
A Critical Perspective on Current Structures Governing Internet Plagiarism: Challenges to Public Relations and Journalism Education

Jane Johnston
Griffith University

The Internet has raised student plagiarism to a new level. Never before has access to information been as easy, and never before have students had such a capacity to search, order, borrow, copy, cut and paste. This paper offers a critical perspective on current practices that deal with student plagiarism, while placing the issue into the context of current Internet culture. As cyber-plagiarism emerges as a major challenge to universities worldwide, with one US survey indicating up to 70 per cent of students commit academic offences such as plagiarism (University of Alberta, 2001), how is it being tackled? How might it effect the way we teach communications studies and what particular challenges are faced by educators in journalism and public relations? This paper addresses these issues and, finally, considers the need for a new framework to deal with these changing trends in academic culture.

This paper presents a critical perspective on the existing structures surrounding plagiarism from the Internet. In particular, it seeks to do two things: first, to analyse the existing literature and frameworks that are in place to deal with Internet plagiarism, and second, to foreshadow some new directions for an improved framework for this important field of teaching and learning.

Much of the existing literature on Internet plagiarism focuses on the issue of plagiarism across all university disciplines. This provides a very useful background to current issues associated with Internet plagiarism. It does not, however, address issues which arise in the specific communication studies environment. So, while it is useful to critically analyse the literature on generic Internet plagiarism, the research for this paper has highlighted the need for more specific research into plagiarism in communication studies. Research for this paper,

therefore, also relied on critical incident reports from members of two Australian-based email chat groups of public relations and journalism academics and professionals: *edu-pr-net* and *jeanet*. While anecdotal, these reports have assisted in informing the new perspective on Internet plagiarism.

However, before beginning this analysis on Internet plagiarism it is instructive to go first to the culture that surrounds the technology of the Internet.

The culture of the Internet

The Internet brings with it an open culture of information. As Young pointed out last year:

the first decade of the mainstream Internet has been accompanied by a utopian rhetoric of freedom. The net's apparent decentralised nature and lack of control hierarchy lead many to suggest that freedom and openness are intrinsic components of the new media domain (Young, 2001, p. 11).

Young suggests that the Internet embraces "an ideology of freedom and openness, a loose amalgam of the Hacker Ethic, Libertarianism, Ayn Rand and a utopian desire for a change in cultural habits" (2001, p. 12). Part of this cultural shift has been an acceptance that the audience of the Internet is active (Young, 2001) rather than passive users of traditional media: books, television and magazines. This activity gives a sense of ownership and extends to what Young describes as "prosumption"—a mixture of production and consumption (2001, p. 13). Taken into the study environment, this culture has resulted in a shift in the student research

paradigm: from a reliance on traditional resources such as books and journals to a dependence on the Internet. One only has to scan a range of student bibliographies to see the reliance on the Internet as a primary source of information. But the Internet is also representing a change in those who do not cite their materials. It is this culture of openness, freedom and audience activity that typifies the Internet that educators are dealing with a new environment of cyber-plagiarism, cyber-copying or cyber-cheating.

It is widely held that student cheating and plagiarism is on the rise (Lathrop & Foss, 2000; University of Alberta, 2001; Turnitin, 2001; ABC News Online, 2001). As one Internet plagiarism detection site states, “The Internet has made plagiarism easier than ever before” (Turnitin, 2001, p. 1). Where papers are copied from one of the dozens of Internet sites (called “paper mills”) that provide free or paid-for assessment papers, it is clearly a case of cheating. If a student goes to a site *schoolsucks.com* or *cheater.com* or *123student.com* there is little likelihood that they do not know they are cheating. Plagiarism has reached a new level of sophistication with a generation of students who know their way around the Internet far better than a library catalogue. Magney illustrates an example:

With three keystrokes, Smith copied a paper about alternative medicine from the site and pasted it into his word processor. After quickly reformatting the paper, he used the word processor’s search-and-replace feature to change certain words in the paper. Finally, he used a grammar-checking program that suggested ways to rephrase sentences, making the original source more difficult to identify (in Lathrop & Foss, 2001, p. 2).

There is now a proliferation of American sites through which students may access work and these are discussed in more detail later. However, Australian sites are also emerging.

One Melbourne-based site recorded two million hits in eight weeks in the year 2000, offering 10,000-plus pages of academic material (Murphy, 2000). Some universities report that they tried to close these sites down. Boston University in 1998 tried to shut down ten paper mills but the law-suit was dismissed by the Federal Court (Thomas, 2002).

Defining plagiarism

However, not all plagiarism is as blatant as accessing material from these “paper mills” or “cheat sites”, but at what point does using other people’s Internet material move from research to plagiarism? And what issues are specific to communication students who rely on the Internet as a legitimate research tool?

On first consideration it appears that plagiarism may be easily defined. For example, one university definition, which seems typical, states: “plagiarism involves the use of other’s ideas and words without clearly acknowledging the source of that information” (University of Queensland Cybrary).

However, Wilson (as cited in Biggs, 1999, p. 129) lists four levels of plagiarism:

1. Repetition: simply copying from an unacknowledged source.
2. Patching: copying, with joining phrases, from several sources.
3. Plagiphrasing: paraphrasing from several sources and joining them, placing in the reference list but without page numbers.
4. Conventional academic writing: where ideas are synthesised to make an argument and a new academic package—but are the ideas new?

Biggs points out that the first two of the four are obviously plagiarism but, he asks, what about the second two? If one considers number three, then the question of in-text referencing would clearly need to be addressed, even though page numbers would not be required (I would suggest that this type is one of the most problematic for students). Number four would still require the writer to acknowledge the source of an idea in an academic essay. There are,

however, other types of professional writing that will be discussed later where the rules are not clear-cut and opinions differ on the notion of sourcing ideas. Biggs concludes: "it is not always easy to decide what plagiarism is" (1999, p. 130).

International students, or other students for whom English is their second language, represent a range of different problems to those faced by native English-speaking students, complicating the issue even further. For some international students it is difficult to change wording but keep the same meaning and, for others, it is considered disrespectful to alter the words of an expert (Ballard & Clanchy in Biggs, 1997). Furthermore, in some disciplines, such as public relations and journalism, a reliance on contacts and local knowledge of organisations and individuals can put international students at a disadvantage, forcing a higher reliance on Internet materials. Space restrictions preclude a further analysis of the issue of cross-cultural plagiarism here. However, further investigation into this issue is currently planned, as indicated at the end of this paper.

Other observers identify different types of plagiarism. Ryan refers to context change, missing footnotes, false references and cyberspace cooperation (Ryan, no date). Lathrop and Foss identify high-tech and low-tech plagiarism and unintentional plagiarism (2000). They list 50 Internet sites through which a student may obtain a free or paid essay (as cited in Lathrop & Foss, 2000). An alternative to downloading a single purpose-written essay is the cut-and-paste, although it too might incorporate material from the paper mills. Such an example is cited on the Turnitin.com web site, which, by using its software package to break down one essay on schizophrenia, identifies five web addresses from which the material is drawn.

Special problems for journalism and public relations educators

While overt plagiarism such as those examples raised above are unacceptable in every discipline, it must be noted that assessment for students of communications often falls outside

the bounds of traditional essays and exams. The Internet, therefore, represents different challenges for the educator, and indeed the student, of public relations and journalism. The student of journalism or public relations will often source a real organisation, perhaps for background research or in order to prepare a line of questioning. Indeed the Internet is not only a legitimate source of communication research but a crucial medium due to its accessibility, range and timeliness. An organisation's web site is often its flagship, presented as a site of factual information. The issue here is, of course, not its use in general but its inappropriate use as a research tool without due acknowledgement. Many students enter this copyright-rich environment, where the copyright symbol may be buried at the bottom of a page or not present at all, keen to collect data for their business story or company profile, unaware that they are dealing with copyright material or subject matter that, if cited, should be duly acknowledged.

The fields of journalism and public relations include a range of idiosyncratic issues for the student and these may appear as paradoxes between industry practice and academic learning. For example, the news release, by its very existence, calls for no acknowledgement of source material, yet to use another's words verbatim without citation in an academic assessment item would be a clear case of plagiarism. Indeed, "the action of sending a press release to news outlets gives rise to an implied licence to use and adapt the material" (Breit, 2000, p. 83). Journalists' names appear on news stories that emerge from press releases written by somebody else. Public relations students proudly report that their release was used verbatim in the local paper, a high prize for the student, and a common occurrence on those papers that suffer understaffing. Students learn at an early stage in their academic careers that material generated by public relations practitioners is successful if it is professionally plagiarised. Indeed, this extends to the general business environment where bureaucratic plagiarism is part of the fabric.

As Martin points out:

Most politicians, celebrities and business executives are plagiarists. They give speeches or issue statements under their names when actually the words were produced by speechwriters or staff ... that this often takes place with the consent of everyone involved does not eliminate the misrepresentation (1997, p. 11).

It is no wonder then that students may be confused or see inconsistencies between their study and the closely related industry environment. While these represent perfectly legitimate, indeed crucial, forms of professional communications, contradictions between study and professional practice must be overtly pointed out to the student.

Some issues, while problematic for public relations and journalism, are not peculiar to students of these disciplines. Based on the adage that "there is no such thing as a new idea" problems arise with originality of ideas. For example, the recycling of popular magazine articles or the re-worked model of a public relations campaign clearly illustrate just how difficult it can be to determine originality in a student's work. Because of this, the notion of incorporating "ideas" into the plagiarism definition is problematic. Standler supports this by excluding ideas from his definition (2000). "Any intelligent, creative person routinely has 'original' thoughts. A careful search of books and scholarly journals in a library will likely reveal that the same thought has been previously expressed by someone else" (2000, p. 24). In a communications context is it therefore acceptable for a student to adapt into a local organisation a successful campaign, found on the Internet, and claim it as their own? Is it ever acceptable for a student to use quotes from a web site and not quote the web site, thus portraying the material as emerging from their own interviews?

Sourcing material from the Internet and representing it as one's own poses the further problem of re-using other people's mistakes. This is by no means peculiar to communications students, but it does raise other issues that are

central to education in this field. By assuming material on the Internet is accurate students limit their experiences of interviewing and conducting primary investigation and furthermore miss out on the benefits of face-to-face contact with their source.

Policing plagiarism

The last two years have seen a proliferation of material written on the issue of Internet plagiarism. For the purposes of this paper, these have been categorised into two divisions: detection and deterrence of plagiarism (Gajadhar, 1998; Lathrop & Foss, 2000; Ryan, no date).

Deterrence.

Patience notes that "we are in very serious danger of making degrees totally meaningless and unleashing unqualified graduates into the community ... these (cheat) sites will ultimately force universities to abandon continuous assessment procedures and return to the days of assessment by exam" (as cited in Murphy, 2000, p. 1). Perhaps this may occur or, alternatively, perhaps educators will have to think critically about their previous assessment strategies and refine them in response to the problem. Earlier this year I emailed Australian academics on *jeanet* and *edu-pr-net* about whether their assessment styles had altered to combat Internet plagiarism. It seems, anecdotally at least, that educators in both journalism and public relations are facing this challenge proactively, instituting changes that require more in-class testing and more checkpoints for the educator.

The critical incident reports included:

1. One educator in public relations and journalism said she included a 1000 word oral defence for students on presentation of a brochure and newsletter. This included audience analysis and rationales for making decisions during research and production.

2. Another journalism educator responded that Internet plagiarism

was one of the reasons he ran in-class assignments in a computer laboratory for news writing.

3. Yet another journalism educator responded that over the past five years she had moved to in-class tests.

4. A public relations educator said his university was contemplating introducing faculty-wide electronically submitted assignments so they could be scanned by plagiarism software.

5. Another public relations educator noted that post graduate students were tested in an end of semester short answer tests, responding to readings presented each week by their peers.

6. Other suggestions included providing contact details for all journalism stories and randomly checking with sources; requiring public relations students to provide background briefing notes with the finished assessment items; and expanding the notion of the reference list to include email and telephone communication, annual reports, brochures, advertisements and so on.¹

The idea of requiring an oral to support a written work, as noted above in point 1, is supported by others (Harris in Gajadhar, 1998; Lathrop & Foss, 2001).

Gajadhar suggests a range of strategies which deal with assessment modifications. She notes “assessments which remain unchanged from one year to the next or follow the same formula can encourage online plagiarism” (1998, p. 2). She questions whether the assigned research paper is a satisfactory method of assessment unless

students are supervised during the process of writing.

Active involvement is a key to effective learning. One of the main characteristics of online learning is its potential for interactivity. It behoves us, as educators, to consider our uses of the research paper and instead look to other options such as case studies and scenarios as viable options (Gajadhar, 1998, p. 7).

Lathrop and Foss suggest that parts of the project supported by outlines, notes, drafts, photocopies from books and magazines, copies of downloaded pages and a working bibliography should be submitted at stated intervals for assessment (2001).

Gajadhar notes, “if students can be encouraged to use data from the Internet in ethical ways, opportunities will begin to outweigh [their] concerns” (1998, p. 8). Laudon argues that this can be achieved by providing quality assessments and suggests that educators should “be open, explore options and support individuals who are facing ethical dilemmas” (as cited in Gajadhar, 1998, p. 8).

This is consistent with Leland who suggests that teachers should not “turn into plagiarism cops...it can become an obsession—and should be avoided” (as cited in Lathrop & Foss, p. 169). Instead, the focus should be placed on limiting plagiarism options through creative assessment practices, open communication and clear and precise warnings.

Some universities and colleges require the use of an “originality agreement” on each item of assessment (for example some Australian TAFE colleges). Standler cites this system from Princeton University as offering clear-cut rules for plagiarism.

Because of the importance of original work in the Princeton academic community, each student is required to attest to the originality of the submitted work and its compliance with University regulations ... at the end of the essay, laboratory report, or any other requirement, the student is to

¹ Responses to *jeanet* and *edu-pr-net* email from Jacqui Ewart at Central Queensland University; Ian Richards at the University of South Australia; Anne Dunn at the University of Sydney; Donald Alexander, Central Queensland University; Rebecca Harris, UTS; point 6 represents examples of my own assessment modifications.

write the following sentence and sign his or her name: "This paper represents my own work in accordance with university regulations" (2001, p. 9).

In his analysis of how to deal with plagiarism on the Internet, Leland suggests several strategies to deter Internet plagiarism. These provide a useful summary:

- ? letting students know about the cheat web sites,
 - ? taking students to the sites to look for poorly written papers,
 - ? teaching students to cite these papers correctly,
 - ? not listing plagiarism as "a rule" but as a point of fair use and intellectual property,
 - ? using the issue of the cheat sites as writing assignments on ethics,
 - ? watching students write, working on drafts in class,
- (as cited in Lathrop & Foss, p. 169).

Detecting.

Even with altered assessment practices, open communications and the best of warnings, it would be naïve to believe that Internet plagiarism will just go away. Harris puts forward a list of reasons why students plagiarise.

1. Students are natural economisers.
2. Students, faced with many choices, put off low priorities.
3. Some students fear their writing will be inadequate.
4. A few students like the thrill of breaking the rules (Harris, 2001, p. 1).

Wilhoit suggests that the majority of students unintentionally misrepresent and a minority consciously do so (as cited in Gajadhar, 1998). The University of Alberta Libraries provides a faculty guide to Cyber-plagiarism which presents a range of reasons for Internet plagiarism. These include a lack of research

skills, problems evaluating Internet sources, confusion over plagiarism and paraphrasing and confusion about how to cite sources. It notes that 68% (of 2,100 students polled) said they had committed an academic offence such as plagiarism. It also suggests that most university administrators say the number of unreported cases of plagiarism far exceeds the number of reported (2001). In Australia, Noah and Eckstein found that 70% of a survey of 700 secondary private school students admitted some degree of cheating (as cited in Richardson, 2001). However, research at the tertiary level relies largely on American studies.

Ryan notes "educators should take some solace in the fact that while the Internet is a useful resource for plagiarists, it is also an excellent tool against them" (no date, p. 5). Indeed, the Internet is littered with plagiarism detection sites, rivalling in numbers the paper mills that provide the easiest source of plagiarism. Harris lists a range of search engines to locate material on-line. These include findsame.com, howoriginal.com, plagiserve.com, and [google](http://google.com) (2001). Google is planning an expansion of its searching capabilities, noting in February this year "the mission of the company is [retrieving] all of the world's information" (Weisman, 2002, p. 1). In addition, Harris adds a list of commercial services that provide plagiarism detection. These include: Plagiarism.com, Plagiarism.org, Wordchecksyste.ms.com, Integriguard.com and canexus.com/eve (2001, pp. 7-8). Another site is turnitin.com which gives a clear example of how it detects plagiarism. In Australia, Curtin University's Business School is using this detection package (Curtin, 2001). Plagiarism web detection services and sites are also listed on some university web sites in Australia. In general though, plagiarism detection software and Internet warnings may be viewed as adjuncts to traditional diligence on the part of educators.

As noted by one academic from Curtin University:

The solutions would only be used as an additional tool in assisting academic staff in detecting

such occurrences, and to provide an added deterrent to students. Software cannot necessarily be used as a sole method of judgment and will never replace the vigilance of academic staff (Gordon in Curtin, 2001, p. 1).

In March 2001, the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee committed to an investigation into Internet plagiarism (Contractor, 2001, p. 1-2). However, no report has been tabled to date.

Critical perspectives

Martin describes plagiarism as “a taboo topic” (1997, p. 11). Standler supports this by noting that the topic is “rarely discussed in legal journals and law textbooks” despite its relevance to that student community (2000, p. 1). Yet there is certainly no shortage of literature on Internet plagiarism in academic journals and the topic is covered, not surprisingly, by a wealth of material on the Internet. Despite this, certain issues have not been addressed.

As noted earlier, problems lie in the very definition of Internet plagiarism. This, in turn, poses problems with educating students and policing plagiarists. Warnings such as the library one cited above are typical of most university’s web sites. Ironically, the resources cited to stop plagiarism are Internet sites and warnings are on the Internet, yet at no point does the definition or explanation refer to Internet plagiarism. Instead the more traditional terminologies such as “from a text or article” or “original text” are used to describe correct procedures. Students do not necessarily relate such warnings to use of the Internet. As Lathrop and Foss point out: “many students are convinced that all material on the Internet is free to copy” (2001, p. 121). There is a need for plagiarism warnings to be precise and specific about the Internet so that there can be no ambiguity. Such a warning might read: “Downloading, copying and not acknowledging material from the Internet is plagiarism”. McCabe, founder of the Centre for Academic Integrity at Duke University, says it is not enough to say “our policies apply to the internet as well” (Thomas, 2002, p. 1). Indeed, warnings

need to be inclusive of the Internet, or separate warnings that stand alone, rather than simply an Internet add-on to existing warnings.

However, even with such updates to warnings there will remain a vast majority of students who never read them if placed on the Internet alone. Why? I suggest that students are far more interested in what they should do than what they should not do and it is unlikely that they will rush to any university web site to read these rules. Instead, educators must be prepared to bring the message to the student and not rely on the student to seek them for themselves. This could be achieved through systematic teaching and learning practices compulsory across all courses perhaps, presented as a multi-media package.

In addition to providing a teaching and learning tool for students, the package could also assist part-time, adjunct and sessional staff, many of whom are primary markers and assessors in growing communications courses. A range of issues surround the need to assist sessional staff in this area—this includes payment, training, access to the Internet, and workloads—and these present a further area for investigation in the future.

Mead points out that the current “disciplinary codes which regulated what we call plagiarism were developed in and for a different, older, academic culture which operated under different conditions” (1999, p. 3). Or, to take on board Barlow’s views of the challenges to copyright and the Internet, “we will need to develop an entirely new set of methods as befits this entirely new set of circumstances” (no date, p. 1). An entirely new set of methods for plagiarism deterrence? Probably not, but it is about time we re-thought the question of plagiarism within the framework of the Internet. In response to this need I have begun work on a project which will evaluate student attitudes and set in place a practical framework for minimising internet plagiarism.

References

- Barlow, J.P. (2002). Selling wine without bottles: the economy of mind on the global net, *John Perry Barlow Library*, Retrieved

- April 17, 2002 from: www.eff.org/Publications/John_Perry_Barlow
- Biggs, J. (1999). *Teaching for quality learning at university*, Philadelphia: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Breit, R. (2000). Law & ethics. In J. Johnston, & C. Zawawi, (Eds.). *Public relations: theory and practice*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Contractor, A. (2001, March 14). Universities unite to catch cheating students, *Sydney Morning Herald* on-line: www.smh.com.au/news/0103/14/pageone/pageone9.html
- Curtin University of Technology. (2001, May 29). Anti-plagiarism software to check student cheating, *E-commerce news*: www.cbs.curtin.edu.au/Business/media/pr_2001_04.cfm
- Gajadhar, J. (1998). Issues in plagiarism for the new millennium: an assessment odyssey, *Ultibase Articles*: <http://ultibase.rmit.edu.au/Articles/dec98/gajad1.htm>
- Gibaldi, J. (1999). *MLA handbook for writers of research papers*, New York: Modern Language Association of America.
- Harris, R. (2001). Anti-plagiarism strategies for research papers, *Virtual Salt*: www.virtualsalt.com/antiplag.htm
- Internet blamed for rise in uni plagiarism. (2000, February 25). *ABC News Online*: www.abc.net.au/news/science/internet/2001/02/item20010224164008_1.htm
- Lathrop, A., & Foss, K. (2000). *Student cheating and plagiarism in the internet era: A wake-up call*. Denver, CO: Libraries Unlimited.
- Martin, B. (1997). Academic credit where it's due. *Campus Review*, 7 (21), June 4-10, p. 11.
- Mead, J. (1999). Tell us what you want, what you really, really want. *Australian Universities Review*, 42 (1), 2-4.
- Murphy, P. (2000, December 3). Cheats.com, *The Age* on-line: www.theage.com.au/news/2000/12/03/FFX72NF59GC.html
- Richardson, J. (2001, May 15). Out together dancing cheat to cheat. *The Australian*, p. 35.
- Ryan, J. (2002). *Student plagiarism in an on-line world*. Retrieved February 2, 2002 from: www.asee.org/prism/december/html/student_plagiarism_in_an_onlin.htm
- Thomas, K. (2001). Colleges clamp down on cheaters. *USA Today*: www.esatoday.com/life/2001-06-11-cheaters.htm
- Turnitin. (2002). Home-page and services page. Retrieved March 10, 2002 from: www.turnitin.com/services_1.html
- Standler, R. (2000). *Plagiarism in colleges in USA*: www.rbs2.com/plag.htm
- University of Alberta Libraries (2001). *A faculty guide to cyber-plagiarism*: www.library.ualberta.ca/guides/plagiarism
- University of Queensland Cybrary. (2001). *Stopping plagiarism*: www.library.uq.edu.au/ssah/useits/plaguseit.html
- Weisman, R. (2002, April 2). Talking search technology, *Boston Globe*, p. 1.
- Young, S. (2001, November). What's the big idea? Production, consumption and Internet regulatory discourse. *Media International Australia*, 101, 9-19.

Author Note

Jane Johnson, School of Arts, Griffith University.

Address for correspondance: Jane Johnston, School of Arts, Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus, Southport, Queensland 4215
E-mail: j.Johnston@mailbox.gu.edu.au