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Now "*Ulrich's Bimonthly*"

April, 2006



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Against Plagiarism The plea for open access publishing voiced in the last two monthly pages is not to be confused with a call for abandoning the idea of copyright. Rather, it entails a different concept of copyright, one that aims to protect the rights of authors (creators) as much as those of publishers (distributors). In this month's reflection, I therefore want to say something about a proper understanding of copyright under conditions of open access academic publishing.

Wild West in scholarship? Open access is not the same as Wild West in scholarship. The fact that an author facilitates the access by others to his or her works does not mean the author loses the right of being identified and recognized as the creator of the work in question. Nor does it mean that authors lose any right of seeing the integrity of their work preserved, in the sense that not everyone can modify it as he or she pleases. An author may be prepared to renounce these rights to some extent, for example, when contributing to [Wikipedia](#) or to other open access materials intended for publicly shared authorship ("public wikis" and others); but whether or not the author is prepared to forego such basic rights is entirely up to her or him and to nobody else.

So, let's not confuse open access with Wild West in academic publishing. In an open access philosophy, publishing intellectual work means that authors submit their work to public use but *not* automatically that they forego any right to receiving credit for it and to see it preserved in its integrity. Similarly, inasmuch as a publisher other than the author is involved, it does not automatically mean the publisher loses the right of being recognized and cited as the original source of publication. "Copyright" then becomes a much more subtle and flexible concept than today, one that authors and distributors can specify according to their needs – so long as the idea of open access is

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respected. What can be restricted is no longer the right to *use* published material but only that of doing so without preserving its integrity and without giving full and accurate credit to the source.

Open access ethics: towards a new ethics of academic publishing

I believe and hope that in the coming age of open access publishing, the ways we understand and handle copyright issues will become part of a more encompassing, gradually shaping ethics of the global **infosphere**. My hope is that "academic publishing" will then once again mean what it originally meant – making "published" material public, that is, available to everyone. Copyright then will no longer entail the establishment of legal barriers of accessibility but only the protection of both authors and distributors against any use of published material that does not give proper credit to the sources – plagiarism in all its forms.

Without a shared understanding of the nature of plagiarism and a consequent effort to fight it, "copyright" is meaningless and open access publishing cannot flourish in the academic community. This is why in what follows, I want to concentrate on this core issue of plagiarism. I may on some later occasion deal with the complex issue of copyright in a fuller way; but facing the widespread resort to plagiarism is basic.

A definition of plagiarism By plagiarism, I suggest to understand "any use of ideas or formulations of others that risks passing them off as one's own. The only way to avoid this is to give full credit to the authors, by specifying the source truthfully and accurately." I take this definition from an earlier reflection on the subject in this site ([Ulrich, 2005](#); some of the following considerations are equally adapted from that source).

I would like to highlight two basic intentions of this definition:

1. Plagiarism for me includes the widespread phenomenon of *mild plagiarism*, practiced in the form of near-literal paraphrasing without giving accurate references. "Accurate" reference means to give full bibliographic data including the pagination. The only excuse for not giving page references is when a publication is available in HTML

format only, as is the case with the present page and the earlier source to which I just referred; as soon as a HTML page is also available in PDF or in print format, there is no such excuse. Giving page references is essential to enable readers to find referenced passages easily, so that they are able to compare the wording and meaning of the original author with that of the present author. It is equally essential to prevent authors from erroneously ascribing text they quote or paraphrase to the wrong authors, which might over time lead to an ever-growing *cascade of invalid references* and ultimately, to a corrupted body of literature in the field concerned.

2. It is irrelevant for the fact of plagiarism whether the failure to disclose one's sources occurs intentionally, due to a conscious attempt of passing off the ideas or formulations of other authors as one's own, or (as most authors convicted of plagiarism will try to argue) *unintentionally*, due to an oversight or missing bibliographic information. Applying utmost care in identifying, recording, and declaring one's sources is one of the basic requirements of scholarly writing, and there is no excuse for not doing so.

The standard excuse by authors I have often experienced that not only inexperienced authors but also established university professors (colleagues and others) have more or less literally copied entire passages and indeed, entire pages from my writings, without giving any reference or disclosing the circumstance in any other way. Whenever I politely inquired about their reasons for doing so, they would explain that it happened "unintentionally" and was a *mere "oversight."* I do not believe this is a convincing excuse, though. Once you start to accept this kind of excuse, it will become very difficult indeed to maintain a clear line regarding plagiarism.

The "information age" excuse A new, alternative excuse for plagiarism is recently gaining ground. It claims that in the age of global Internet access to information, plagiarism is rapidly becoming a skill rather than representing an unacceptable use of published material. The following quotation may represent this view:

In the Information Age, the primary obligation of all educational institutions is

to ensure that teachers and students are wise in the ways of the InfoSphere and moral in their use of it. Unfortunately, many educators are trying to apply old ethical and educational concepts to the InfoSphere despite the fact that it is an entirely new kind of place that requires entirely new kinds of thinking. For example, many educators are concerned about how easy the Internet makes plagiarism and the concomitant difficulties this causes for teachers. Various coping strategies have been suggested: outlaw websites that sell or store term papers, emphasize critical thinking and synthesis instead of fact gathering, create checkpoints throughout the entire research process instead of just the end, and so on. These suggestions miss the bigger picture: the concept of plagiarism will die and be reborn with a positive connotation in the Information Age. What we now call plagiarism will become a basic skill. Instead of trying to prevent it, we will teach it.

[...] After all, the student who can find, analyze, and display an elegant solution to a task possesses the skills necessary to prosper in the Information Age. Whether the solution is his/her own or someone else's is irrelevant. Employers are interested in the bottom line, not the footnotes. In an era of a rapidly expanding global knowledge base, it is more important economically to be able to plagiarize existing elegant solutions than to create your own inelegant solutions. (Riegler, 2001)

The last sentence of the quote is perhaps the most telling of all. Apart from revealing the opportunistic core of the argument, it betrays a basic confusion of terms. Just replace the phrase "to be able to plagiarize" by "to be able to identify and cite," and the postulated positive connotation of plagiarism becomes immediately pointless. The skill that really matters for students and authors in a world of ubiquitous information is not, of course, that of passing off the ideas of others as their own but rather, that of knowing how to find and cite relevant information for the benefit of everyone interested.

Riegler's (2001) plea for plagiarism thus ultimately boils down, it seems to me, to a confusion of open access with an absence of any rights on the part of authors to be recognized as authors (at least unless they explicitly renounce this right) and to see their works treated with respect.

For the rest, just how irrelevant and self-defeating this plea for giving plagiarism a positive connotation is, became apparent to me when I quoted it above. What an irony, that I should quote and give credit to the author of such a plea! Any author stipulating plagiarism in fact confronts those willing to take such a stipulation seriously with a peculiar dilemma: if you wish to help his cause and cite him properly, you risk disappointing him because you apparently do not take him seriously at all; if however you don't cite him, you risk disappointing him because you *do* take him seriously.

Pondering this dilemma, I ultimately decided in favor of giving a literal quote followed by an ordinary reference, whatever the quoted author may object against such an outdated habit. One reason is, I cannot help but suspect that Rodney P. Riegler, like any other academic author, appreciates being credited for his contribution. ;-) As a second consideration, Riegler's "bigger picture" does not seem to include the readers of the plagiarized material. Giving quotes and references makes good sense for those readers who may wish to read the original argument in its integrity. Some among my readers may wish to do exactly that, so why should I prevent them from doing so easily? I would indeed encourage everyone to read [Riegler's \(2001\) article](#), as it raises a number of interesting issues regarding the concept of the infosphere; my only objection is that as I see it, these issues point to the value of an open access philosophy of publishing rather than that of plagiarism. Finally, and saving me from the self-defeating implications of Riegler's argument, my (supposedly outdated) belief in conventional standards of academic writing leaves me little choice. The cited author may pardon me for being so old-fashioned!

A personal stance on plagiarism As a matter of principle, plagiarism in all its forms is in my view unacceptable and can in no way be justified by referring to the infosphere and to the [open access philosophy of publishing](#) that is adequate to it. When I say "unacceptable," I do not shut my eyes to the fact that unintended reliance on other people's ideas or formulations may happen to all of us occasionally; but does that mean we should make a virtue of it and elevate it to the status of a new principle guiding the skillful use of the infosphere? Hardly. As I see it, open access publishing cannot flourish in the infosphere unless authors, so long as they do not explicitly renounce their author's rights, can expect to be credited for the material they make available to others and to see its integrity preserved.

I do not believe that the academic community will in any way promote the skills of students and authors by accepting plagiarism or taking it lightly. Plagiarism betrays not a positive skill but rather a lack of care in dealing with one's sources, if not conscious dishonesty in using them. Lack of care and

dishonesty go in this case hand in hand; for if I do not take care to identify and write down from the outset the exact sources of all the materials I use or may collect for later use, and then also to indicate these sources in my manuscripts at the time I draw on them, I accept – and indeed, invite – the risk that later on, I will "forget" or be unable to give accurate references, so as to make it at all times clear to my readers which parts in my writing are truly my own wording and which are quoted or adapted from somewhere else. That means, furthermore, that I accept the risk of causing the mentioned **cascades of invalid references** and of thus contributing to a general loss of quality in the concerned body of literature. Avoiding these negative consequences is what quotation marks and page references were invented for! Nothing can dispense me as an author from this kind of responsibility and care vis-à-vis both my readers and concerned third authors.

In conclusion, we should not confuse the rise of open access publishing with Wild West in the way we use the infosphere. In the coming age of open access publishing, conventional standards of academic writing – accurate quoting and referencing, that is – remain as valid and make as much sense as ever. Taking a firm stance on plagiarism is in the well-understood interest of all users of the Internet, whether as authors, readers, teachers, reviewers, editors, or publishers.

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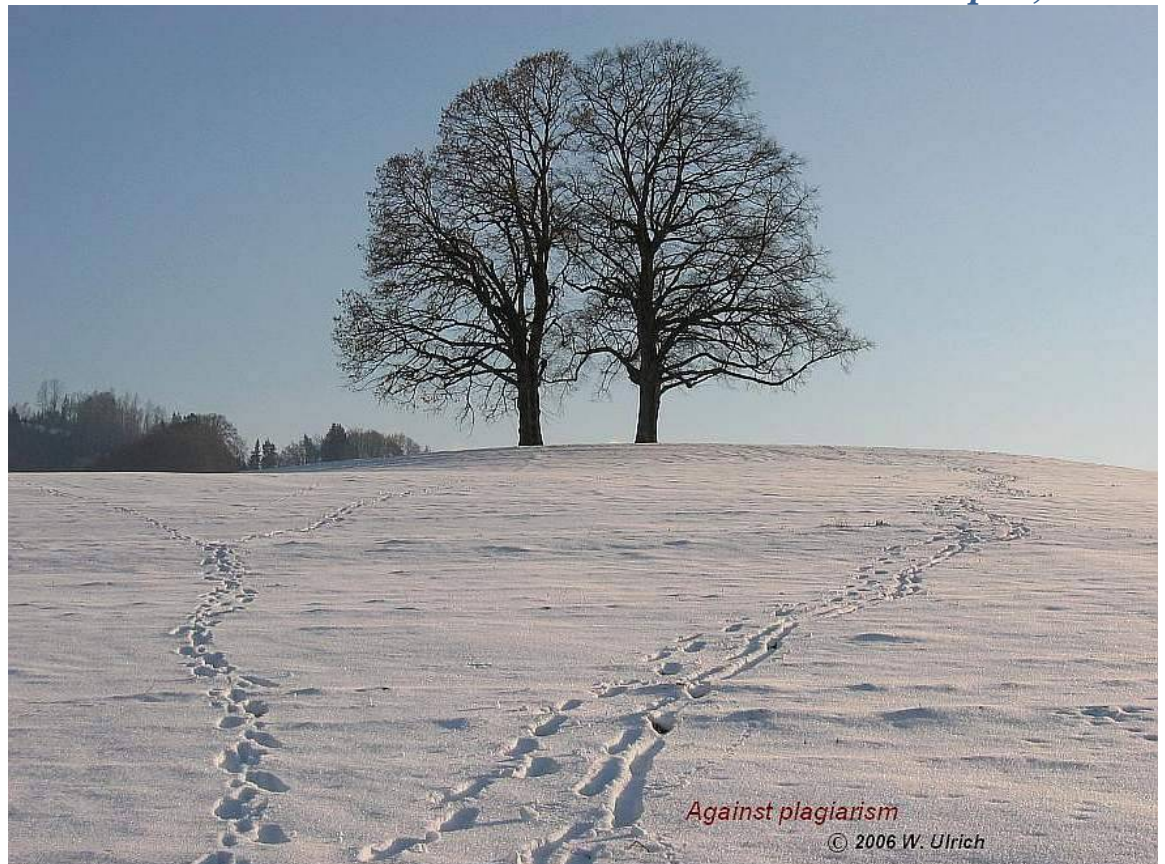
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This month's picture: technical data Digital photograph taken on 5 February 2005 at 5:20 p.m., shutter speed 1/500, aperture f/7.1, ISO 50, focal length 13.6 (equivalent to 61 mm with a conventional 35 mm camera). Original resolution 2272 x 1704 pixels; current resolution 881 x 659 pixels, compressed to 113 KB.

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Conviviality or plagiarism?

„Plagiarize, plagiarize, plagiarize ...
only be sure to always call it, please, research.”

(From the lyrics of "Lobachevsky," satirical song by Tom Lehrer, b. 1928, American song-writer, humorist, and former lecturer of mathematics at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

First published in the record album *Songs by Tom Lehrer, 1953.*)

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Last updated 10 May 2010 (references, links) and 2 April 2006 (text; first published 2 April 2006)
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