

Why Plagiarism Matters

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“Good poets borrow; great poets steal.” (Variously [mis]attributed to Mark Twain, Pablo Picasso and/or T S Eliot)

“Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different than that from which it is torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest.” (T S Eliot, The Sacred Wood)

“It’s no secret that books are made from other books, but hopefully we’re not to the point where books are simply compilations of other books. Cutting and pasting shouldn’t be considered writing.” (Lee Ellis, The New Yorker)

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Wikipedia and Plagiarism

- WP:Plagiarism only begun in 2008 (Franamax and Carcharoth)
- Previously, had been redirect to Wikipedia:Copyright problems
- Before that, redirect to Wikipedia:Citing sources
- Faced considerable opposition
- Even now, is “guideline,” not policy

Wikipedia and Plagiarism

- Restrictions on copying go against much of the core ethos of the encyclopedia
- “Free knowledge” “Information wants to be free”
- Yet plagiarism is also the source of much scandal on-wiki, and a significant reason for tension with (other) institutions of education, such as universities

Wikipedia and Plagiarism

- Plagiarism is endemic to Wikipedia
- Plagiarism is a sticking point for universities
- It is also a sticking point for Wikipedia
- Why does Wikipedia plagiarize?
- It is not for the usual reasons
- On Wikipedia, plagiarism is both bug and feature

Wikipedia and Knowledge

- Wikipedia has transformed the circuits of the production and distribution of knowledge
- But *it wishes to deny its role in the first part of the circuit: the production of knowledge*
- Wikipedia's very emphasis on neutrality both hides and contributes to its role in this process

Plagiarism: Definitions

- Unattributed or misattributed copying
- Wikipedia: “taking credit for someone else's writing as your own, including their language and ideas, without providing adequate credit.”
- University of Cambridge: “submitting as one's own work, irrespective of intent to deceive, that which derives in part or in its entirety from the work of others without due acknowledgement.”

Plagiarism: Notes

- The copying does not have to be direct (word for word); “close paraphrase” can also be plagiarism; as can copying the structure (if not the specific words) of a source text
- Attribution in itself does not clear a text from the charge of plagiarism; it must be clear from the attribution what exactly has been copied, and how.

Plagiarism: Notes

- Plagiarism is not the same as copyright violation; a public domain text may also be plagiarized

Plagiarism: Notes

- Often described as “intellectual theft”
- But this is not the most pressing issue on Wikipedia
- **Wikipedians do not (generally) plagiarize for the usual reasons**
- Wikipedians do not (generally) get “credit”
- They do not have to edit
- Neither imposture nor laziness
- (Though Wikipedians who are also students...)

Plagiarism: Notes

- The issue is more **the diffusion or elimination of credit altogether**
- Less “taking credit for someone else's writing as your own” than presenting it as nobody’s.. or everybody’s
- As such, it is a problem that touches the heart of Wikipedia, as a collaborative encyclopedia
- Because this is what Wikipedia sets out to do!

Plagiarism: Notes

- Conceived as “theft,” plagiarism acquires moral dimensions and leads to scandal and vituperation
- “Good” plagiarism is hard; “bad” plagiarism is often obvious
- Not plagiarizing seems easy: use quotation marks
- The effort to avoid plagiarism leads to more problems, especially on Wikipedia
- Perhaps we should view **the whole encyclopedia as an exercise in “good” plagiarism**
- Let us be “good” poets, not “bad” ones

Plagiarism: Issues and Examples

Did you know...

- ... that *After the Deluge* (pictured) was described by [Walter Bayes](#) as "a kind of sublimation of all the most poetic elements in nature"?
- ... that [Gadis Arivia](#) established Indonesia's first *After the Deluge* journal of feminist theory?
- ... that of the 482 coins found in the [Viking Age Sundveda Hoard](#) outside [Stockholm](#), only one came from Western Europe?
- ... that in 1985, [China–Hong Kong football rivalry](#) resulted in China's first recorded case of [football hooliganism](#)?
- ... that the Cuban national [Order of Playa Girón](#), named after the location of the [Bay of Pigs Invasion](#), was first presented to the cosmonaut [Yuri Gagarin](#)?
- ... that on one occasion, protesters used a foghorn to discourage [Mormons in Ireland](#) from meeting?
- ... that [Charles Brantley](#) was the first person in the [Tennessee Walking Horse](#) industry to be inducted into the [Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame](#)?
- ... that [Alyssa Milano](#) released **four studio albums** in Japan after appearing in ads there for pasta and chocolate milk?



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Plagiarism: Issues and Examples

- Turnitin: almost every article as 100% copied
- we have to take attributions for granted
- one article a list
- three based on sources in foreign languages
- one based on offline sources
- one article had other sourcing problems
- two articles can be checked and certified “OK”

Plagiarism: Issues and Examples

- Not that the “OK” articles are without their problems...
- E.g. “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Ireland” is written by self-identified BYU scholars, using exclusively LDS sources
- This, too, fits with a culture of plagiarism on Wikipedia... in that it hides the partiality of its sources, converting opinion into fact

Plagiarism: Example 1

- Wikipedia: “During the Asian Financial Crisis, Arivia – recognized as one of Jakarta's leading feminist scholars[6] – protested the rising price of milk.”
- Source: “Gadis Arivia, one of Jakarta’s leading feminist scholars and a founder of Suara Ibu Peduli...”

Plagiarism: Example 1

- Fix: “Arivia – described by Krishna Sen as ‘one of Jakarta's leading feminist scholars’[6]...”
- But the meaning has fundamentally changed: **the “knower” has been specified**
- What’s at stake is the distinction between opinion and knowledge
- What would it take to describe Arivia as (in fact) “one of Jakarta’s leading feminist scholars”?
- Wikipedia shies away from the authority to say such things (per “verifiability”)
- But it is unsure what to do when others claim that authority

Plagiarism: Example 2

- Wikipedia: “a national order conferred by the Council of State of Cuba on Cubans or foreigners for their leadership in the struggle against imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism, or who have contributed to peace and the progress of humankind. [2]”
- Source: “Es una condecoración concedida por el Consejo de Estado de la República de Cuba. Se le otorga a ciudadanos cubanos o extranjeros que se hayan destacado en las luchas contra el imperialismo, el colonialismo o el neocolonialismo, o que hayan realizado grandes hazañas por la paz y por el progreso de la humanidad.”

Plagiarism: Problems

- The text plagiarized is **already itself plagiarized**, multiple times:
 - Cuban Council of Ministers (“que se hayan destacado o se destaquen”) (July 1961)
 - Radio Rebelde (Lucía Sanz Araujo) (April 2011)
 - Wikipedia ES (August 2011)
 - EcuRed, a Cuban Wiki (date?)
 - Wikipedia EN (September 2016)

Plagiarism: Problems

- The **effort to avoid plagiarism** has introduced errors
 - from “que se hayan destacado” to “for their leadership”
 - from “las luchas contra el imperialismo, el colonialismo o el neocolonialismo” to “the struggle against imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism”
 - from “que hayan realizado grandes hazañas por la paz y por el progreso de la humanidad” to “who have contributed to peace and the progress of humankind.”

Plagiarism: Problems

- A specific point of view is now presented as encyclopedic truth
- Opinion is presented as fact/knowledge
- But this is an opinion that was also originally presented as fact
- Here, shouldn't it be presented (and explained) as opinion?

Plagiarism: Problems

- A fix is not easy, at least not without breaking Wikipedia rules about NPOV or OR
- Because the encyclopedia exists to translate opinion into fact
- Moreover, the form of the encyclopedia—as a series of discrete entries—militates against providing necessary context

Plagiarism: Example 3

- Wikipedia: “The order takes the form of a gold medal with pin and ribbon. The obverse of the medal depicts a soldier in fighting attitude, with one foot on the Cuban archipelago and the other on the North American mainland.[3]”
- Source: “En oro, con cinta y pasador, presente en su anverso o cara delantera a un miliciano en actitud de combate, con un pie sobre el archipiélago cubano y el otro en el continente...”

Plagiarism: Problems

- How better to describe a thing's physical characteristics?
- If neither style nor POV are at issue, why should statements of fact be rewritten?
- We look for encyclopedic "facts" and reproduce them as such...
- Should then the whole site be within quotation marks?

Universities and Plagiarism

- Plagiarism usually treated as “academic misconduct”
- E.g. UBC: “Plagiarism, which is intellectual theft, occurs where an individual submits or presents the oral or written work of another person as his or her own.”
- “Academic misconduct often results in a one-year suspension from the University and a notation of academic discipline on the student's record.”

Universities and Plagiarism

- Unlike Wikipedia, universities privilege “original research” and “point of view”
- In much of the Arts and Humanities, for instance, the whole point is to learn to articulate an original argument
- Plagiarism obviously undermines that goal

Universities and Plagiarism

- Students are still tempted to plagiarize...
- They need the credit
- They are (increasingly) pressed for time
- Copying seems easy
- Finding an original argument is hard
- They can (frequently) get away with it
- And as often as not, they plagiarize Wikipedia...
- ...all the more so when told not to cite it!

Wikipedia, Plagiarism, and Universities

- Something of a perfect storm...
- Doubled incentive to plagiarize:
 - need the credit, lack the time
 - Wikipedia prioritizes copying over innovation
- Caught between contrasting demands:
 - the production of knowledge
 - and/or its reproduction
- So students either copy or (when appropriately guided) clumsily rewrite

Solutions?

- Wikipedia needs to take plagiarism much more seriously
- Time to move from imitation to theft?
- “The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different than that from which it is torn”
- Universities and Wikipedia need to see this as common ground for discussion and debate
- Plagiarism provides a chance to consider the roles of both institutions within the broader knowledge ecosystem