are probably using software for gardening. People were doing, I mean, I could go on, but like, I've definitely missed markets. I've been either ahead of the market or behind the market, and you don't want to come out too early and you certainly don't want to come out too late in today's world, with the advent of so many books, if you come out late, Into the like machine learning market, like there's so many books that don't sell.

You just become an also Ram, but.

[00:26:31] **G Mark Hardy:** That occurs to me. What I was getting ready to say a moment ago is that with the machine learning and now with the generative ai, I would think that if you try to put a book out, it'd be obsolete in 45 days. I mean, we're just changing at such a rapid pace. It's almost as if to say, don't read about it.

Just get your fingers on the keyboard and just spend hours with it, and until you start figuring it out.

[00:26:52] **Bill Pollock:** I heard exactly that from I was at m MIT and I knocked on the door of a very high profile AI researcher and I said, you know, a book publisher [00:27:00] said, I will never write a book because, and he said, because it'll be out of date in six months or less. So in that area. And that's what's happening.

And that's not an area for us. We will be doing a basic book about how AI works. And this book is actually great because AI fundamentally the basic stuff is probably not going to change that much, but all the applications and the latest advances and stuff that will change.

But at Core, AI is built on a core set of tools. So the people who learned about AI 20 years ago are not irrelevant. Today. We're not. I am amazed by how many books are coming in on ChatGPT. That seems pointless to me in the security field. I mean, when I talk about InfoSec I tend to stay away from tools because the tools change too quickly and focus on, for example, practical packet analysis, ways to use packets to analyze what's going on the network.

The most useful parts of that book for many people are the scenarios. And they'll just basically ignore the networking stuff. I published the TCP/IP guide in [00:28:00] 2003 or 2005, and that was IPV6 throughout. That book still sells today, just the way it did when it came out. It was way ahead of its time.

That book was early. No one was using IPV6, but now well probably still no one's using IPV6 but it's still relevant

[00:28:16] **G Mark Hardy:** Well, if you look actually at Google, if you Google the term. IPV6 adoption rate. You'll find that from Google, which they track all of their traffic over 40% now is IPV6 going from about 1% eight or nine years ago. And it look, it's like, I wish my 401k were like that. I wouldn't be doing this anymore.

I'd have my own island because it's just gone through the roof. And it's a normal process as we go there. And of course that's just kind of foundational protocol. So, but let's go back to an author. So somebody is developed an ability, they're really good at something. Someone said, you ought to write a book, or somebody says, I'd like to write a book.

Then they look out there, and of course there's all these publishers and things like that. What's the value of proposition for a potential author to come to [00:29:00] no starch press?

[00:29:01] **Bill Pollock:** Well, let's talk generally about the nature of the author book publishing arrangement. Whenever you sign a contract with a book publisher, you're giving up something with a publisher will pay you a royalty at some level. There are different things to look at in a publishing agreement, like we pay a flat royalty, which is unusual in the business as in if it's 15%, we're going to pay 50% on all on certain sales period.

We don't cut the royalty rate. We, it will increase for eBooks. We, it'll increase for foreign rights sales, but we're not cutting it for different types of sales. People are, you know, you're not a publishing professional, nor should you expect it to be expected to be one. But there are certain aspects of the publishing agreement that authors don't de evaluate, and it's.

What they'll see typically is, oh, this one's going to pay me 17%. No storage is only going to pay me 15%. But nominally you might get effectively 6% because of the different types of cuts. People don't know how to evaluate that stuff, but publishing is a service business number one. [00:30:00] And this is going to tie to kind of the way I've built my own business, right?

So when you go to a publisher, you ought to get a level of service. Otherwise, why bother? Why not just do it yourself? Well do it on Lean Pub. And there's, and in some cases there's absolutely, you know, it makes perfect sense. If you've got a high profile and you've, you can pull it together and you want to do the work, do it on Lean Pub.

You, you can do it on Amazon, create space, but they'll, you'll see the way that Amazon effectively monetizes every bit of the business. So if you want real marketing support, that's one cost. You want a professional cover, that's another cost. You want a real editor and you, when you add it up, it becomes very significant.

But in some cases, the book is so popular that you don't need that. So that's where you look at it and say, well, what can this publisher do for me? And in some cases, the answer is, I can do nothing more for you than they could do, but. In cases where a publisher can help you get on track, edit the writing, help you to stay on schedule, get the book into more than just Amazon channels, as in there are [00:31:00] multiple sales channels around the world.

Sell foreign rights, get in ebook vendors because no get into actual bookstores because no bookstores going to buy Amazon book books. There's no none. You know, maybe selling other countries physical books and such, depending on what the person wants. Those are things that a publisher can offer. But then through the author, the challenge is to ask those questions and ask before you sign the contract.

I, I say to authors too, like, if one, first, if a company sends you a contract, the, and you don't have to sign it right away if they're actually interested. If I say to you, this is interesting, talk to me. I've had a people I signed six years after I met them, 10 years, 20 years. If I think the person's good, I look for the person first.

Because I'm interested, you know, I'm going to be interested in three weeks too, if I actually am interested. If all I'm trying to do is just get books signed.

And each editor at most companies is incentivized to just acquire books. They're called acquiring editors for a reason. It just want to get stuff. And in today's world, where it's all print on demand, which basically means [00:32:00] effectively very little investment on the part of the publisher. It doesn't matter.

Like people are trained to say, well, what's your first printing? And people will tell you, well, you know, we print on demand. Why? Why would you care about that? Well, if I print \$10,000, 10,000 copies of a book and it costs me \$50,000, the argument is that publishers is making a significant upfront investment.

They're not going to just leave your book behind. And we do print offset. We do print 5,000 copies. We print 10,000, sometimes 25,000. Sometimes more. So that is a significant bit for me, but that's not why I'm choosing to back a book. I'm choosing to back a book because I believe in it. I think there's value in it.

I think it can actually work. I don't just collect books. My company publishes maybe 30, 40 books a year, max and I have competitors doing 50 to 100 books a month and. If you think about it simply by the numbers. Well, okay, well let's say you, that's an interesting option. You want to, you want one of their covers on your book.

But what are they actually bringing to the [00:33:00] table if all they're doing is saying, we're going to throw a, a cover around the book and you're going to be part of our list, what does that actually mean? Companies that people have known and have grown up with, have changed in direction. Companies that you, you can think of who were like the standard for certain areas.

Like we, we took over the whole Python book market because our competitor just left it behind. But because they're doing trainings, they're focused on, we don't do trainings. I'm not against doing trainings, but I don't know how to do it. I don't know how to do, like, I mean, if an author comes to us and says, well, can you, we want to do a book, and we have trainings to do, it's like, well, I don't have a training arm.

I make books.

[00:33:39] **G Mark Hardy:** And understand what lane is. So, you kind of a question I was wondering. So you have to imagine, a lot of listeners are probably wondering too. Let's assume that I take the time and I write a book and the proposal's good. You good. We write, it goes out there and it goes to press. And let's say it's, you know, what's a reasonable number of copies?

Recognizing that we're not Stephen King, so we're not selling to the world, we're [00:34:00] writing to a niche. If I sell 5,000 copies, am I knocking the cover off the ball or am I just scratching the surface?

[00:34:05] **Bill Pollock:** I mean, I have almost nothing, I think that sells 5,000 or fewer, but I see many books on the market that are selling in the low hundreds. I mean, which is really stunning not from my company. I have security books that have sold, you know, 50,000, a hundred thousand copies. I have security books that will sell, you know, maybe seven to 10.

But we're also, we also have to look at the ebook market. Basically. I've got print, I've got ebook, I've got foreign right sales. Those are three major contributors to revenue. So I look for books that where we have really, you know, decent right sales because we pay half of whatever the right sales are.

The ebook sales on tech books for us. Or maybe 50 50 some, it might be 60% ebook and 40% print. And that's not really what I want. I'd rather just the reverse, I'd rather sell like 60% print and 40% ebook because the authors are going to make more money on that. [00:35:00] We don't get the same amount of money for an ebook sale, because ebook sales are typically counted as reads.

So it's a just a, some little piece of the sale.

[00:35:09] **G Mark Hardy:** Right. So again, not committing to any particular book, but just for ballpark. So a potential office says, if I'm going to sit down and spend hundreds and hundreds of hours and I deliver a quality book, and it starts to sell, what are they looking at in terms of the remuneration? Is it going to be measured in the hundreds or thousands?

Will they break 10 grand if they're doing well, or do they break a hundred grand?

[00:35:27] **Bill Pollock:** I have authors who get \$300,000 a year for royalties. I have authors who get \$3,000. So the, I think the first thing is don't write to get rich. Don't write to replace your daytime job. I've got friends who do trainings in a weekend taking a hundred thousand dollars.

Very unlikely that you're going to see that in revenue. But use, use the book to build a business, to build your brand, to make a contribution. And that's another reason why when you go to the publisher makes money. Like the publishers that are bringing out a hundred books a month, [00:36:00] they're making money with aggregation by just collecting a bunch of stuff.

Nickels and dimes. Just sign everything. You can put it out under POD, do nothing. And I'm sure your readers have seen books where it's like, oh my God, did anyone edit this? It is all over the market. That's not the case with my company. You might see a good idea and you pick it up. It's like, oh my God, this is terrible that I never want to hear that about any of our books.

But the first thing is don't quit your day job. The, I recognize that every one of nearly every one of our authors has a day job. They're professional. That's why our authors set their own schedules. We're not going to be calling and saying, Hey, G Mark, I need the book in three weeks. I mean, the first thing I start with is when do you think you could finish?

The author puts the data in the contract. Unless I feel like the market is slipping away, I'm going to say, okay, we'll see you in the book in three years. Then it's our job to kind of help you stay on track and make sure that people have the direction and advice. But you, there are plenty of books on the market that [00:37:00] sell almost nothing today.

Because there are so many books out. So I've got my sales and marketing team involved early. I've got editorial people, I've got Penguin Random House, my

distributor involved early. We catalog books about a year in advance. I'm going for the bigger sales, but when we're talking about bigger, we're not Stephen King here.

I have Python crash courses is my title, and that has sold better than any techbook I've seen in my entire lifetime. It's sold. Our estimates are in multiple languages, close to 2 million copies in print worldwide. I've never seen a book sell like this.

[00:37:33] **G Mark Hardy:** That's impressive. Now, before you. I don't want to cut you off, but we're going to getting short on time. This has gone, we could probably talk for another hour, but the one thing I definitely wanted to talk about was what you started back in 2016. The No Starch Press Foundation, which is renamed the Hacker Initiative, and that's a public charity and it can make some significant impacts on people.

And again, before the call, we're talking about the fact that you have to follow a lot of [00:38:00] rules and it's not just, you know, you know, handing things out, but can you tell a little bit about some of the projects that you've funded in the past and then some of the things that people might look forward to that as being a possible candidate.

And I think your 2023 grant cycle is open right now if that's not correct.

[00:38:15] **Bill Pollock:** That's open now the. I personally don't make any decisions. The board makes decisions. So it's a, it is a true public charity. When I named it the no such press foundation, that was not an appropriate name. It suggested private foundation. It's a public charity and it's basically run by the IRS and the Attorney General.

And I just do, you know, I'm the chair. So the, a couple things that stand out, I that were interesting projects. We funded one group that is building a robotic arm to, to feed. Like an indigent population. And then the latest project that they had funded is a smart trashcan, which is an interesting project, like something that could actually make a distinction and I guess, potentially separate out different types of trash.

So, we funded a project to create a free [00:39:00] 5G network, and the idea was that you'd build this network. So when people were remote and they had to go and sign on to get an internet subscription, not every family can afford that. The idea was you build a free network that people can use and connect up and get, like, use that for teaching purposes.

We funded a project to do some research into quantum. Will it move the quantum research forward? Who knows? But the point of the, of Hacker initiative is not to determine whether a project will fail or not, but to find, to kind of support the idea. Just because someone fails at doing it doesn't mean the project was a failure.

So, but the way it's structured is we have a programming committee, we have a mentorship committee, and the programming committee deals with the actual program of the nonprofit. So they're reviewing applications which they then propose to the board, and ultimately the board reviews the shortlist and my other questions, and then it, the board signs off on, and the board is made up of multiple people.

So in terms of what they'll do this year, I don't know. I [00:40:00] don't know what projects they're talking about. It's a, it's an arms length thing. I don't they'll, they will come to the board with proposals, but, The best way to understand what we're looking for is to read the mission statement, because that's what we vote on.

Like there's a it's registered with the irs, it's approved by the irs. That's what the, that's what we have to follow is our mission. And there's a set of exclusions. And when it comes to the board level, does it meet the mission of the nonprofit, the of the charity? Does it violate any exclusions?

[00:40:30] **G Mark Hardy:** So if somebody had a really good idea that they just could use a little bit of help on the funding, how would they go ahead and contact the Hacker Initiative?

[00:40:38] **Bill Pollock:** There's a Google form@thehackerinitiative.org, hacker initiative.org and fill out the form and it goes to the programming committee and then they begin to review it. And it's while. And there's a lot of focus on cybersecurity. It's not a cybersecurity focused public charity. We define hackers broadly.

So hackers could be [00:41:00] someone in computer security, hackers, could be someone building some new engineering project, someone doing some kind of experimental work in a lab. And we look for impact and measurable results. These are not my terms, these are charity terms. So we need to be able to show our donors that this is the impact.

Otherwise, it's like, oh we send five kids to a program is not something we'll do. But if we help people to build something, five kids, build something interesting

that can then be shared widely, it has real impact. That's something we'd look to fund.

[00:41:31] **G Mark Hardy:** That's really great and I do appreciate both personally as well as professionally, which you've done because you've spent 30 years in this community, you've helped so many people a, become. Authors, but then also for those people who are the consumers of the books, to gain the knowledge and the professional capabilities to improve their careers and you've really been at the nexus of that.

And now the next generation here to be able to create a public charity and then allow that as a conduit for more good things. And so you've done an [00:42:00] awful lot and continue to do. A lot for this community and for that, I want to say thank you on behalf of all of our listeners who I share if they were here personally, would like to say thank you in person and I think it's really great.

Any last thoughts before we wrap up? Anything ideas you'd like to leave us with?

[00:42:15] **Bill Pollock:** When I think about where InfoSec is today, I compare it to the medical field. Remember I was on my way to join the medical field and when I realized at the time there were a massive number of trade magazines, everyone's got a specialty. And I see more and more of the community is like that. It's the field has matured dramatically.

There are tons of companies, tons of funding. And I think there's a lot, probably a lot of feeling of imposter syndrome. Why don't write any code or I don't know how to actually do malware analysis and I can't use a debugger. So I think we need to recognize that there are specialties in the field and some people are amazing at certain things and don't know anything about anything else.

Your endocrinologist might not know how to fix your knee and vice versa. So I see in many ways a field that's ready to, and maybe already is, I'm sure developing specialties. We've always had our [00:43:00] heroes in the InfoSec community, but now we've got real standout people. This person is amazing. As an assembly programmer, this person is amazing as a hardware hacker for, you know, dealing with firmware.

So much of it is apprentice work. So I'm looking now at areas where, I can fill in gaps like we publish recently published the Hardware Hacking Handbook, which is amazing, like voltage attacks and stuff. Like, it's really interesting work

by Colin o Flynn and Jasper on Wittenberg. Like I look for holes, things where, because how many books the people need to buy in the course of a year.

What I'd like is for each book that I bring out actually solves a problem, makes people a lot smarter. And if it's only 200 pages long, it's 200 great pages. It's not like, 200 pages of fluff. So you had asked earlier about an off call, about the name No Charge Press. I think of it as basically meaning no bullshit.

It doesn't, that's not a literal translation. Right. But it's not stuffy, it's accessible. But I want people to pick up our books and like, and say, oh my God, this is amazing. Oh, it's got, I never [00:44:00] understood that when I published Hacking Art of Exploitation, people would say, this is the best description of a buffer overflow, and it's five pages long.

There were entire books written about overflows. How much information do we actually need? You know, we need to understand stuff. We've got brains. We can go from there. I want people to be like, the reason I started a public charity is it's to unlock the potential I want the community to drive that I put in over a million dollars into that charity of my own money.

And to give back to the community. Unfortunately, I realize it's also a challenge to get people to understand what a public charity is. It's a lot more involved than I thought, but the money is still there, and we're looking for ways to make a difference with that money. And we need that insight from people or investment and it's harder, a lot harder than I thought.

But I hope that when I look back on my life as I do that, I think that I've made contributions to people's careers or opened up the possibility where someone said, I've been trying to understand this for 10 years. Thank you. I finally understand this. [00:45:00] I don't write the books, but I try to make sure they're on track and that they get the job done.

[00:45:05] **G Mark Hardy:** Well, I thank you for all the work that you've done, and I think it's been wonderful, and I appreciate you being part of the CISO Tradecraft podcast. So this has been our guest, Bill Pollock. Thank you for listening. This is your host, G Mark Hardy. If you're following us on your regular podcast channel, Give us a five star or thumbs up so others can find us as well.

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our community by helping other people get the message out. So until next time, thank you for listening and stay safe out there.