Intellectual property is the most pervasive yet least understood way we regulate expression. Despite its importance to so many aspects of the global economy and daily life, intellectual property policy remains a confusing and arcane subject. Intellectual Property: A Very Short Introduction clarifies both the basic terms and the major conflicts surrounding this area of law, offering an introduction to copyright, patents, trademarks, and other forms of knowledge that are subject to global law and regulation. It illustrates the powers and limits of intellectual property, distilling the complex tangle of laws, policies, and values governing the dissemination of ideas, expressions, inventions, creativity, and data collection in the modern world.

1. How to read Starbucks, or why intellectual property matters more than you think

Intellectual property is a core function of the cultural elements from which we build meaning and of the commercial ecosystem that fuels so much human activity. Global companies, such as Starbucks and Coca Cola, have mastered both dynamics. Understanding the intellectual property ecosystem demands a full acknowledgment of the justifications for these systems of law and practice and an account of their consequences—both positive and negative. “How to read Starbucks; or why intellectual property matters more than you think” considers the justifications of intellectual property and its globalization and explains the main branches of “intellectual property” law: patent, trademark, copyright, and trade secret law.

3. Patents and their discontents

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No truly global patent system exists; some treaties ensure that there is mutual respect for patents, but unlike copyright, patents must be registered in individual states to ensure maximum protection. “Patents and their discontents” outlines how patents work, how a patent is acquired, and how it is enforced. Using the case of nanotechnology, which bridges the conceptual gaps between substance and information, hardware and software, and technology and science, it examines the complexities and contradictions of the patent system. It concludes that the struggle to design an ideal patent system—one that creates just enough incentive to drive invention forward yet does not stifle markets nor drive up prices for important products—continues.