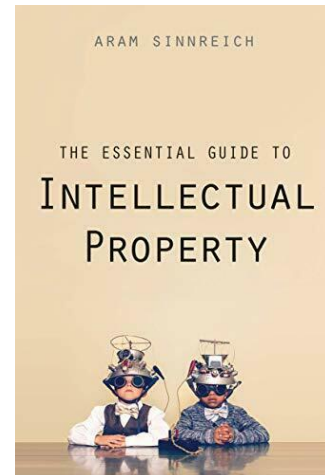


Aram Sinnreich, **The Essential Guide to Intellectual Property**, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019, 304 pp., \$25.00 (paperback).

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Intellectual property (IP) is a topic that often takes an entire semester to teach, and even then, these courses often only get to scratch the surface of the myriad and ever-expanding ways that IP plays a role in how we get to innovate, share, learn, and entertain in modern society. It is an enormous subject that is constantly in flux; at the risk of using an overwrought analogy, IP is an ocean, with vast expanses, towering waves, and mysterious creatures. It might be impossible to know everything about the ocean, but it might just be possible to build a boat with which to traverse it.



Aram Sinnreich's newest tome, **The Essential Guide to Intellectual Property**, does just that. The book serves as an introduction and overview of IP, meant to make the reader aware of its depths while also revealing just how much more there is to learn. As readers of his previous books might also expect, Sinnreich guides his readers through the messy world of IP using a keen wit and a good sense of humor. However, Sinnreich does not simply present the landscape of IP as a frictionless, objective field—smooth sailing, if you will—where the purpose and values of IP can be taken for granted. It quickly becomes clear that for Sinnreich, it is most important that his readers approach IP with a critical eye that can see it not just as tool of economic or technological progress, but also as, at various times, a carefully calibrated shield protecting creators from the digital onslaught; a tool of corporate control over practices of cultural expression and sharing; and a bargaining chip in international power struggles, where the losers are often the most vulnerable among us.

The book begins in its introduction with a brief outline of the many forms of IP that exist, and, in chapters 1 and 2, a review of their origins and limits. Chapter 3 follows with a set of examples showing how various forms of IP are integral to different cultural industries, and in chapter 4 how, in turn, these laws have influenced emerging forms of cultural expression. Chapter 5 delves into the flows of money and influence behind the creation and enforcement of IP law within the United States, followed in chapter 6 by an overview of how IP law development and implementation is working on the global scale. In chapter 7, Sinnreich discusses the role that piracy has played in IP discourses and policies. Finally, chapter 8 covers the most recent battles within and against IP law, including how IP law has addressed remix culture and the advent of digital technologies, as well as the copyleft movements that have arisen in response. Sinnreich ends the book by covering the IP law developments on the horizon now, and some prognostications as to what the future may hold. While the book does attempt to cover all the areas of IP, including trademarks, patents, trade secrets, and rights of publicity, Sinnreich focuses mostly on copyright and the creative

industries. However, he also uses surprising examples of how IP is being used in unexpected situations, like how patent laws written in the United States are affecting local markets for folk medicine around the world.

Sinnreich works hard to provide data that paint a picture of the current state of IP, digging deep into campaign finance investigations, international treaty development reports, and current events in copyright litigation. This is both a necessary strategy and an uphill battle—necessary in that this information is critical to giving the reader a thorough understanding of the current politics of IP, but an uphill battle in that, within a few months, many of these circumstances have already changed. Sinnreich acknowledges this struggle, and puts these data to good use, making them work double duty as a window into today's practices and evidence supporting a longer-term critical argument about the fundamental principles, pervasive abuses, and promising reforms of IP.

Where the book contributes most to the IP/copyright literature genre is in its intense focus on how the sausages of domestic and international IP laws get made. For his discussion of the politics of IP regulation within the United States, Sinnreich leans heavily on Jessica Litman's (2001) notable book, *Digital Copyright*, which chronicles media industries' heavy involvement in the development of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. He adds to it his own deep dive into how media industries shape laws and regulations through enormous and expansive campaign contributions, ersatz nonprofits, and dark money vehicles like Super PACs. In doing so, he reveals how media industries wield massive financial influence, spending hundreds of millions of dollars in lobbying and contributions to buy as many seats at the table as they can—and thus, leaving few, if any, for libraries, universities, and civil society groups.

Looking beyond the story of IP in the United States, Sinnreich turns his sights abroad, explaining how IP policies are shaped through international treaties and agreements, which are frequently engineered by a small handful of stakeholders from powerful nations. These international pacts, which rely on the "harmonization" of IP policies across national and regional boundaries, are highly controversial. As Sinnreich explains, on the one hand, having a single set of IP policies smooths transnational trade and investment, and makes more investment-intensive products available to more people around the world. On the other hand, this kind of smoother trade is often to the advantage of wealthier nations whose IP must then be protected and policed by smaller ones, in addition to concerns about cultural protectionism and forms of cultural production that these forms of IP may not adequately protect. However, throughout all these debates over how IP should be regulated internationally, Sinnreich notes that the original spirit of IP is lost in the incessant pursuit of control and profit. Instead of furthering the supposed mission of IP—to incentivize creation and enrich the public sphere—this international IP regime "reduces the universe of arts and ideas into little more than a set of pieces to be moved around a sheet of cardboard imprinted with a map of the world, like toy soldiers in a game of Risk" (p. 175). While foreign policy discussions like this can frequently lose the reader in the weeds of dense terminology, inscrutable acronyms, and endless historical specifics, Sinnreich does a masterful job at presenting enough detail and context to make the reader feel like they understand what is at stake, and where they should keep digging if they want the complete picture.

This ability to show the reader the many rabbit holes that IP offers without inadvertently tumbling down them is one of the book's strengths. In this way, the book is precisely the kind of "essential guide" you want for relative newcomers to a topic; it provides not only a mass of information about IP, but also an

extensive bibliography, drawing from a broad array of disciplines—communications, political science, legal theory, anthropology, and history, to name a few—thus providing readers with a rich well of additional resources to visit. The breadth of sources also serves to further make Sinnreich’s point, that IP is not an issue isolated to a single domain of concern, but a regime that touches upon nearly every facet of contemporary culture.

Although the author describes the book as one that will allow readers to “participate in the debate and to interpret and apply the laws according to your own point of view” (p. 3), that does not mean that the author’s own voice and point of view has been totally excised. This critical overview of IP shows Sinnreich’s own deep roots as a communications scholar of copyright in the ways that Sinnreich follows the currents of power that move the ocean of IP, and how these currents often manipulated to try to drench or drown racial, economic, and indigenous inequities.

Reference

Litman, J. (2001). *Digital copyright*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus.