The Cambridge Handbook of Technical Standardization Law

Technical standards like USB, Wi-Fi, and Bluetooth are ubiquitous in the modern networked economy. They allow products made and sold by different vendors to interoperate with little to no consumer effort and enable new market entrants to innovate on top of established technology platforms. This groundbreaking volume, edited by Jorge L. Contreras, assesses and analyzes legal aspects of technical standards and standardization beyond those covered in its companion volume (patents, competition, and antitrust). Bringing together leading international experts, it focuses on key areas of technical standardization law including administrative, trade, copyright, trademark, and certification law. This comprehensive, detailed examination sheds new light on the standards that shape the global technology marketplace and will serve as an indispensable tool for scholars, practitioners, judges, and policymakers everywhere.

Jorge L. Contreras is a Professor of Law at the University of Utah S.J. Quinney College of Law and an internationally recognized authority on the law of technical standard-setting. His work has been cited by scholars, courts, and regulatory agencies throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia, and he has published more than 100 scholarly articles and chapters. He has twice received first prize in the Standards Engineering Society’s scholarly paper competition, and in 2018 was awarded the Standards Education Award by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) Standards Association.
The Cambridge Handbook of Technical Standardization Law

Further Intersections of Public and Private Law

Edited by

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Preface

Technical standardization policy has been animated for more than a century by pursuit of efficiencies from interoperability, and also in recent decades by active facilitation of economic and innovation gains achievable through competitive markets benefiting from network effects. Science and technology studies (STS) or Foucauldian power-knowledge frameworks diversify this perspective, animating inquiry into ways in which standards enact power allocations, distinguish as well as unify, exclude as well as normalize. National security priorities and geopolitical considerations add additional layers, as do state industrial or protectionist policies. Whether and how to take account of wider societal interests and state interests affected by standards and standardization processes, and what allocative mechanisms or compensatory remedies should accompany the distributional effects and externalities (positive and negative) of standards, are public policy questions that manifest themselves also in public law, but in the fragmentary and uneven ways traced in this lucid and thoughtfully constructed book.

Whereas the companion volume examines intersections of political economy and law in the relations of technical standards to patents and the relations of standards and patents to antitrust or competition law, the present volume traverses other topics of technical standardization law with private–public implications that, if for the most part less litigated, are nonetheless fundamental. By “law” the contributors tend to mean formal law (state/national law, or intergovernmental law), in contrast to social norms or other forms of normative ordering with law-like features. The term “regulation” may be deployed to encompass this wider range of normative orderings. While the organizing frame of the book is technical standardization and formal law, the specificity of this frame in fact enables the book to shed much light on relations between standardization and regulation more broadly.

The contrast routinely drawn between formal (state) law and technical standardization owes much to U.S. styles of capitalism and regulation, including the federal government policy which since 1980 has explicitly been to favor private standard-setting and to prioritize use of private standards in government regulation and procurement. Characteristic of U.S. technical standardization practiced by private standards development organizations (SDOs) are the general principles that such standardization should be voluntary, open, balanced, transparent, and consensus-based. Such principles may be incorporated into the constitutive or membership rules of the SDO, or the social norms shared by its participants inter se. Much of their de facto superintendence and enforcement, however, comes from state action, ranging from legislative delegation or ratification, to administrative actions and import controls, to government procurement rules and consumer protection, to decisions of courts in collateral litigation or on
tort liability of SDOs. The deployability of this suite of state measures in relation to foreign or transnational SDOs and their standards depends on the technology and on the state’s position in the global market. Small and less technology-capable states often have little or no impact on private SDOs, and many prefer standard-setting by or under the auspices of bodies with governmental participation such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) or the Codex Alimentarius. In transnational contexts, some meta-regulation of SDOs-as-regulators is supplied by bodies such as ISEAL, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). These meta-regulators are themselves in turn regulated, including through global administrative law and some state controls. This entire zone of regulation and meta-regulation generates numerous research questions on inter-institutional relations, the legal management of hierarchies and their intersections with networks, the resolution of conflicts among different entities and interpretive competence for different standards, the place of conflicts of laws (private international law) doctrines and techniques in this regulatory zone, and legal puzzles concerning the maintenance or desuetude of older standards which retain their formal status but may have been partially eclipsed by newer instruments or practices.

These issues with regard to regulation and meta-regulation are instantiations of a broader topic: to what extent is work on legal aspects of technical standardization informative for other areas of standardization? Technical standardization and the administrative law of regulated economic sectors share the general characteristic that they blend sector-specific practices and norms on the one hand, with cross-cutting principles and institutions distinctive to the whole field on the other; and in each case the blend is in some measure embedded in wider structures of constitutional law, international law, and global political economy. Much of the modern legal material animating the companion volume relates to telecommunications, information technology, and digital economy industries. For the issues addressed in this volume, the cross-cutting features are to the fore, the sectors currently or prospectively implicated are more diverse, and the range of articulated interests is wider.

Health and safety regulation, and the specifics of food safety governance, each examined in this volume, have distinctive standardization and supervisory practices in which public interests have a formalized salience but mixed success in continuous struggles with large economic interests. These practices grapple with pervasive problems of regulatory capture and asymmetric information, but also with immense global capabilities gradients and preference divergences, and with newer regulatory problems such as combinations of individually benign standards-compliant products inadvertently co-producing dangerous risks.

At a more distant remove from the locus of technical standardization are the practices of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standardization. The multi-stakeholder institutional forms for standards production and certification as exemplified by the private Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) or the hybrid private–public Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), contrast in various dimensions with major information technology technical standardization bodies such as the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) or the IEEE. But even these wide chasms are bridged by some cross-cutting issues on which this book provides much informative material. The following are four examples.

The business models of different SDOs depend on finding means to raise revenue. Some claim copyright in their standards or trademarks in their distinctive names, and seek income from licensing fees; others privilege members of the SDO in access to or use of these standards or trademarks, in part as recompense to (or inducement of) members for their support of standards development. Chapters in this book highlight numerous challenges to these strategies,
Preface

including longstanding rule-of-law objections to commercial controls on free access to those standards which have status in formal law.

Open standards and open-source culture in software development provide an important counter-point to single-company or platform standard-setting and to SDO standardization amidst thickets of patents and contract-chains. The open standards ecosystems necessarily employ some regulatory forms with regulatory effects, which in turn are touched by formal law. The standpoints brought to the study of these in this volume provide useful insights for open-standards as complements to or substitutes for traditional standardization in areas beyond software.

Certification of compliance with standards can be undertaken by SDOs, by standards users directly (self-certification), or by third-party organizations that may or may not be specifically accredited for this function. As the relevant chapters in this volume show, the law of certification, certification marks and labeling, certification intermediaries, and accreditation is piecemeal and likely in need of some elaboration and reform, particularly in transnational contexts.

Standardization, and the formalization of standardization process, can be undertaken with an eye to averting the prospect of formal legal regulation, or to influencing the approach taken by regulators or by courts in litigation.

In concluding, an observation on the shifting extent and configuration of the space of technical standardization may be made. The present volume, with its more eclectic range of topics, concentrates geographically on the United States and Europe. The companion volume, however, in its study of FRAND licensing and other issues concerning standards-essential patents, includes chapters on China, the EU, India, Japan, and the United States, as well as South Korea. While the shaping of practice on technical standardization in the contemporary global economy has been much influenced by North Atlantic industries and regulatory ideologies, together with Japanese participation, the rising scope of other Asian advanced-tech economies and the re-equilibration of global politico-military and soft power are prompting changes in participation in existing SDOs as well as the growing influence of a more diverse set of standardizers and approaches to standardization. Struggles over standard-setting for, and deployment of, 5G wireless communications technology were an early marker of the judders involved in this global re-balancing. Searches for new pathways in this more contentious environment include cross-operable devices capable of running on different platforms, such as politically facilitated agreement on commercial mobile communications devices enabling the user to move between any of the four main governmental Global Navigation Satellite Systems (GPS, Glonass, Galileo, Beidou). The coexistence of deep globalization with intensified nationalism and perturbations in existing orders poses heightened challenges to hitherto dominant models and institutions of technical standardization. As the chapters in this book demonstrate, law in this field is always engaged with maintenance and innovation. Both can be expected to take on a new valence under unsettled conditions of global re-ordering.

Benedict Kingsbury
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Much of the relevance and timeliness of this book can be attributed to the deep engagement of its authors in the issues and controversies surrounding technical standardization and the law. As such, many of us have been directly involved in counseling, litigation, and transactions affecting the cases, agencies, and organizations discussed in this book, including as attorneys, experts, arbitrators, and employees. Personally, I served for two decades as legal counsel to the Internet Engineering Task Force, a major international standards-development organization, I have represented numerous firms in their dealings with other standards bodies, I have formed and represented several standards-development consortia, I have appeared as an expert witness in standards-related litigation on behalf of both patent holders and product manufacturers, I have served as an arbitrator in a large FRAND-related dispute, and my academic research has been supported by grants from both public and private sources. The details of these relationships, as well as similar relationships enjoyed by many of the chapter authors in this volume, are disclosed in greater detail in the relevant papers, articles, and chapters, the biographical sketches contained in this volume, and our personal and institutional websites. Nevertheless, the reader is assured that all views expressed herein are of the individual authors, writing as respected experts in their fields, and do not reflect the views or opinions of any employer, client, or funder.

The Editor