

PLAGIARISM

IT'S NOT A BLACK AND WHITE ISSUE

By Deni Elliott

Fox Butterfield from *The New York Times*, Laura Parker from *The Washington Post*, Katie Sherrod from the *Fort-Worth Star Telegram*—the list of those recently charged with plagiarism looks like a roster of the best and the brightest.

The pressing issue is not where these journalists went wrong, but how the industry decides what to count as plagiarism. Now that most published information flows freely past everyone's electronic door, it's not surprising that people should get more sensitive about how their work is used. But not all misuse is plagiarism. Lack of attribution is not always larceny.

Consider the case of Fox Butterfield.

Butterfield readily admits that he relied on a *Boston Globe* transcription of a speech in his July 3 *New York Times* story, "For a Dean at Boston U., a Question of Plagiarism." Butterfield painfully admits that his second attribution to the *Globe* for Dean H. Joachim Maitre's quotes got lost between his editors and published story.

In a published editor's note, management said Butterfield's story was "improperly dependent on the *Globe* account." But Nancy Nielsen, spokeswoman for *The New York Times*, said, "The editors who looked at this closely did not view this as plagiarism."

Yet, Butterfield's name has been linked with plagiarism in major publications in the trade and lay press. "I didn't plagiarize," Butterfield says, "and *The New York Times* didn't say that I plagiarized. A lot of people read the editor's note to say that I had lifted the story from the *Globe*. That's not what it said."

You'd think that the writer's intent to pass off someone's work as his own would be important, but sometimes what matters is context.

Many journalists think that it's fine for



one reporter to use another's work without attribution as long as both work in the same shop. The July 2 *Boston Globe* story that supplied quotes from Dean Maitre's speech for Butterfield also provided ten paragraphs of background material that appeared almost word-for-word a few days later under another *Globe* writer's byline.

This non-attributed use is so common a practice that *Boston Globe* Ombudsman Gordon McKibben consulted his dictionary for a definition of plagiarism as he mused about the situation. "She works for the *Globe*, goes to the library, gets something out of her own paper's bank of ideas or words and uses them.

"I never thought about it before, but it doesn't strike me as plagiarism," he says. It's the context that makes a difference in how the industry perceives these actions.

Replaying paragraphs from the newsroom library straddles the line between independent reporting and stealing. Newsrooms may have no trouble with the practice, but consumers, if they knew of the practice, might find it troubling. They may very well assume that each new printing or airing of a story involves independent verification, avoiding repeated mistakes. An easy solution is to add the phrase, "as reported earlier." The newsroom loses nothing by alerting the audience that everyone trusts this earlier account.

The line, thin as it is, between ethical use and plagiarism is drawn on the border that separates following known rules from cheating.

Cheating is the same kind of moral problem in real life as it is in playing a game. If you intentionally violate rules that you know other people expect you to follow, you cheat. Cheating is wrong because the people who are duped operate on the basis of false information. In the world of news gathering and giving, where accu-

racy serves as the beacon, plagiarism is the supreme irony.¹

"Don't present some other person's work as your own" seems a straightforward enough rule from the audience's perspective, but not from the point of view of a newsroom unwilling to admit that a competitor got the story first. The struggle is one of ego, not ethics.

If you attribute, you're being honest with the audience. If you don't, it's because you're trying to hide or obscure your failure to get the story yourself. That's cheating.

A writer's byline or the presence of the on-air reporter says implicitly, "Here's the person responsible for collecting and synthesizing the material that went into this story."

Publication itself gives another level of assurance. Publication implies that the news organization attests to the veracity of what appears. In every news organization, that's sometimes a matter of faith. Sources hide in the shadows, or the reporter's conclusions are the result of months spent crunching numbers and synthesizing statistics. The editor has no choice but to trust her reporter's judgment or analysis. That's a big enough burden for any newsroom without adding the dangers of trusting what some other reporter from some other news organization has had to say.

A reporter who passes off some other reporter's reporting as her own cheats her boss by violating a rule of research that she knows she is expected to follow. She cheats the original author by not recognizing her claim of ownership. Most importantly, she cheats her reader because she doesn't have the background that she implicitly promises with her byline or on-air appearance.

Traditionally, wire services have served as ghost writer in most newsrooms. But the sensitivities are changing.

Reporters ought not pass off AP material as their own, says William E. Ahearn, AP vice president and executive editor. "General knowledge, general comments, you don't have to attribute," he says, "but otherwise, I believe that you tell the reader the source of your information if it's not your own reporting."

News organizations are re-thinking their policies. In a recent internal newsletter, Andy Sharp, associate editor/administration of the *Asbury Park Press*, cautioned staff about the use of wire service material:

"Although we often incorporate material from the wire services in our stories

(and in fact have a contractual right to do so), the use of anecdotes and direct quotes, especially from people just beyond our circulation area and from a newspaper available in our area, is being less than honest with our readers."

"We recognized that it was stupid and dishonest not to credit," Sharp says. "You feel embarrassed if you get beat, but it's cheating your readers not to credit."

The practice of "appropriating material" without attribution is losing favor among electronic and news magazine journalists as well. In an interview four years ago, Jeff Marks, then news director of WCSH-TV in Portland, Maine, said the wire service was the laundry service that allowed radio and television news departments to pull material from competitors without attribution.

"What's more likely to happen today," says Marks, now chairman of the Radio-Television News Directors Association and chief news executive for both of Maine's NBC television affiliates, "is that you'd ignore the wire service in that exchange and follow up independently. These days, I see fewer newsrooms that get other newsrooms to do their work for them."

At *U.S. News and World Report*, the ethics committee worked this summer to clarify the difference between material that becomes public domain by way of a press conference and that developed by a single news organization. Ted Gest, *U.S. News* legal affairs editor and a member of the magazine's ethics committee said, "We're now trying to draw the line closer and credit the original source."

New guidelines distributed to staff at the end of August include the following: "U.S. News reporting should be as fresh and original as we can possibly make it. But there are inevitably times when we will pick up a quote or a bit of information from other published work — and it is both ethically desirable and professionally courteous to credit the original reporting that appeared in an exclusive story or by-lined article." The committee decided, however, that if a reporter reads another publication and appropriates information that resulted from a press conference, rather than from an exclusive interview, then no attribution is required.

Newsrooms have always seemed a little ambivalent about when to credit the wire service itself. Editors and news directors credit when they're uncertain about the accuracy of information, otherwise they don't. This might make it easier for journalists to sleep, but it does nothing for

the readers, who don't know about this nicety of the business.

If the criterion for deciding what ought be attributed is what is reasonable for the reader or listener to expect has been developed by the reporting newsroom, wire accounts need to be accounted for.

It's an interesting convention of the business that it's OK to steal sources but not what they've had to say. Looking for a good source? Check out what people have had to say in other news accounts. Taking someone else's sources or story ideas doesn't count as plagiarism because what's original about them is how they are used.


The published quote is the result of a conversation between reporter and source and that conversation cannot be honestly represented by someone who was not a participant. Thus stealing a quote is plagiarism. But there would be nothing wrong with a different reporter finding the same source and conducting his own interview.

There's a greater need for attribution today and in the future, not because of declining morality, but because our notion of news is changing.

Back when news was thought to be something "out there" waiting to be found, not much could count as plagiarism. Everyone was out after the same story. Competent competitive reports would necessarily turn out to be similar. You can't steal reality, only individual expressions of it.

The myth of objective news is just about dead, replaced with a new appreciation of news as a dynamic interaction between the reporter and event. The best story is one different from all the rest.

As news is understood as the creation of a journalist — a result of specialized noticing, interpreting, analyzing, and synthesizing — it's less likely to be plagiarized. It's less likely to be mistaken for objective common knowledge.

In the meantime, news organizations can clarify the usually unspoken rules under which they operate to create a newsroom-wide and a community-wide understanding of what counts as plagiarism. The best way to guard against cheating is to make sure everyone knows the rules. 

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¹ A far more technical explanation of the nature of cheating, and the one upon which my explication is based, can be found in Gert, B. 1989, *Morality: a new justification of the moral rules*, New York, Oxford University Press.