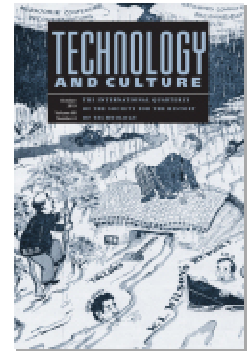
Authors and Apparatus: A Media History of Copyright by Monika Dommann (review)



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Technology and Culture, Volume 60, Number 4, October 2019, pp. 1123-1124 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2019.0109*

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Authors and Apparatus: A Media History of Copyright.

By Monika Dommann. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019.
Pp. 262. Hardcover $41.95.

"We historians always come to things late," Monika Dommann writes in an epigraph for the ages. It is the curious weakness of history as a discipline to pick up on new theories and methodologies only after they are no longer new. That can also be a strength when historians resist making hasty, monocausal conclusions, though as Dommann notes, even the best scholars can get carried away when interpreting the meaning and impact of new technologies, notably the Internet. A professor at the University of Zurich, Dommann has provided a sweeping account of shifting attitudes toward property rights and associated interest groups in Western Europe and the United States, primarily between 1850 and 1980. Her book offers a synthesis of the robust—and contentious—literature on copyright that has flourished since the 1990s.

Authors and Apparatus is "a legal history of media as well as a media history of legal norms" (p. 7). Legal scholars and historians, Dommann points out, often differ in how they approach the law; the former often seek to find the continuity of law's evolution over time, whereas the latter are more open to interpreting legal change "as a caesura or epistemic break" (p. 17). Dommann deftly navigates the different disciplinary approaches of legal and social history, literary studies, and history of technology. Unlike some scholars in this field, she does not overemphasize the ideal of the romantic author in shaping copyright historically, instead giving due recognition to the law's frequent grounding in pragmatic, commercial concerns.

The book's brisk chapters center largely on particular technologies or media, such as facsimile and microfilm (chapter two), the early "talking machines" (chapters three and four), and photocopying (chapter nine). Its discussion of the evolution of microfilm provides a particularly compelling and succinct addition to the history of information technology. At the same time, the book's grounding in the media studies literature is thin at times; for instance, its discussion of the changing cultural, political, and technological modalities of sound recording misses relevant work by historians such as Lisa Gitelman and David Suisman or the musicologist Joanna Demers. Further, the discussion of the "information explosion" in chapter nine might have been stronger if Dommann paused to consider what the concept of information meant in the rapidly changing scientific and political context of the early postwar era (p. 149). After all, the 1940s and 1950s saw advances in computing and new academic disciplines of information theory and cognitive science that reshaped how scientists, and eventually the broader public, understood human expression and communication. Americans and Europeans increasingly thought of all kinds of art, knowledge, and technol-

ogy as merely various kinds of *information*, in ways that likely influenced how they understood conflicts over property rights in new domains (such as software or folklore) in the 1960s and 1970s.

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2019
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At the same time, *Authors and Apparatus* makes an intriguing argument about the sometimes-tense relationship between academic culture and copyright. Scholars of many stripes grew accustomed to receiving free copies of research in the 1950s and 1960s, as freewheeling use of the Xerox machine fueled the mechanisms of academic collaboration, exchange, and (crucially) reputation-building. In the process, scholars became increasingly alienated from commercial justifications for enforcing any scarcity of information—arguably setting the stage for the academic critique of copyright that burst onto the scene in the 1990s.

The greatest strength of *Authors and Apparatus* is the capacious territory it covers, stretching across the Atlantic and encompassing everything from microfilm to magnetic tape to Google. The book offers an elegant entrée into the law of copyright and the history of media, particularly because of its transnational approach, as well as the historical distance made possible by Dommann's choice to close with the 1980s. Sometimes coming to things late can be a good thing.

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Designing an Internet.

By David D. Clark. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018. Pp. 432.
Hardcover $32.95.

Designing an Internet is an excellent, book-long case study in a key theme in the history of technology: the technologies we rely upon might well have evolved along different paths, and thinking through possible futures requires understanding the decisions (and assumptions, and coincidences) that got us to where we are. In *Designing an Internet*, David D. Clark walks readers through how the Internet works, alternate ways an internet might work, and the history that led to one design winning over another.

This is partly a book about history ("The design of the Internet evolved as it was reduced to practice, and its design carries its history in various decisions and the interactions among them" [p. 129]) and it takes an approach that will be familiar to historians and STS scholars ("The Internet is deeply embedded in the larger social, political, and cultural context" [p. 2] and it "does not take the current Internet as a given" [p. 1]), yet Clark is not primarily a historian of technology. Rather, he himself was a key figure in the development of the Internet, and brings a practitioner's expertise