

BY JEFF MCLAUGHLIN

A Cheap Device for a Weak Premise

I received an e-mail from a professor kindly asking me to remove all my student philosophy essays from my web site since he had caught a couple of his students downloading them and handing them in as if the essays were their own creations. Now, aside from the fact that this request is an instance of "blaming the victim," it points to a very real problem: plagiarism and the World Wide Web.

I'm sure that I'm not going to delete information from the Web just because someone used it unethically. At the heart of the matter is the principle that knowledge is best shared with others, but it has to be knowledge gained appropriately. Practically speaking however, if I did shut down my site, then I would also have to e-mail all gourmet web sites and ask them to shut down because I once followed a recipe that turned out really bad. Then I figure I'd have to write all the other 100 million or so people who have web pages up and ask them to delete their files because there's the potential for someone to copy from them without giving them due credit. After that, I'll be required to see to it that all the libraries of the world burn their books, not because they are offensive or harmful, but just because someone might paraphrase a sentence or two without proper citation. To avoid further cases of

plagiarism and cheating, I'll need to go on the conference circuit and demand that universities stop giving written assignments. As well, all exams will have to be oral exams so that we can be sure that the ideas come from the mouths of the students and not from the texts of others (because remember, we destroyed them all for this very reason). And to make sure that no one overhears these spoken words (since these listeners could potentially repeat these vocalizations as if they were their own ideas), the examiner and examinee will have to use the Cone of Silence. The cone of silence, for those of you not familiar with its use by Maxwell Smart, CONTROL Agent 86, is a large molded plastic sheet that is lowered over two people engaged in conversation so that no one outside the sheet can hear the discussion. (Of course I'm referring to that device from one of my favourite 60s television shows Get Smart. Check out www.wouldyoubelieve.com/ and at http://members.tripod.com/cone_of_silence/images/CONE1.jpg you'll find a picture of the cone of silence mentioned above.) In fact, the nice thing about the Cone of Silence is that it never really worked: the people under the cone couldn't hear each other either. This way we're guaranteed that a person's original ideas won't be stolen by anyone since no one will be able to hear them. Of course, this also means that the ideas can't be shared either.

Taking the words or ideas of another without giving the author credit is not a new problem – in fact, it can be traced back to the second cave drawing. Still, it's a problem that is magnified by the Internet. Magnified because of the ease of

finding information; by the vast amount of information available; by the number of people who have access to the Internet, and the sheer number of lazy unethical cheats who abuse or who make it easy for others to abuse the decentralized system. PC's with Internet connections are cheap devices that allow illegal and unethical acts to prosper. There are scads of websites out there where people buy and sell student essays such as 123helpme.com, papers4less.com, bignerds.com. In fact, the Kimble library out of the Coastal Carolina University has compiled a long list of these sites at: <http://www.coastal.edu/library/mills2.htm>

To justify the stealing of another's electronically posted ideas or words on the basis that they aren't real like words in a book are real is a weak premise. For too long people are justifying their behaviour on the "unreality" of the Internet, that no "real harm is being done." Somehow they think that there's no one on the other end, just a bunch of detached words on a screen from some anonymous person whose name they don't care to know. And if these words are posted on the Web, then there's an assumption that the author or owner doesn't care what happens to them. In other words, when we post to the Web, we are saying to all and anyone: "Here, feel free to take this idea, this image, this creation." It's easy to highlight, copy and paste or to simply click on the "print" button thus making the theft somehow less serious, less "premeditated." Hellooo. People... just because you CAN take the information easily, doesn't mean you MAY. Copyright notices don't do much more than create guilty consciences on those of us who have

Continued on Page 27

JEFF MCLAUGHLIN HAS A PH.D. IN PHILOSOPHY. HE TEACHES, AMONGST OTHER THINGS, CYBERPHILOSOPHY AT THE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF THE CARIBOO IN KAMLOOPS, BC CANADA. E-MAIL: JmclLaughlin@cariboo.bc.ca

Tips for Building Knowledge Infrastructures

Continued from Page 15

or implemented as separate units, without any overall design as to their interaction and their interface. A sustainable KM platform must be able to incorporate and adapt to existing services, so that a “break with the past” is not required. This is part of the ongoing challenge facing KM developers today. 🌐

REFERENCES

Abramson, G. (1999). On the KM midway. *CIO Enterprise Magazine*, May 15, 1999. http://www.cio.com/archive/enterprise/051599_cons.html

Borghoff, U., & Parescجي, R. (Eds.). (1998). Information technology for knowledge management. Berlin: Springer.

Davenport, T. (1997). Common pitfalls of knowledge management. *CIO Magazine*, June 15, 1997. http://www.cio.com/archive/061597_content.html

KMPG, (1998). Knowledge management: “Common sense, but is it also common practice?” Knowledge Management Feedback Report, KPMG.

Ruggles, R. (1997) Knowledge tools: Using technology to manage knowledge better. <http://www.businessinnovation.ey.com/mko/html/toolsr.html>

Sivan, Y. (1999-2000). Tips on building knowl-

edge infrastructures. *WebNet Journal: Internet Technologies Applications, & Issues*, 1-2.

Sivan, Y. (2000). Knowledge services: Knowledge units that benefit knowledge users. *WebNet Journal: Internet Technologies Applications, & Issues*, 2(2), 14-17, 22.

Sivan, Y. (2000). Nine keys to a knowledge infrastructure: A proposed analytical framework for organizational knowledge management. Research draft, Program on Informati Resources Policy at Harvard University. <http://www.pirp.harvard.edu/pubs.html>

Tiwana, A. (2000) The knowledge management toolkit: Practical techniques for building a knowledge management system. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

lol: Life on Line

Continued from Page 58

them (consciences that is, not guilty ones) but it doesn't mean much to a kid who would steal a “Please do not trespass sign” from their neighbour's yard.

I'm sure there are readers who have tricks for catching students. One simple thing to do is to copy and paste a unique sentence or phrase from the suspect paper into a search engine and see if there are any exact matches. A colleague just told me of a successful case using this very trick. She caught one of her students plagiarizing and gave the person another chance: “Hand in something of your own.” The student then proceeded to hand in another downloaded essay from a different web site. Unfortunately for the student, a different student in the same class had also printed off the same essay and handed in as his own. Two dumb students. One obvious essay. One web site. And two failing grades. Here's a hint for students. If you are going to cheat, make sure no one else in your class is too.

Howoriginal.com provides a free service for faculty to check phrases, which I've played with some success (if “success” is the right word here). Of course, you can also cave in and assign essay topics that your students won't easily find in the public sphere. “Discuss the political ideas in Plato's Republic” is too common a paper topic; heck, there's probably a web

site out there called “**political-ideas-in-Platos-Republic.net**.” Try instead something like: “In Plato's Republic, he uses a cave as an allegory for the different levels of belief and knowledge. What colour is the cave? Discuss.”

I remember doing a search last year for student essays and came across an electronic bulletin board where students could post requests. One of them actually stated “Urgent!” I need a 750-word essay by this Friday on the topic: “When would I lie?” I laughed and laughed and then cried and cried about the lengths that some of our students will go to avoid putting their own ideas to ink. The amount of time students can spend trying to track down an essay boggles my mind. Then again, the lack of time spent in trying to plagiarize is also noteworthy. Students who hand in a book with a note scrawled along the top stating: “I agree with everything that this author wrote. Nothing more can, or should be said” or “You'll find my essay online, but I forgot to bookmark the URL,” should really think about finding a new career.

We keep hearing ad nauseum how “information wants to be free.” Yet, clearly there is “free information” and “information that is **wink*** free”; just as there are free samples at the store and “free samples so long as the security guards don't catch you.” There's a cost involved when people take with other people's information and then

claim it as their own whether it's professors spending hours tracking down cheaters or researchers trying to determine the veracity and authorship of online work. A far greater cost to all of us is the loss of the information that is NOT shared by those afraid of having their ideas taken or manipulated or altered by others.

Of course it's not just information that people want from the Web. Students aren't just there to find out how to cheat. I'm sure if you asked them what the best thing about the World Wide Web was, “plagiarizing from web sites” would only be 12th on their list. I bet they'll say that finding information on the Web is good and bad – good that there's so much, bad that it's so hard to find what you are looking for. Indeed, students with the eye on the prize would say that the best thing about the WWW is that it's created a lot of new high-tech companies. Still, as an academic, I have to worry that one of these will be a new “e-bay” auction site where the “e” stands for “essay.” Hmmm... Maybe an enterprising lad or lass could corner the market on students who might not be willing to bid \$100 for an “A” paper, but would bid perhaps \$30 for a “C+.” I could let them have a whole slew of “F” papers for a steal of a deal. 🌐

'Til next time,
Jeff