



## Dangers of our cut-and-paste culture

By Elias Aboujaoude

November 13, 2013

### **Blame plagiarism on the ease of the Internet. But will we become desensitized to it?**

Pity the professor trying to keep plagiarism at bay. It is a David and Goliath match for sure when Googling the words "term paper" yields 432 million entries on every essay topic imaginable and when Wikipedia is a click away.

There is nothing novel about a student's urge to cheat on his homework, whether out of laziness, sleep deprivation or poor self-confidence. But with such easy access to sources to *borrow* from, the age-old impulse is nearly impossible to resist. Before the frontal lobe has had a chance to weigh in, before the internalized teacher's voice has echoed inside, the student has highlighted a chunk of text, right-clicked and hit "copy".

While the Internet did not plant that seed in the student, it has certainly nurtured it and caused it to blossom. This is no different from the impulse to gamble, shop or "hook up," all of which are more potent and difficult to negotiate because of immediate, ridiculously easy online access.

This means a golden business opportunity for companies that develop software to detect various types of cheating, from "cloning" (copying other people's work word-for-word) to "remixing" (paraphrasing work from multiple sources). Their potential customer base is as big as the culture itself because plagiarizers are an extremely diverse group.

As the recent troubles of Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., teach us (he supposedly borrowed from Wikipedia, the Cato Institute and other sources for his speeches and [cribbed over 1,000 words of a Heritage Foundation study](#) for his recent book), the focus on students is myopic, a tad hypocritical, and meant to let the rest of us off the hook.

The entire culture is liberally borrowing from itself and reproducing content. Besides Paul, recent examples of plagiarizers who are well beyond the age of term papers include Fareed Zakaria, the CNN host and *Time* magazine contributor, who was suspended from both organizations for reproducing in his column parts of a gun control story he lifted from the *New Yorker*. Also, and in an act of self-plagiarism, Jonah Lehrer, the best-selling author of *Imagine: How Creativity Works*, showed a seriously uncreative side when he recycled material he had published in the *Wall Street Journal* for a *New Yorker* piece that he titled, no less, "Why Smart People Are Stupid".

It is hard not to feel sorry. Our new relationship with information -- we want it fast and furious; original and verified are optional -- puts tremendous pressure on writers to keep fresh content coming their readers' way. The Internet, which has created this new relationship, also becomes the go-to source for topics to reproduce. The result is that the Internet often ends up writing about itself, instead of inspiring truly novel and diverse work. In extreme cases, this leads to "memes" that we all race to reproduce and tweet around. Watching how so much material in online culture can "go viral", and how even people like Paul, Zakaria and Lehrer can succumb, it becomes easier to understand how automatic the "copy and paste" reflex must be for the typical freshman who has a deadline staring him in the face and is browsing around for inspiration or shortcuts.

If that student's defense is "everybody is doing it," the student would be right, and he would not be referring to his classmates only -- it's a copying-and-pasting, news-regurgitating, meme-propagating culture.

But here is the price we pay: The more students and non-students copy without attribution, and the more we become desensitized to that behavior, the more plagiarism becomes normalized, like an expected part of doing business, or an epidemic so vast that we stand no chance in confronting it. This can certainly put a crimp on creativity, not to mention morality.

*Elias Aboujaoude is a psychiatrist and author based at Stanford University, where is the director of the Obsessive Compulsive Disorder Clinic. His books include Virtually You: The Dangerous Powers of the e-Personality.*