

# Unlocking the connection between science fiction and patents

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Imagine diving into the world of futuristic stories where spaceships soar and gadgets do incredible things. Now, think about how those ideas become real things we use. Camilla Hrdy, professor of intellectual property law, and her co-author, former Akron Law assistant professor Daniel Brean, have made new findings about the connection between science fiction and patents.

Using documents maintained in a private research archive at Syracuse University, Hrdy and Brean learned that the famous [science fiction](#) editor Hugo Gernsback had some unique views about the nature of science fiction and the role of [patents](#).

In 1926, Gernsback established and served as the editor of the world's first magazine entirely dedicated to science fiction. But he wasn't just a magazine editor. He was also a dedicated engineer and innovator, leaving behind a legacy of more than 30 patents. Within his editorial contributions to his magazines, Gernsback shared the view that a well-crafted science fiction narrative resembles a patent—an official record submitted to the government detailing a fresh, practical and innovative creation.

Gernsback argued that science fiction stories are like patents because they disclose future technologies that, even if they cannot be practiced today, might one day be possible. He believed that science fiction stories inspire readers to figure out how to make those inventions and noted that many of those readers will go on to get patents for inventions they learned about in science fiction.

Many science fiction authors inspire many later inventions but cannot usually obtain their own patents because their inventions are not usually capable of being practiced at the time the author describes them. Gernsback believed this was unfair and sought to change this. In a 1952 speech he gave to the World Science Fiction Convention, he argued that Congress should amend the United States patent law to make it easier for science fiction authors to apply for patents on the inventions they describe in their stories.

Even though Gernsback's idea didn't become law, Hrdy and Brean think it's still worth thinking about. So many things in existence today, such as ChatGPT and the Metaverse, were inspired by science fiction stories.

"This does not mean all science fiction authors should be able to get patents," Hrdy says. "That would be a bad policy. But we should recognize these authors' influence on the present."

As Hrdy and Brean dove into old papers and books, they felt like they were traveling back in time. And this journey of discovery reminds us that the past holds secrets that can help us understand the present and even guide us into the future.

Provided by University of Akron

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