Plagiarism in Academics: Examining the Issues, Incidence and 'Intent'

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Abstract

Plagiarism defies a conclusive definition. Whereas the law-makers of the land have indirectly touched upon the issue while discussing Copyright infringements, a go-to legal definition of plagiarism per se continues to elude us. As a result, legal initiatives to understand and address plagiarism continue to be found inadequate. Plagiarism in academics is undeniably topical and is approached as an ethical issue. This approach to plagiarism foregrounds the primacy of intent in defining it. Whereas attempts have been made to find a nuanced response to the question 'what constitutes plagiarism', the academic community engaging with anti-plagiarism efforts has found it increasingly difficult to do so, conclusively. It is realised that plagiarism is to be understood against the backdrop of the changing academic and research scenarios. With the ever-bludgeoning dependence and legitimisation of internet as a source of knowledge-sharing, newer forms of plagiarism have surfaced and found a place in an already open ended discourse. This paper argues for the accidental plagiarist. It posits 'intent' as the definitive touchstone of the 'severity' of plagiarism. It provides narrative evidence of the prevalence of unintentional plagiarism among research scholars and roots for concrete steps to not let a budding scholar become an accidental plagiarist.

Introduction

In 2009, the editorial of a Taylor and Francis journal carried a public apology for accepting an article which was later reported to be plagiarised. The apology read as follows:

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"Stop Plagiarism!

The Editorial Board of the Journal [name] apologise for the paper... published in [name of the Journal] 21(3) 2006 that was considered as a typical example of PLAGIARISM (similarity index with other papers approximately 62 per cent)." (Editorial, 2009) (Parenthesis [] introduced to protect identity)

The editorial comment ended with a declaration in a *visibly bold font*:

"The Editorial Board of the Journal [name] is AGAINST PLAGIARISM" (2009) (parenthesis [] introduced to protect identity)

Expectedly, the board went ahead and retracted the paper. What was interesting about the turn of events was *how plagiarism was understood* by the board. The editorial apology mentioned that the authors of the said paper produced improper citations as they did not use three of the original references they have listed in the reference section. Plagiarism, by inference, was defined to include *lying about or providing* (3) *ghost citations*!

Defining Plagiarism: The Issues Involved

Plagiarism has not been defined with legal precision so far. Therefore, it is not uncommon to confuse or hold synonymous *Plagiarism* and *Copyright in fringement*. This understanding is flawed on several related counts; firstly, whereas copyright infringement applies only to cases where a copyright has been legally awarded in the first place, plagiarism does not engage with and even transcends the issue of *legal* copyrighting. As Nandita Saikia; a media and technology lawyer puts it, "Plagiarism itself is primarily an ethical issue...Plagiarism may occur independently of copyright infringement. This is because any use of a work without crediting its author would be plagiarism" (2011). Secondly, a copyright is usually not granted for ideas and concepts "unless they are expressed and 'fixed'" (2011). Plagiarism, on the other hand, is generally understood in a broader fashion and does not exclude ideas and concepts from its ambit. Finally, whereas a copyright expires after sixty years of the death of its author, plagiarism is not confined by such restrictions on the continuity of claim to authorship.

As it is, taking the legal path to understanding plagiarism poses several challenges. Whereas, the law does see plagiarism as more nuanced (than copyright infringement), it seems that it is not seen as being equally offensive. At a time when serious charges of plagiarism have been levied against the media (Saha, n.d.),the literary and music fraternity (Chaudhary and Chakrobarty, 2009) and academia (TOI, 2009) alike, legal initiatives to either understand or

address acts of plagiarism continue to be found inadequate.

Plagiarism in academics is undeniably topical and its occurrence disturbingly frequent (Caroll and Appleton, 2001). The influx of anti-plagiarism software(s) bears testimony to the loss of innocence in academia. In such a context, it is even more disconcerting that seeing plagiarism in academics through a legal prism may result in overlooking cases like *ghost citations* altogether. Clearly, there is a need to evolve a more comprehensive discourse on what constitutes plagiarism in general and in academics in particular.

DEFINING 'PLAGIARISM IN ACADEMICS': THE EFFORTS AND THE ROADBLOCKS

Rosamond (2002) calls plagiarism "the most grievous academic crime". Of course, it is provided, it is done with a malicious intent. Whereas, it is easy to engage in labelling *any* and *every* act of plagiarism as undeniably 'bad', it is proposed that plagiarism in academics is defined and understood against the backdrop of the changing academic and research scenarios.

The global academic community driven by the travails of its journal publishing arm has not failed to recognise and rise to the need articulated above. Concerted and continued efforts are being made to define plagiarism holistically and at the same time non-mechanistically. To illustrate, in an article published under the aegis of Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE); a not-for–profit UK organisation which discusses issues relating to ethical publishing, Wager (2011) reinforces the nuanced nature of plagiarism as she enlists seven factors vis. extent, originality, intention, language, etc. which "*may* be helpful in distinguishing types of plagiarism (emphasis added)". Despite containing detailed tables and flowcharts on the various types of plagiarism, how to identify and address them, the COPE article continues to acknowledge the tentativeness of its conceptualisation of plagiarism.

Similarly, ever-denying a common definition, the increasing understanding of the nuanced nature of plagiarism has instead introduced several new terms into the discussion. Terms like auto-plagiarism, self-plagiarism or redundant publication, micro-plagiarism, major-plagiarism, minor-plagiarism and so on only accentuate our bewilderment when faced with the task of defining plagiarism. As Caroll and Appleton (2001) too admit, "Although definitions of academic misconduct in general and plagiarism in particular are universally regarded as important, the *latter* are difficult to devise (emphasis added)."

A similar tentativeness is expressed by none other than the Turnitin think tank. Their tentativeness holds great weight as Turnitin is "the world's leading web-based solution for plagiarism prevention, used by educators

worldwide to check students' papers for originality" (Turnitin, 2012). Why this tentativeness?

It is a growing acknowledgement that the difficulty of defining plagiarism emanates from what many refer to as the evolution of web 2.0. As the Turnitin paper on plagiarism observes:

> "Increasingly though, the lines of what constitute plagiarism are blurring as the Internet reshapes culture and education.
>
> The Web's more interactive "Web 2.0" evolution has created an environment that encourages information sharing and values the remixing and remaking of original content. In this environment, plagiarism is easier to commit and originality more difficult to define." (p.3)

One agrees and adds that defining the term was indeed a straightforward task in the pre-knowledge society era. An act of Plagiarism would be considered committed if an author fraudulently claimed credit for an idea or work not originally her/his own. (Turnitin, 2012). However, in the era that we inhabit, the pursuit of ethical research is determinately difficult and at times perplexing.

The conceptualisation of a knowledge society is, as it is, inextricably and symbiotically connected to the world of internet.

Our move towards creating knowledge societies and the resultant *ever-bludgeoning dependence* and *legitimisation* of internet as a source of knowledge-sharing, has conspicuous and pressing implications on how we may answer the question '*what constitutes plagiarism*?' How we answer this principal or seed question has implications for practice of ethical research.

Web leaders in plagiarism detention services like Turnitin and J.I.S.C. have helped identify more and more forms of plagiarism. The Turnitin document has for *e.g.* identified no less than ten different forms of plagiarism simultaneously rating them on a descending severity index. This document labels the *ghost citation* instance mentioned in the beginning as a definite act of plagiarism and labels it as '404 Error'. Clearly, the recent efforts have attempted to explore the limits of plagiarism in depth.

A constant underlying theme in these attempts however has been an awareness of and the resultant sensitivity to the predicament of an academic researcher facing the challenges of the information and knowledge boom. Herbst (2010) succinctly articulates this challenge as:

> "The knowledge explosion coupled with technological advancement enables a researcher to gain access to a wealth of information. This development not only

allows for the availability of more material than can be scrutinised and analysed, but also often leaves researchers exasperated with the amount of knowledge that can and should be dealt with."(p.vii)

In a scenario like this, attempts to understand the changing landscape of a researcher's intellectual habitat become a pre-requisite to understand plagiarism. The next section attempts to document this landscape.

THE ACCIDENTAL PLAGIARIST: FOREGROUNDING INTENT AS THE TOUCHSTONE

Increasingly, more and more literature is available on practices which constitute plagiarism. As discussed above, these definitions continue to be open ended and dynamic. At the same time, there exists a consensus on 'intent' as being the definitive touchstone of the 'severity' of plagiarism. It is to be understood that intent is to be understood in conjunction with knowledge/ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism. Literature on plagiarism has routinely recognised the prevalence of *unintentional* plagiarism (Turnitin). Editorials have earnestly admitted that most instances of plagiarism stem from 'a kind of sloppy referencing that has ignorance at its roots' (Herbst, 2010). Educators, editors and the academic community at large must cognise that our transition to being

a knowledge society lies at the core of some of the issues raised above. A knowledge society is to be understood as:

"one in which the conditions for generating knowledge and processing information have been substantially changed by a technological revolution focused on information processing, knowledge generation, and information technologies. The knowledge society is people-centric… everyone must be able to move easily through the flow of information submerging us, and to develop cognitive and critical thinking skills to distinguish between "useful" and "useless" information. (Mishra, 2012).

The generation today is aptly referred to as *Digital Natives* by Turnitin. The impact of information revolution on their study and research habits is too conspicuous to be missed. The World Wide Web has convincingly replaced the physical libraries for a vast majority of technology savvy academic researchers. The transition to virtual libraries is a personal choice and is to be respected as it is. Institutions worldwide have, in fact, supported this transition by going digital. The web has significantly furthered our reach and enabled extensive referring by countering the challenges of manual search for relevant material

spread far and wide across diverse physical and geographical locations.

It seems however that these digital natives find it difficult to balance their technological proficiency in finding reference material with their academic *naiveté* in discerningly sifting the *more* relevant with *less* relevant material. As a result, the present day researcher has to her/his disposal more and more seemingly relevant information than she/he may probably be able to systematically process, filter and assimilate.

This can be a precarious situation for the scholar. It is not uncommon to feel overwhelmed when struck with the realisation that shockingly large volumes of research has already been undertaken in what one may have thought of as a niche area of potential research. What can be equally frustrating is the logistic impossibility of continuing to refer indefinitely and therefore the compulsion to delimit your references once the Pandora's Box lay open on the turf of the World Wide Web.

A brainstorming discussion on plagiarism with a group of doctoral research scholars enrolled in the Department of Education, University of Delhi, reaffirmed the following:

- Intentional plagiarism was attribute to such reasons as the *fast approaching submission deadlines, lack of motivation* for a particular task, non-comprehension of the *academic expectations from a task* and in some cases the *pressures to publish.*

- With regard to unintentional instances of plagiarism, most scholars expressed their ignorance about the complicated matrix of types of plagiarism. For most of them plagiarism referred to *copy-pasting of text without acknowledging the original author.*

- Scholars admitted that they did not follow citation norms seriously and found the rigours of citation manual very demanding. It had not occurred too many that incorrect citation too could be labelled plagiarism.

- The discussion also reinforced the earlier analysis pertaining to information overload as they shared that wading through the *never ending list of search results* returned by sundry search engines was *unnerving* and led *to a sense of academic inferiority.*

- The enormity of the material available on the web marred their *academic courage* to undertake something new as they realised there was *nothing left to pursue from them.* Whereas, contextualising the findings of researchers done in foreign/ different contexts was identified as one legitimate area of research, but it raised the fear of being called a "copycat" with reference to the theoretical frameworks.

By the end of the discussion, the scholars accepted to have unintentionally committed plagiarism at one time or the other. They also rued the lack of concerted and consistent

efforts to educate and sensitise them towards the issue of plagiarism in academic writing.

The Road Ahead

The group discussion reinstated the author's belief that the growing instances of plagiarism need not be equated with a culture of *academic dishonesty*; for every instance of intentional plagiarism, it seems, there has been existed multiple instances of unintentional plagiarism. The thing with the latter is that as it is not a conscious act of unethical academic practice, it bodes well for the success of awareness-based interventions to minimize plagiarism.

These interventions can range from course inputs on plagiarism, orientations and workshops of citation requirements as also kinds of plagiarism, institutional forum for research scaffoldings and dialogues, availability of an institution specific document/web page on plagiarism, clearly established code of research ethics with precisely articulated policy on dealing with plagiarism and so on.

One also feels that, at the Macro level, a dialogue needs to be initiated between the community of practice in academics and the law makers of the land to ensure that plagiarism is understood with utmost sensitivity by law makers to begin with. However once a consensual understanding of what constitutes plagiarism in the digital era is reached, it needs to be seen that any legislation so drawn has sufficient bite to curb the menace of intentional plagiarism.

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