The programme of talks throughout the year is one of the benefits which Friends enjoy, but not all Friends can attend every talk. To our delight, Professor Brian J. Ford kindly offered to write up an article for the Bulletin covering the points of his talk for the Friends on ‘Plagiarism – scourge or solace’ given on 27 November 2010.

The power of the plagiarist

People seem perplexed by plagiarism. Much of this is a question of semantics and terminology – for some students, plagiarism is seen as a sub-set of citation. Facts and phrases are conventionally re-used in academia as our understanding builds upon what went before, and the omission of due credit is sometimes seen as a concomitant of the digital era. In my view this is a shallow argument; plagiarism is theft. Citing earlier work is one thing, but presenting it as one’s own is very different.

We may perceive the origins of the term in the Latin plagiar(e), to abduct or kidnap, and what makes it particularly prevalent is the impact of digitisation. It is so simple now to find the work in which you are interested, to copy it, and paste it in a trice into a current piece of unrelated work. Conversely, the digital network makes it equally easy to identify plagiarism; software can be used to search for terms and match sections of identical text. Indeed, there is little need to invest in the software since it is a simple matter to select a suspect section of prose, enter into a search engine (between double quotes, so that the phrase is sought in its entirety) and see if, and where, it has previously appeared.

There are signs that some educational institutions are adopting a less stringent view of plagiarism. Cambridge University has long had a statute that forbids a student from making use “of unfair means in any University examination”1. Cheating was always frowned upon and a culprit was liable to rustication. Regulations are less rigid now. The University’s current statement merely states that, if detected, plagiarism may affect the mark given to a candidate’s work2.

In Germany, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg recently resigned as defence minister when it was revealed that his PhD thesis had been plagiarised. A dashing and charismatic figure who had been formally Christened Karl-Theodor Maria Nikolaus Johann Jacob Philipp Franz Sylvester Joseph von und zu Guttenberg, he had been granted his higher degree by the University of Bayreuth in 2006. A professor at Bremen University worked through the thesis with the aid of internet-based searches and discovered that more than half of the 475-page thesis had been cut and pasted from earlier sources.

Saif al-Islam, the recently arrested son of the former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, has similarly been shown to have plagiarised his PhD thesis awarded by the London School of Economics. Sir Howard Davies, as director of the LSE, had assisted Saif’s close association with the university and had been involved in the donation of £1,500,000 from the Gaddafi International Charity and Development Foundation. In March 2011 Sir Howard Davies resigned; Saif has not been stripped of his degree.

Plagiarism has similarly encroached upon global politics, as in the case of the British government report published in 2003: Iraq, Its Infrastructure of Concealment, Deception and Intimidation. Much of the key information was misappropriated from a publication in the previous year written by Ibrahim al-Marashi under the title ‘Iraq’s Security & Intelligence Network: A Guide & Analysis’, which had appeared in the Middle East Review of International Affairs3 dated September 2002. The disclosure of this high-level example of plagiarism by Dr Glen Rangwala, a Fellow of Trinity, gave rise to the term ‘dodgy dossier’ for the report. The report was cited by Prime Minister Tony Blair in obtaining widespread acceptance of the subsequent invasion of Iraq by coalition forces. Just as in the earlier cases, no sanctions have been sought against the perpetrators.

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1 http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/univ/plagiarism/students/statement.html
2 ibid
3 Vol. 6 no, 3 (September 2002); Middle East review of international affairs is available electronically, from its first issue in 1997 onwards
Plagiarism has become a feature of contemporary academia. A recent report in *Nature* by Yuehong Zhang\(^4\) has claimed that plagiarised work has featured in 692 submissions out of 2,233 to the *Journal of Zhejiang University: Science* – a total of over 31 per cent. This is in the face of official disapproval, indeed the Chinese Minister of Science and Technology, Wan Gang, has stated that the attitude of the Chinese government to the plagiarists is one of ‘zero tolerance’. Attitudes are different in the West, where Michael Schrage, a research fellow at the Sloan School Center for Digital Business at MIT, wrote in 2010 an article entitled ‘Plagiarize Your Way to Productivity and Profit’\(^5\). On this basis, unoriginality can be seen as the key to commercial success – there is no resonance of ‘zero tolerance’ here. Quite the converse – the university seems to express guarded tolerance of what is essentially unprincipled behaviour.

Although the digital era facilitates plagiarism, and aids in its detection, we must not imagine that the phenomenon is new. From the dawn of modern science, the plagiarist has dogged the heels of conventional, creative investigators. In 1561 Conrad Gesner, the noted chronicler of the animal world, published an engraving of what he captioned a hyena. He chose the wrong creature, for what he actually published was a copper engraving, not of a hyena, but of a baboon\(^6\). Within a few years, others were flagrantly copying Gesner’s figure\(^7\).

The sheer innovative nature of Gesner’s work gave him the appeal of uniqueness and he was not the only author to inspire plagiarists. Albrecht Dürer published a magnificent portrayal of a rhinoceros as a woodcut. He never saw a living specimen, but in 1515 he received letters and a rough sketch describing the animal when it was in captivity in Portugal. From these he made a vivid, if somewhat inaccurate, drawing and it was later made into woodcut for publication. The rhinoceros itself was despatched to Rome the following year as a gift for Pope Leo X. The animal was sent by sea from Manuel I, King of Portugal, but it was drowned in 1516 when the ship foundered in a storm off the Italian coast. No other rhinoceros was seen in Europe for over sixty years, and Dürer’s illustration remained the reference point for the understanding of a rhinoceros by learned individuals until the Georgian era.

The rhinoceroses in these images had solid body plates, somewhat like those of a tortoise, and on the upper spine a forward-facing extraneous horn protruded. When the image was plagiarised, these features made the derivation obvious. William Jannsen published an exact reproduction of the original plate in 1630, as did Jan Johnston thirty years later. By the time it was copied and published by François Leguat in 1708, the non-existent forward-pointing horn was almost as large as the correctly-portrayed horn on the animal’s nose. Examples of copied versions of Dürer’s woodcut are still being discovered – the latest example I have personally encountered was on modern Bulgarian currency, where it decorates a 10 Lev note.\(^8\)

Arguably the first professional scientist was Robert Hooke, for he was employed by the Royal Society to bring forth microscopical demonstrations, commencing in 1663. In 1665 he published his master-work entitled *Micrographia*\(^9\), which introduced his astonished readership to the view of nature that a low-power microscope could provide. The two most spectacular plates in this extensively illustrated work were of a flea and a louse. Each was printed on a fold-out plate and in many cases they were framed and hung on the wall. Both images acquired iconic status and one sees images based on them used to the present day. Hooke’s meticulous studies were simplified and reproduced without due acknowledgement in Filippo Buonanni’s *Observationes circa Viventia, quae in rebus non...*

\(^4\) Vol. 467 no. 153 (September 2010); *Nature* is available in hard copy at CP340:1.b.95 for the first 61 issues, P340:1.b.95 for hard-bound issues thereafter, and West Room pigeon hole G.153 for the latest issues. It is also available electronically from its first issue in 1869 onwards.


\(^6\) *Historiae animalium* (from 1551), available through the Rare Books Room at N*.1.23(A)

\(^7\) See the author’s *Images of science: a history of scientific illustration* (9000.b.5021) for further discussion

\(^8\) For further reading on the case of the Dürer rhinoceros, see *The rhinoceros: from Dürer to Stubbs, 1515-1799* by T.H. Clarke (available through the West Room at S400:8.b.9.187). Specific examples, such as Leguat’s *Voyages et aventures de François Leguat* (available in the original French and in English translation also published 1708), can be found in the Library.

\(^9\) two 1665 copies are available through the Rare Books Room, at Keynes.S.7.21 and U*.4.35(C)
Viventibus reperiuntur. Cum Micrographia curiosa of 1691\textsuperscript{10}, and (this time with due reference being made to their source) in much simplified form by Henry Baker in The Microscope Made Easy\textsuperscript{11}. As late as 1771, John Adams featured crude redrawn versions in his Micrographia Illustrata\textsuperscript{12}. The list goes on.

Hooke was a petulant protestor about plagiarists, most notably in his repeated insistence that Isaac Newton had utilised Hooke’s own calculations in his published work. The repeated instances of Hooke’s work being misappropriated by others gives one a sense that his protestations were fully justified. Yet my enquiries into Hooke’s own standards reveal a very different interpretation – Robert Hooke was himself a plagiarist.

At the recent reception at Cambridge University Library to launch the digitised Newton manuscripts, a digitised image, fleetingly displayed on their monitors, caught my attention – it was an ink drawing of snowflakes and ice crystals. Although apparently unattributed on the manuscript, it was a copy by Isaac Newton of images previously published by Robert Hooke in Micrographia\textsuperscript{13}.

You may take this as a classical example of how Hooke felt his work was misappropriated by others. Yet I have researched this image, and find that the version published by Hooke was not originated by him. He insists that this is his own work, claiming that his studies have been made as he endured ‘some coorse draughts, such as the coldness of the weather, and the ill provisions …’ but Hooke is being disingenuous. These distinctive figures were copied, with scant alteration, from Thomas Bartholin’s earlier work De nivis usu medico observationes variae of 1661\textsuperscript{14}. How curious it is to realise that the first great protestor against plagiarism in science was himself a plagiarist.

One aspect that I have not yet addressed is that of the person being plagiarised. In some ways, this is the most important matter. Although I would express my commiserations to anybody in this invidious position, it is clear that the propensity is prevalent. It happens, and it always has. Present-day academics need to accept from early in their careers that worthy work is likely to be misappropriated by others. If you have not been plagiarised, then your work has not attracted much attention – plagiarism is, for the victim, something of a tribute. My published work has been plagiarised on several occasions, and in each instance it has been solely to my advantage. One can dine out on it for years. The fact that one’s work was considered worthy of being misappropriated brings nothing but plaudits for the victim (and censure of the perpetrator) from everyone who knows: it is a mistake for you to be unduly offended by the act.

This does nothing to diminish the heinous nature of the crime, for such it is. Plagiarists are weak-minded and unoriginal. They are abundant, and there is little we can do to eliminate plagiarism from the dusty recesses of academia. Those that are unable to originate work will plagiarise that done by wiser minds and, when we see implied acceptance that a little plagiarism may be acceptable within the academic world, then the whole edifice of original work is threatened. The act of plagiarism reveals an unholy weakness – and tacit acceptance of it, by ruling that such depraved standards might result merely in the lowering of an examination grade, is not appropriate.

Just as we can condemn with faint praise, so we may condone by slight censure. All universities should seek to control plagiarism, and the greatest universities should do so with the greatest diligence. Since plagiarism is theft, showing an inclination to turn a blind eye to what they have done, or at least an eye with impaired vision, will debase academia. It may help maintain a higher position in the league tables of examination successes year by year, but in the end it defeats the purpose of academic integrity and that would be the greatest offence of all.

Brian J. Ford, December 2011
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\textsuperscript{10} available at, for example, the Natural History Museum library.
\textsuperscript{11} the Library holds several editions, including a first edition (1742 – available through the Rare Books Room at Keynes.E.4.8)
\textsuperscript{12} two 1771 copies are available through the Rare Books Room, at Keynes.E.4.7 and White.c.2
\textsuperscript{13} MS Add. 3958 (Early papers), folio 2v.
\textsuperscript{14} two 1661 copies are available through the Rare Books Room, at Kkk.446 and N*.14.12(F)