Plagiary, Googling, and the Mouse: Is The Internet Killing Our Ability To Do Research?

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The Internet is a powerful tool that has changed the way we access information. However, it has also enabled plagiarism and the use of online sources without proper attribution. This has raised concerns about the credibility of research and the academic integrity of students.

In a recent survey conducted by the Electronic Publishing Initiative at Columbia University, it was found that 99 percent of students stated that they used the Internet for research. Of these, 46.5 percent used Google as their primary search engine. This has led to concerns about the reliability of search engines and the need for proper citation and attribution.

In an article in *Against the Grain*, William M. Hannay argues that the Internet is not the enemy of research. Instead, it is a tool that can be used effectively if proper guidelines are followed. He emphasizes the importance of using a variety of sources and verifying information from multiple sources.

In conclusion, the Internet is a valuable resource for research, but it is essential to use it responsibly. By following proper citation practices and verifying information, we can ensure that the Internet remains a valuable tool for students and researchers alike.

And it is not only in academic studies and surveys that evidence of the problem can be found. ABC’s “Primetime Thursday” aired an hour-long report on cheating in school on April 29 of this year. Primetime’s investiga- tion found cheating on campuses everywhere — from top public high schools and colleges to Ivy League universities. Students described the powerful temptation to cheat, telling ABC they are under intense pressure to get good grades — and keep up with peers who cheat on exams and papers. “It’s unfair on your part, if you’re studying ... so many hours for an exam and everybody else in the class gets an ‘A’ cheating,” said Sharon, a college student. “So you want to get in the game and cheat, too.”

Comments from several of the students ABC interviewed indicate that the cheating trend may reflect a deep-seated cynicism among students that getting an education is more about learning to “work” the system than learning math and history.1 Cheating in school, they argue, is good preparation for a career in the business world, where some- times it’s what’s necessary to get ahead. (The Primetime report struck a nerve among par- ents and teachers. Hundreds wrote in after the show, concurring with the existence and enormity of the problem. See http://www. charactercounts.org/pdf/Primetime_post- show_comments.pdf)

Why is this happening? Why don’t all stu- dents recognize that, for example, cutting and pasting text from the Web without attribution is plagiarism? One scholar attributes some of the difficulties in teaching ethics to students to “the value of the generation that has no problem down- loading songs off the Internet.”2 If copyright laws are perceived as irrelevant when it comes to music on the Internet, the ethical leap from failing to pay for music to failing to credit sources may not be far.3 One, possibly apocryphal but wonderfully amusing anecdote illus- trates the moral tone-deafness of many students: A professor had a student come to his office to argue for an A on a paper instead of the C he received. When the professor asked the student to explain why he should get an A, the student appeared flustered, then replied, “Because the student I bought it from got an A.”

Another scholar finds a more global expla- nation, suggesting that students are dishonest “because their role models (parents, instructors, doctors, lawyers, clerics, police, and society in general) offer little to stimulate principled action” and that “[c]onsequentialist ethical theo- ries that care more about results than principles take precedence over traditional moral thinking.”4 As a result, he argues, "unethical activ- ity becomes acceptable when it is convenient or whenever one can get away with it."

And plagiarizable information is exception- ally “convenient” to find. Not only is it easy to find articles or Websites from which students can cut and paste a sentence or a paragraph, but from a variety of so-called “term paper mills,” students can find entire papers, probably on the very topic the teacher has assigned. To test this convenience, I did a little experiment. Yesterday (November 4th), I ran a search on AOL for “free term papers” — I got 55,115 hits.11 These included three sponsored sites which were not exactly “free” but they would undoubtedly have sounded appealing to a desperate student.

www.monsterpapers.com, offering ac- cess to “1 Million Term Papers and Es- says” for only $9.95.

www.server.com, offering “Term Paper and Research Paper Service” — it was at pains to note that “We are NOT a free service but our prices are low”

www.paperonline.us — obviously a highly ethical and patriotic operation — it offers “Non-plagiarized term paper writing services from USA” at “Only $8 per page” for 4 days delivery with a “Money-back guarantee.”

There were also innumerable non-spon- sored sites that were indeed “free,” including: Term Paper Sites.com with “Only the highest quality sites on the net” with “Thousands of free and searchable Term papers!”

And a site billing itself as the “Home of teens for free term papers [and] homework” where you can also “Chat and Hangout.” It’s name? True gentle ladies and gentle men, I ask you to please close your ears. It’s www.schoo lbucks.com.

Just to see what kind of papers were available for “free;” I plugged a Google search for “free term papers” into The Scarlet Letter. (William, my son, is reading it for his Eng- lish class, and I was curious what tempta- tions might lay in the path of him and his classmates.) I got 29,900 hits. So I looked at a couple of them. They looked like pretty realistic high school papers: turgid, bewild- ered, tuneless ... but probably worth a “B” in most high school English classes.

So it is convenient — terrifyingly convenient — to find tons of material to plagiarize in whole or in part. And, at least until the past couple of years, it has been wonderfully easy to “get away with it.” As the dome’s campus newspaper, the Daily Californian, points out, “Many of the students think that their professors are too lazy, too busy, or too dumb to catch them. Some of those students and others have gotten away with it before, certainly in junior high school and high school, sometimes in other college courses.”12 It would be difficult for the typical teacher to catch such Internet plagiarism, but enlightened entrepre- neurship seems to be coming to the rescue. An increasing number of computer-based detection tools are now available to academic institutions to catch the cheaters.13

One of the most successful is Turnitin.com, a California-based company formed in 1996 by a group of researchers at University of Cali- fornia at Berkeley who created a series of com- puter programs to monitor the recycling of re- search papers in their large undergraduate classes. It is reported that over 3,500 institu- tions license Turnitin’s plagiarism prevention system, including hundreds of high schools, submitting as many as 20,000 papers daily.14 The software compares a student’s essay to all text publicly available on the Internet, to vari- ous books and academic journals, and to mil- lions of essays already turned in to the service, and within five minutes, can issue a report that highlights each passage that matches another source.15 “Approximately 30 percent of the 20,000 papers we check a day are less than original,” the CEO of Turnitin’s parent, iParadigms LLC, is quoted as saying. “Our system doesn’t detect plagiarism, it detects verbatim copy. It is up to the instructor to determine if plagiarism has occurred.”

Northwestern University has announced that it has begun using a similar Internet ser- vice this fall. The test site, created by NU’s called “SafeAssign” and is allegedly not only searches for exact phrase matches but also looks for similar wording in cases where a student was savvy enough to change a few words in the lifted material. The university’s associate provost for undergraduate education is quoted as saying that the service is necessary to combat a “signi- ficant” 10 percent to 20 percent rise in aca- demic dishonesty.16

But: one Website concerned with the pla- giarism plague warns that plagiarism detec- tion services are not a complete answer.

These services don’t catch “custom essays,” and they don’t catch plagiarism when the original work isn’t already in the digital domain. If you rely on detection, you are doing a disservice to your students. The fact is, detection services help to catch the cheaters who fall into the “not so bright” category. Smart cheaters can skate around these services.18

Moreover, the use of detection services car- ries with it a risk of being wrong. Consider, for example, the report of a University at Canter- bury student in England who admitted downloading material from the Internet for his de- gree after the school began to run a pilot program of plagiarism-detection software to analyze stu- dents’ work. He was advised, just before his final exams, that he would get no credits for his course work and is now suing the university for negligence. The student, 21-year old Michael Gunn, claims that Canterbury of- ficials should have warned him that his actions were against school regulations.19

So what is the answer to plagiarism and the too easy use of Google and the mouse? Prof. Lawrence Himman, director of the Values In- stitute at the University of San Diego, identifies three steps that institutions can take: “Our first and most important line of defense against academic dishonesty is sincerely good teaching. Cheating and plagiarism often arise in a vacuum created by routine, lack of interest and overwork. ... The second remedy is to encourage the de- velopment of integrity in our students. The sense of responsibility about one’s intellectual de- continued on page 38
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development would preclude cheating and plagiarizing as inconsistent with one’s identity.

Third, journals encourage our students to perceive the dishonesty of their classmates as something that causes harm to the many students who play by the rules.20

Certainly the positivist approach suggested by Professor Hinman is vital in the long run. But in the meantime, it is just as important to use the available legal and academic sanctions against students plagiarists when they get caught. Honor codes and school policies against plagiarism must be emphasized and enforced by both secondary and post-secondary institutions, and the discipline meted out should be publicly disclosed so that an example can be made of those who have violated the codes or policies.21 Where the academic institution has taken such disciplinary action, the accused plagiarist all too often turns to the courts of law in an attempt to avoid the loss of degree or, in the case of teachers, loss of job. Invariably, judges reject the plaintiff’s effort to have the court second-guess the academic institution’s procedures.22

The publicity given to the numerous instances of famous or near-famous “adults” that have been found guilty of plagiarism is highly salutary, both because it shows that people do get caught and also because it shows what a devastating effect committing plagiarism can have on one’s life and career. Here’s a quick list:

- In late September of this year, Lawrence Tribe, a distinguished Harvard law professor, admitted that he had copied without proper attribution portions of a 1974 book by Henry Abraham entitled Justices and Presidents.23 Notorious journalism scandals have recently come to the surface, such as the ones involving Jayson Blair (New York Times), Jack Kelley (USA Today), and Richard Judd ( Hartford Courant).24
- Historians Stephen Ambrose and Doris Kearns Goodwin used entire passages from other publications in their books without indicating from whence the material came.
- Huang Zongying, an associate professor of English at Peking University, was fired after a Chinese graduate student brought the misconduct to light.
- In September 2004, Mostafa Imam, a Saudi Arabia-based researcher, was accused of plagiarizing photographs of various organisms previously published in micropaleontology articles by other authors. Shortly thereafter, Imam died of a fatal heart attack.
- Tony-nominated playwright Bryon Lavery has been accused of plagiarizing passages from a 1997 New Yorker article by Malcolm Gladwell about Dr. Dorothy Otnow Lewis and her book Guilty by Reason of Insanity. Lewis and Gladwell say that a number of passages in Lavery’s play “Frozen” are taken directly from their own work.
- In March of this year, the president of Central Connecticut State University, Richard Judd, was accused of plagiarizing materials for an op-ed piece that appeared in the Hartford Courant the previous month. A few days later, he announced that he would retire at the end of the school year.

Importantly, there are various legal weapons available to academic institutions to fight plagiarism committed by the student or academic as well as the aiding and abetting of such misconduct by online term paper mills. With respect to the latter, for example, 14 states have enacted laws that prohibit and, in most cases, criminalize the sale of term papers, thesis, dissertation, or other written material where the writer knows or should reasonably have known that such written material is to be submitted by another person for academic credit at any institution of higher learning in the state.25 Unfortunately, neither academic institutions nor prosecutors have proven interested in pressing such cases.

With respect to the plagiarists themselves, academic institutions seldom press for legal sanctions against the perpetrators other than internal disciplinary measures. Nevertheless, sanctions under various legal theories are in fact available.26

In the end, teachers are the first line of defense in both detecting and deterring plagiarism.

WEBWORTHY

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WEBWORTHY has reviewed 330 Websites to date! Are you reading this intro? If so, we’d like to know if you find this column useful! Email the editor at <pmrrose@buffalo.edu> with your comments and any suggestions for improvement!

Websites are chosen for uniqueness, depth of information, functionality and ease of access. Sites are organized by broad subject area and are visited just prior to publication. Please let the editor know of any broken links.

Comments and suggestions welcome to Pamela M. Rose, Health Sciences Library, University at Buffalo, 3435 Main St., Buffalo, NY 14214-3002; 716-829-3900 x129; <pmrrose@buffalo.edu>. Unless otherwise noted, Internet sites were also reviewed in Science’s NetWatch column. — PR

Computers Are you helping in the search for ET? If you’re not already using your desktop computer’s downtime to search for signs of alien life, IBM is recruiting volunteers to help crunch research problems which will aid societ. The World Community Grid will begin with the Human Proteome Folding Project, and will move on to five or six projects a year. — http://www.worldcommunitygrid.org

Exhibits Learning about 87 eminent physicists who excelled in the field from 1900-1976 might seem like just another biographical excursion. Except these 87 persons are often named Albert, Robert, or Hans. Contributions of 20th Century Women to Physics profiles an international roster of scientists, including Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin who won the 1964 Nobel Prize in chemistry, and S. Jocelyn Bell Burnell who identified the first pulsars. Although the intro page still states 83, the subdiscipline categories include a total of 87 names. There were other women contributors to the field prior to and after 1976; however this group had the most documentation available and have been thoroughly researched. Also included are a photo gallery, historical documents from 1891-2000, and a section titled “In Her Own Words” with notable quotes from the subjects. My favorite, made by Hertha Marks Ayrton (1912) whose work on the electric arc was precursor to the field of plasma physics: “An error that ascribes to a man what was actually the work of a woman has more lives than a cat.” — http://cwp.library.ucd.edu/continued on page 39

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Plagiarism, and there is much good advice available on the Web about how to do just that. For example, an excellent set of guidelines on “Anti-Plagiarism Strategies for Research Papers,” prepared by Mr. Robert Harris in 2002 is available at http://www.virtualself.com/antiplag.htm. The guidelines provide helpful and workable details on how to apply the general goal of “[mark] the assignment and requirements unique enough that an off-the-shelf paper or a paper written for another class or a friend’s paper will not fulfill the requirements” so that only a newly written paper will suffice.

I do not know the extent to which your own academic institutions formally attempt to inculcate in their students, teachers, and researchers a deeper respect for book research versus online research as well as unfailing sense of academic honesty and integrity, nor do I know the extent to which your institutions consciously and intentionally include library professionals in either the broader challenge of teaching intellectual rigor or the process of detecting and deterring plagiarism. But if the institutions do not redouble their efforts to inspire academic honesty and if they do not include library professionals in these efforts, those institutions are leaving themselves on a collision course with the present trends toward lazy and dishonest scholarship. Addressing these issues is not a “luxury” that can be postponed until a better time, notes Professor Lawrence Himann. “It is a short step from dishonesty in schools and colleges to dishonesty in business.”

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Geology
Cold. Snow. Ice. Glaciers. Icebergs. Welcome to the cryosphere! If you live in Buffalo or Minnesota and want to know more about the world of cold, visit the National Snow and Ice Data Center out of Boulder, CO. View the curious formations sculpted by snow and ice, such as sastrugi (formed by wind) or ogives (alternating bands of light and dark ice). Experts can dig into more than 400 data sets of snow depths or satellite images then follow the gradual crumbling of the Larsen Ice Shelf in Antarctica. — http://nsidc.org/

Paleontology
When your 10 year old begins to hunger for more information about T. Rex, turn to the Paleobiology Database, maintained by paleontologist John H. Ostrom of the U. of California Santa Barbara. With more than 43,000 fossil collections’ detailed data, the site offers a wealth of collective information which allows users to map collection sites, look at detailed profiles including lists of other remains, and ask “big picture” questions like tallying the diversity of forms since the demise of the dinosaurs. — http://paleodb.org

Endnotes
1. Bill is a partner in the Chicago-based law firm, Schiff Hardin LLP, and has been a frequent speaker over the years at the Charleston Conference. He is an Adjunct Professor at Chicago-Kent College of Law and the author of numerous books and articles on legal topics.
3. Id.
4. A case in point is reported in the Boston Globe for March 3, 2000, at B1 (sixty-three students in introductory computer science class at Dartmouth were charged with plagiarism on homework assignment).
6. The report featured the results of an ABC News poll about the attitudes of kids toward cheating in school.
8. Id.
11. The same search for “free term papers” on Google came up with 5,090,000 hits. By contrast, a search for “plagiarism detection” came up with only 36,000 hits on Google and a mere 7,107 hits on AOL.
12. “Dane S. Claussen, director of the journalism and mass communication graduate program at Point Park University in Pittsburgh, quoted in Y. Whitehouse & J. Nichols, “Inside the hallowed halls: how journalism schools are confronting student plagiarism,” The Quill, August 1, 2004, No. 6, Vol. 92; Pg. 14.
13. One article makes the disturbing suggestion that some term paper mills “have ties to plagiarism detection software companies.” For example, detection software companies, PlagiaServe (http://www.plagiaserve.com) and EduFile (http://www.edufile.com) have connections to term paper sites like MightyStudents.com (http://www.mightystudents.com), EssayMill.com (http://www.essaymill.com), EssaysOnFile.com (http://www.essaysonfile.com) and TopEssays.com (http://www.topessays.com).
15. Id.
21. It would be surprising if any educational institution did not have such a code or policy. A quick Web search turned up numerous examples on line. It also turned up the curious anomaly of one state university library Website that included both the school’s honor code as well as an extensive list of hyperlinks to fee-based and “free” term paper mills. One wonders about the wisdom of providing such information. As one legal commentator observed when encountering a similar situation on another university library’s Website, “[w]hile such information is not difficult to find, I consider it unethical to provide links to businesses that are explicitly violating the law.”
22. See Chandrakant v. Georgetown Univ., 274 F. Supp. 2d 71 (D.D.C. 2003), where an American student of Indian descent sued Georgetown, alleging unlawful discrimination on the basis of national origin and retaliation after the university sanctioned him for plagiarism. The court dismissed the claim, concluding that plaintiff offered no evidence that the disciplinary hearing was not conducted in accordance with the procedures published in the university’s honor code. Moreover, the honor code clearly set forth the definition of plagiarism, and the hearing board’s decision not to exercise its disciplinary power to adjust the sanction was not a violation of the sanctioning guidelines.
25. One section of Mr. Harris’ guidelines gives practical details on how to detect plagiarism. Rule number one is to “[l]ook for the clues.” As you read the papers, he advises, look for internal evidence that may indicate plagiarism, such as mixed citation styles, lack of references or quotations, unusual formatting, off topic discussion, signs of datelessness, anomalousness, anomalies of diction, anomalies of style, and smoking gun blunders.

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