Book review:

Cranor, L.F., & Wildman, S. S. (Eds.). (2003). *Rethinking rights and regulations: International responses to new communications technologies.* Massachusetts: MIT Press.

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In an academic world filled with conferences, the annual Telecommunications Policy Research Conferences in the United States sound like compulsory events, at least based on this collection of papers from the 30th meeting in 2002, the Research Conference on Communication, Information, and Internet Policy. And while you'd never think so from the title, this book contains genuinely thought-provoking, interesting and relevant reading in the field of communications design and delivery.

Theories and incisive thoughts, at once appropriate to the Australian environment and exciting because of their global applications, leap from the text from page 1. In fact, they leap at such a rate – I could barely keep the highlighter up to them – that it became axiomatic that the exact citation I had been looking for to assist my latest research project would appear on the next page to which I turned. There are other tiny gems along the way, too, such as Robert Cannon's "the Internet was born on an October day in 1969" (p. 69).

The editors note that the book's relevance is based on the recognition that "because technologies are embedded in social systems and are understood in this context, responses to new technologies may be as varied and as complex as the social systems that incorporate (or reject) them" (p. *xi*). Thus, the collection displays the contributors' "attempts to better understand new technologies and their implications for various societal interests".

There is a heavy accent on technological and economic determinism in this volume, to the extent that I fear that those theorists who fundamentally challenge these deterministic lines of thought might also feel less than comfortable with most of the contributors' conclusions. Likewise, there is an emphasis on law and 'dry' economics, the kind 'wets' like me also reject in favour of more socially-amenable – and costly – policies. However, it bodes well for the 'wets' to understand the 'dry' positions, if only to know thine enemy.

Dan Hunter's chapter on "cyberspace as place" (and others, such as one by Mark Lemley) unlocks the interesting concepts of what domain registries and internet service providers are actually selling, and what we as communicators (and as individuals) think we are using and buying 'on the Internet'. Hunter canvasses the 1990s concept of a 'digital commons' in which Internet users think they have free reign in cyberspace. Faulhaber and Farber (p. 199) compare this commons to the situation now affecting international fisheries, in which "fisheries … became overfished and stocks have had to be allocated; markets are the most efficient way to allocate these resources". However, Hunter challenges the market-forces concept with the looming 21st century reality of a "digital anticommons", in which "multiple parties have an effective right to preclude others from using a given resource, and as a result no-one has an effective right of use" (p. 17).

The stand-out chapter is Number 6, *Some Economic of Wireless Communications*, by Yochai Benkler, then director of the Engelberg Centre for Innovation Law and Policy and of the

Information Law Institute at the New York University, now a Professor of Law at Yale. Benkler dissects the issue of public communications using the at-first unlikely scalpel of information theory, then the more obvious tool of economics and, naturally, law. There are times – especially during passages heavy with United States-based law – that readers outside the US might drift away, even though Benkler tries to place aspects of US communications law into a global context. That said, the information theory and economics of Benkler's argument unlock stunning truths which policy makers elsewhere should read and apply.

The reason Australian and other policymakers need to understand communications law is that "a critical aspect of the understanding of any new technology is who uses it any why" (p. *xiii*). Those of us in the communication fields of public relations and journalism would recognise this truism as an acknowledgment of the importance of "audience studies" and "understanding your publics". The editors also remind us that "rights influence behavior (sic) by setting bounds on what is permissible" (p. *xvii*).

In summary, this is an extremely useful text for research, as well as curriculum development. Use it to fill in those empty layovers at airports, but not for the beach.