guns yielded an average of more than $150 (in 1976 dollars), three times more than in robberies committed with other weapons. Thus, even if the street price for a handgun tripled, robbers could recoup their expenses after two or three crimes. Moreover, if handguns were *completely* prohibited, criminals could easily create high-powered homemade weapons. Afghan tribesmen, Wright notes, make rifles capable of handling Soviet AK-47 cartridges using technology far less sophisticated than that available to the Mafia.

Social science research indicates that "gun control" laws do not reduce crime. But Wright maintains that this does not necessarily mean that such laws should be abolished; an equally plausible case can be made from social-science evidence that stricter, nationally standardized gun controls might be the solution. In short, Wright says, researchers can show that existing policies do *not* work, but they can rarely demonstrate that a new policy will be *more* effective. The gun-control debate, like most other similar controversies, centers not on "facts," but on "values, ideologies, and world views" impossible to quantify.

PRESS & TELEVISION

Copyright Confusion

"Copyright Cracks Up" by David Bollier, in *Channels* (Mar. 1988), 19 West 44th St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

"Only one thing is impossible for God," Mark Twain once remarked. It is "to find any sense in any copyright law on the planet."

Twain's quip, notes Bollier, a *Channels* contributing editor, aptly describes the current imbroglio over the ownership of TV programs. Television copyright law, he argues, has become a "baroque monstrosity."

Even using photocopiers, reproducing printed material is relatively expensive. Television shows, however, can be broadcast to millions of homes at an extremely low cost. New technologies such as videocassette recorders and cable television further reduce the expense of duplicating a TV program, increasing the odds that a show will be broadcast without a copyright-holder being compensated.

Copyright owners say they should be paid every time their work is broadcast on television or duplicated for home use. But the courts and Congress have ruled that ownership of *intellectual* property is not the legal equivalent of owning personal property; a copyright represents a share of an "intangible creation" whose use must be carefully defined.

Since 1976, Congress has introduced 420 amendments to U.S. copyright law, proposing such custom-crafted fixes as royalty taxes in attempts to provide fair compensation for copyright-holders affected by new technologies. But Congress has blocked more stringent proposals, such as taxing blank videotapes or requiring installation of anticopying chips in videocassette recorders. In 1984, the Supreme Court further thwarted copyright owners by ruling that private, noncommercial copying of television programs does not violate copyright law.

Technology will continue to complicate the copyright question. Computers, for example, can now artificially produce lifelike images. Such synthetic systems, in effect, "could allow stars to stage comebacks after death," creating knotty legal problems. How would W. C. Fields's estate, for example, be compensated for a "new" Fields comedy?

Bollier predicts that copyright disputes will continue to rise in frequency and complexity. Yet as copyright expert Robert Kost observes, these discussions, however arcane, represent "the foundation of capitalism in the information age."

Misreporting Economics

"Business News: The Terrible Truth" by John F. Lawrence, in *Fortune* (Apr. 25, 1988), Time and Life Building, Rockefeller Center, New York, N.Y. 10020-1393.

"ECONOMY WEAKENING, EXPERTS SAY," was the headline of the lead front-page story in the February 2, 1988 *Miami Herald*. "For once, economists are in agreement," the story began. "The big chill everyone feared is here."

A month later, the *Herald* changed its mind. In a story buried on the business page, the *Herald* reported that America's gross national product and the Commerce Department's "leading indicators" of economic trends were *rising*, not falling. The "chill" had vanished.

Lawrence, a fellow at the Gannett Center for Media Studies, notes that such tacit retractions of "hyperbolic" economic news are commonplace. The press creates "news where none exists."

Consider the monthly index of "leading indicators" issued by the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis. This index, combining 11 statistics, such as new orders for consumer goods and changes in costs of materials used for manufacturing, is first issued in incomplete form, then revised later when more accurate information is available. Journalists frequently produce gloomy stories based on *preliminary* estimates, even though *revised* figures show different patterns. For example, the *Washington Post* reported on May 30, 1987 that "LEADING INDICATORS PLUMMET 0.6 PERCENT IN APRIL"; a month later, revised Commerce Department figures showed the "plummet" had not taken place.

Trade statistics create similar problems. Some years ago, Congress began requiring the Commerce Department to issue trade statistics twice; first, with freight and insurance charges on imports added, then, two days later, with these charges removed. The second figure is significantly smaller than the first. In December 1987, for instance, the U.S. trade deficit was $12.2 billion *with* freight and insurance and $10.6 billion when these charges were removed. Journalists frequently report the higher figure, thus making trade deficits appear worse than they actually are.

Instead of playing up *monthly* economic statistics, Lawrence suggests that journalists focus on less volatile *quarterly* "moving" averages, based on revised numbers, which more accurately chart economic trends. He also calls on business editors to curb the use of "Second Coming headlines" that may create unjustified alarm among readers.