A Case of Academic Plagiarism: The Perils of Internet Publication

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The "publish or perish" philosophy permeates academic career development systems at a large number of universities (Lichtenberg, 1997) and research centers in the US and many other countries. Young researchers and university professors are rewarded based on the number of academic publications they are able to produce per year, as well as on the quality of those publications. Quality standards are often determined by the academic ranking of the conference or journal where the publication appears. Particular importance in this respect is given to "recognized" refereed journals, where peer reviews often lead to rejection of eighty to ninety percent of all the paper submissions.

Singular pressure is placed on university professors on tenure-track appointments (CHE, 1995) to generate a certain number of publications (preferably publications in refereed journals). The required number of papers published, and respective journal or conference ranking usually depends on the candidate's university and field of research (Zivney and Bertin, 1992). Certain universities will grant tenure to a candidate if he or she has two journal papers. Other universities will require more papers, with at least a few of those papers published in top ranking journals. These requirements can be very stressful for some candidates.

Under such pressure to publish in order to proceed on a chosen career, or simply keep a job, a young professor on a tenure-track appointment may feel tempted to cheat his or her way up through the system. How can this be done? It is not hard to think of possible ways. Faking research data is one of the alternatives, especially when "confidentiality" prevents disclosure about its sources. One famous case of alleged data fabrication is that of the psychologist Cyril Burt. Widely regarded as one of Britain's most eminent psychologists, Sir Cyril Burt (1883-1971) was, within five years of his death, publicly denounced as having fabricated data to show that intelligence is inherited (Gould, 1981). This case aroused so much controversy that several books have been written, both accusing and exonerating (Joynson, 1989) Cyril Burt, over a period spanning nearly twenty years (MacKintosh, 1995).

Another alternative, seemingly pursued by the protagonist of the case discussed in this paper, is plagiarizing the work of others. For example, a researcher under pressure may submit a nearly identical copy of a paper already published in a refereed journal to another journal in a related field. Choosing a journal in a related field, rather than in the same field, would likely reduce the chance of an overlap of readership and therefore the chance of being caught red-handed. And, using a paper that had successfully been through a review process may considerably increase the likelihood that the paper will be accepted for publication again in a different journal.

What prevents someone from plagiarizing the work of others, or faking data, or both? My own experience, described in this paper, suggests that the answer is: "Not much." The temptation of having to spend just a few hours rather than years of work to fulfill publication quota requirements can be very strong for some. Moreover, holding the transgressor accountable for
his or her acts may not be as easy as it appears. It is not clear whether such cases have any chance of becoming the focus of a government prosecution team's efforts (as often happens with such newsworthy cases as murder, tax evasion by the wealthy, and government corruption). My experience also suggests that many lawyers would not be interested in contingently suing the transgressor in such cases unless the transgressor's employer can be their target, and reasonably large sums of insurance money collected.

In this paper I describe a case of academic plagiarism in which I was directly involved as one of the authors of the work plagiarized. I have found out that a paper submission to a prestigious journal was virtually a copy of a paper previously co-authored by me. Later, I have found out that the same person, again based on one of my papers, had made another fraudulent submission to a different journal. I describe how I obtained information about the author of these submissions, who until recently was a professor of information systems at an American university. I also describe how I confronted the author with the facts, and how he reacted. Legal considerations are made based on my interaction with lawyers. Finally, some implications for authors and the academic community are discussed in the concluding section.

The facts

In early 1997 I received an e-mail from a colleague and former co-author telling me about a paper submission he was reviewing. He had been asked to review the paper by the associate editor of a prestigious journal whose focus was on the development and use of computerized knowledge-based systems. In his e-mail my colleague mentioned that the paper he was reviewing "...heavily referenced..." some of my previous work on process-based cognition and improvement, partly conducted while I was doing my PhD.

I replied with a request for more details about the submission. My colleague responded that, although he was probably going to recommend that the paper be accepted for publication, he could not give me any further information about the submission because of the confidential nature of the review process. I must admit that I was very curious about the submission. Being heavily cited in a paper that had a chance of being accepted for publication in a prestigious journal was certainly good news, and the indication that my PhD research work had been useful to someone. Moreover, chances were that the author of the paper and I could in the future collaborate in related research projects. I decided to try to convince my colleague to at least let me have a peek at the paper submission.

A few months later I traveled to meet my colleague, and managed to convince him to let me have a look at the submitted paper. First, however, he gave me the bad news. The paper had been rejected due to a misfit with the journal's topicality. My colleague had received detailed information from the associate editor, who explained why the paper had been rejected. Attached to the letter were the reviewers' comments and the letter that was sent to the author. The review had been extremely detailed, impartial, and very professional.

The associate editor stated that she had asked three reviewers to read and comment on the paper. Two of the selected reviewers had a stronger business orientation (one was my colleague); the other reviewer was more technically oriented. The two business oriented reviewers had praised
the paper and recommended acceptance. The other reviewer strongly recommended rejection because the paper was not geared at the journal's target audience. This reviewer suggested that the paper should be submitted to a business journal. The associate editor then reviewed the paper herself, and eventually concurred with the technically oriented reviewer. She decided to reject the paper based on the mismatch between the paper's contributions and the journal's topicality.

As soon as I laid my eyes on the submission material, I noticed that not only did the editor in her letter to my colleague mention the name of the person submitting the paper, but she also kept the first page of the submission together with the paper. This page contained the title of paper, the name of the person submitting the paper, and his affiliation -- attached to the copy sent to my colleague. The first page of the paper submission was stamped "Received Mar 1, 1997, 104135 0" and read as in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: First page of the paper submission](image1)

I started reading the paper submission. From the outset I noticed that the wording was extremely similar to that used by me in some of my papers. Even some peculiar phrase constructions and grammatical errors where the same (among other things, I tend to refer to data in the singular, as in "...the research data was obtained from…") It was clear to me that there was something very strange about that submission. My intuition told me that the author of the submission (hereafter referred to by the pseudonym Plag) had written it using large chunks of text from a paper that I had previously authored for a conference or a journal. As I explain in more detail next, I later found out that Plag used a journal paper previously authored by me, and whose electronic version was available from my web page at Temple University.

I spent some time checking my previous publications, until I found, almost by coincidence, a copy of the journal The Learning Organization (TLO), Volume 4, Number 2, published by MCB Press (based in Bradford, England) early in 1997. One of the papers published in this issue was titled "The Nature of Data, Information and Knowledge Exchanges in Business Processes: Implications for Process Improvement and Organizational Learning", and had been authored by me, Bob McQueen and Jim Corner (both at the University of Waikato, in New Zealand). I compared this paper with Plag's submission. Right in the abstract, I found that about half of the sentences were almost exactly the same in both papers.

Our TLO article was written based on research data collected over several years from three organizations, one located in Brazil and the other two in New Zealand. Figure 2 shows the first paragraph of the "Research method" section of our TLO article, and the first paragraph of the "Research method" section of Plag's paper submission. A few paragraphs earlier in Plag's paper submission, it was stated that "...actual names of companies have been disguised for the sake of confidentiality..."

![Figure 2: First paragraph of the "Research method" section of our TLO article (top) and of Plag's paper submission (bottom)](image2)

I counted fifty-one paragraphs in the body of Plag's paper submission. From these, thirty-eight were nearly full (i.e. sentence-by-sentence, word-by-word) copies of paragraphs from our TLO
The order of the paragraphs in Plag's paper submission was nearly identical to that in our TLO article. Three paragraphs in Plag's submitted paper were partial copies of paragraphs in our paper, where approximately half of the sentences had been copied verbatim. Ten new paragraphs, which were not in our TLO article, appeared in the sections "Limitations of the research", "Directions for future research", and "Recommendations and Conclusion" of Plag's paper submission.

All of the references in the "References" section of Plag's paper submission but one, to a paper by Plag, were identical to the references in our paper, including references to a book and a manual written in a foreign language (Portuguese) by me. The manual had been written to support a course on quality management I taught in Brazil, and is very difficult to be obtained from anyone other than myself. And, I had never received a request for this manual from Plag, or sent a copy of this manual to him.

Four out of five figures in Plag's paper were nearly identical to those in our TLO article. These included a flowchart diagram with twelve symbols. The symbol shapes (e.g. square, oval) and their relative location in the flow chart were identical in both our TLO article and Plag's submission.

The two tables in Plag's paper submission were nearly identical in shape and descriptive content to the two tables in our TLO's paper. Our TLO article listed the processes about which research data had been collected in a table captioned "Table 1: General description of the processes studied". Plag's paper submission also had a table listing the processes studied, captioned "Table 1: Distribution of business processes studied". This table was strikingly similar to the table in our TLO article. Both tables are shown here exactly as they appear in our article (Table 1 in this paper) and Plag's paper submission (Table 2 in this paper). Note that, even though in Plag's paper there is a claim that twenty business process instances have been analyzed (see Figure 2), the list of processes studied in Table 2 shows twenty-two processes, the same number of processes analyzed in our TLO article.

Good research papers usually include a section where the researcher attempts to show that he or she understands the limitations of the research. This section often warns the reader about possible sources of bias in the research, problems that could have potentially arisen from the data collection and analysis method used, and limitations as to the extent to which the research findings can be generalized. In an apparent attempt to adhere with such conventions, Plag's paper included the following warning to the reader in the first paragraph of its section "Limitations of the research", located near the end of the paper:

...it is important to point out that this research presented here investigated business processes in the U.S. apparel industry and hence research findings may be limited to the apparel industry. Other correlations and relationships may emerge in other industrial (e.g., electronics, pharmaceutical, insurance), national or
international organizations. These limitations call for further empirical research in other industries and settings.

I showed the two papers to a number of close friends and colleagues, who compared the two submissions and provided their personal advice on what steps I should take. Their advice ranged from "Forget about it, this guy is going to be caught sooner or later anyway," to "Obviously, you should sue him for theft of intellectual property."

My colleague, who had reviewed the paper, had the opportunity to carefully compare the two papers himself. He reached the same conclusion as I did regarding the striking similarities between the two papers, and sent an e-mail to the associate editor of the journal to which Plag's paper had been submitted informing her about the potential copyright infringement. He also faxed her a copy of the TLO article, for comparison. At my request, he asked her not to take any action until I had carefully analyzed the legal implications of the case, and gathered more information about Plag. Most importantly, I wanted to make sure that he had submitted the paper himself, as opposed to someone having submitted the paper under his name. I reasoned that someone might have done this as a joke, or with the deliberate intent to undermine Plag's reputation.

Gathering information about Plag

In Plag's paper submission there was an indication of his affiliation with a department of a large American university. Using a browser, I checked the web page of the mentioned department and saw Plag's name listed as one of its faculty. I downloaded his personal web page from there.

Plag's web page had several sections, starting with his full contact address. The web page's "Background" section listed three degrees -- a doctor of philosophy degree from a prestigious American university in the Midwest, as well as an MBA and a BSc on Mechanical Engineering. Right below there was the following statement (exactly as in Plag's web page):

My involvement with information technology at both the operational and executive level in leading Fortune 50 companies has equipped me with an acute awareness of and sensitivity to the importance of information systems in organizations.

Standing on the threshold of the twentyfirst century and well entrenched in an information age, I feel very privileged to be in the midst of this tumultuous and exciting era of change. As a trained IS professional anchored in a strong academic setting, I perceive for myself a dual role of integrating IS with other areas of knowledge and bridging the "terrestrial gap" between theory and application of IS.

This was followed by a "Teaching" section, describing seven courses taught by Plag at his institution, and a "Research" section. The next section was titled "Publications", and listed several papers that had been published or accepted for publication. Among these publications were eight journal articles, one refereed book chapter, and twenty-four conference proceedings papers. Also were listed four articles under review, and ten working papers.

From the refereed journal publications listed, six had Plag as the single author. The other two journal papers listed co-authors. Their dates ranged from 1995 to "forthcoming" (this was in 1997). From the twenty-four conferencing proceedings papers listed, twenty had Plag as the single author; the other listed co-authors. Their dates ranged from 1994 to 1997.

The "Awards and Honors" section on Plag's web page listed eight awards or honors, including one titled "Best Dissertation International Award", followed by the name of a prestigious international conference (which I personally regard as the top conference in the field of information systems). When checking for confirmatory evidence about this award, I found that it was listed on the official "Awards" web page of that conference, which listed all the awards granted since the inception of the conference.

Seeking legal advice
After gathering information about Plag, I decided to seek legal advice. I was not only looking for some guidelines on how to proceed regarding this case, I also wanted to know what the legal implications for both Plag and me would likely be. I contacted twelve lawyers over the phone and in person.

Initially, I contacted patent attorneys and lawyers who specialize in intellectual property law. These initial contacts were very frustrating, as I had to explain the details of my particular situation to each one of the lawyers, only to be told they could not help me with my case. Some lawyers were surprised about the incident. A few others pointed out right away that (in the words of one lawyer) "There doesn't seem to be much money in [this case]". Some of these lawyers suggested caution in dealing with Plag, pointing out that "He seems to have a lot more to lose than you do." I concurred with their advice. If Plag really wanted to pursue an academic career, he would probably do whatever was in his power to discredit any accusation of academic plagiarism against him.

At a certain point I was referred to a lawyer whose specialty was intellectual property. I contacted him, and he told me he was not interested in the case, but added that I could always contact Plag directly and request him to financially compensate me for the distress caused by his actions. He believed that my case was strong enough for me to easily win in court, and that Plag was probably aware of that. He instructed me to make it clear to Plag that I was seeking an amicable solution to this case, and to state that I had no intention on suing Plag if this was not necessary. It was his opinion that I should cut a deal with Plag, which itself would scare Plag so much he would never do this again. This lawyer told me that he could not represent me if the case went to court, as he only took on cases involving corporate disputes.

After three weeks of relatively unsuccessful contacts, I decided to call the Philadelphia Bar Association's lawyer referral service. The lawyer who answered my call told me that I should
contact the bar association of my township (I live in the US, just outside Pennsylvania). I had to contact two township bar associations because my house was located near the border of these two townships. When I found the right association and called it, I was informed that I should try again the Philadelphia Bar Association. I should specifically ask for a lawyer that was licensed to practice in both Pennsylvania (where I work) and state of my residence. I did so, and was given the name of one lawyer. In the meantime, I was referred by a friend to another lawyer who was also a university professor. I decided to contact both.

In my phone contacts with lawyers from the bar associations I was strongly advised to seek financial compensation from Plag. In one of these lawyers' words, "...this is your only option in this case..."; meaning that there were not many other legal avenues through which I could seek justice in the US legal system. However, I was reminded by this lawyer that, if I personally contacted Plag or someone close to him and made allegations about the submitted paper, that could prompt Plag to sue me for harassment and slander. Since Plag was in a different state in the US, chances were that I would have to hire a different lawyer to defend me in that state if Plag decided to sue me for one of these offenses.

One of the lawyers I met in person was also a university professor. We talked for over two hours. She was surprised at the case, and assured me that it was quite unique. Although she agreed that something should be done, her advice was filled with caveats. Based on her professional experience, she felt that I would probably be doing myself a favor if I concentrated my energies on something more productive than going after Plag. She pointed out that Plag would probably deny any wrongdoing and attack my own reputation as a form of defense. "Believe me, this can turn into a bloody battle, where there will be no winners," she warned me.

I also met an aggressive young lawyer, whose advice was quite different. He believed that I had a very strong case, given the similarities between the papers, the fact that my paper had been published before, and the formal nature of the submission (with Plag's name, affiliation, signature etc.). However, his opinion was that I should not sue Plag directly, as he also believed that Plag would probably file a lawsuit against me for defamation. The most appropriate tactic, according to this lawyer, was to sue Plag's employer. Not only would this guarantee financial compensation, as the lawyer believed Plag's university had some sort of collective professional liability insurance, it would also ensure that the university itself would take disciplinary or legal action against Plag. In a sense, this was probably the most pragmatic advice I had received so far.

However, I was not sure as to whether it would be ethical to sue Plag's institution. After thinking a lot about the whole case, I decided to contact Plag myself. At this point, I had spent many hours collecting evidence, discussing the case with friends, seeking advice from lawyers and colleagues, and thinking about the whole situation and its implications for the academic community. I was determined to obtain a written apology from Plag and financial compensation for the time I had involuntarily spent on the case.

**Contacting Plag**

On July 24, 1997, I placed a phone call to Plag from my office at Temple University in Philadelphia. As soon as he answered the phone I introduced myself and told him that I had a
copy of one of his paper submissions (the one I believe was fraudulent). I described some details of the submission, including title and journal. I then asked whether he had made the submission himself. He answered affirmatively.

I then mentioned the incredible similarity between his paper submission and my previously published paper. He denied any wrongdoing, and told me that the similarity was probably due to a coincidence. I told him that I did not think so, and that I wanted him to send me a written apology. I also told him that I wanted to be compensated for the time and distress that the incident had caused me. He insisted that he had done nothing wrong. Later that day, I received an e-mail message from Plag. This message is shown in Figure 3. Although Plag refers to a fax in this message, supposedly sent by me to him, I had had only one phone conversation with him up until that time.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Figure 3: E-mail message received from Plag after our phone conversation

In his apology letter later faxed to me, however, Plag never mentioned what he was apologizing for. As in his e-mail (see Figure 3), Plag apologized for his "...grave mistake..." only, which I thought was too vague an apology to be seen as valid from a legal perspective. After all, Plag could later claim that, if the matter for some reason went to a court of law, he had apologized for something else, something unrelated to plagiarism. Although my intent was not to ruin anyone's life, I wanted him to apologize for having used my TLO paper in his paper submission. Moreover, I wanted him to send me a signed letter -- the letter he faxed me was not signed. I stated these points clearly in an e-mail message sent to him a few days after. On July 28, 1997, I received another e-mail message from him. Below is a partial quote from this message.

\[\text{I have taken some time from my busy schedule and investigated your accusations regarding my article. I am wrong to have apologized without investigating the matter myself. Now I have ample evidence to prove that my work was not plagiarized from any published/cited source. I have consulted a top attorney who is ready to take up the matter in the court if you still plan to defame me on false grounds. In fact, my attorney suggests that I file a "defamation suit" to claim damages for tainting my "outstanding research record"...It is unfortunate that you have managed to prey on my "trusting" nature and caused me and my family lots of heartburn, physiological, and psychological problems since last week. I am willing to forget and forgive this if you recognize this error. Some of the senior colleagues in the field have also encouraged me to take a legal course if you still insist on pursuing this case.}

\[\text{I would like to rest this matter with this message. I would appreciate your reply; if not I will assume that you are intent on "defaming" my career and family and will proceed with my attorney's recommendations on the legal course of action open to me.}

I was obviously very angry after I read the e-mail above. I somewhat pulled myself together, and tried to be calm. I replied to this e-mail message stating that if he thought he could successfully sue me, then he should go ahead and do it. I pointed out that in a defamation suit, he would have to prove that my allegations were false, which would be impossible for him given his formal submission of an article whose previous publication was well documented.

However, his threats were frightening, for at least one reason. The US legal system does not require Plag, or any other person for that matter, to automatically pay for the legal expenses of the person sued if the lawsuit is unsuccessful, in any instance. If the winner so wishes, she must
sue back later to recover the expenses, but then she might be facing an appeal of the first decision, which can be seen as a new lawsuit in itself. Unlike other countries like England for example, the US legal system does not incorporate the rule usually know as "the loser pays", with the only exception of the state of Alaska (Di Pietro et al., 1995). This characteristic of the US legal system may encourage someone in Plag's situation to sue first, and appeal in court as many times as possible to buy time (maybe until tenure comes). This tactic could also be used to force the other party to give up the whole case due to mounting legal defense bills. I consulted a lawyer about legal costs in the case such lawsuit was filed against me, and was told that my legal defense could easily cost me ten to twenty thousand dollars. And, I was told that there was a good chance that I might have to defend myself in Plag's home state, which could add heavy transportation, communication, and other related costs to my defense.

When I consulted another lawyer regarding Plag's threats, however, this lawyer told me that it was very unlikely that Plag would sue me. In the words of this lawyer: "If [Plag] was really planning to sue you, he would have already done so..." Although the lawyer's comment was reassuring, at that point I almost regretted having written the TLO paper in the first place. The whole situation had become very inconvenient and distressful. On July 31, 1997, I received a very long e-mail message from Plag. Below is a partial quote from this message.

I am sorry for the intrusion. I am writing this to you on the advice of some senior faculty in the field with the hope of resolving this amicably.

It is very unfortunate that two promising researchers should find themselves in this peculiar situation. Though the ideas represented in our papers are similar, I can truthfully say that I did not come across your "in press" papers during my literature search. Had I come across them I could NOT have pursued this research. I can sincerely say that the motivation for the study came from unpublished sources on the Internet.

Some of my mentors who are very senior in the field opin that this may be a coincidence and I have done the right thing in apologizing and that we should be laying this matter to rest as no credit has been taken away from you. I have been told that unintended cases such as this have happened in the past, but have been settled amicably without any talk/threat of legal action. These senior faculty feel that if you indeed take any such action the credibility of the MIS field would be itself shaken and they feel they would not be able to forgive us if we end up jeopardizing the future of MIS when we are fighting to stay credible in the eyes of the AACSB. I agree with their wisdom and advice because I believe that the interests and future of MIS is of overarching importance. I fear to think of the consequences and our futures if we end up jeopardizing all these years of hard work and hope that these visionaries have had for the rest of us. I fervently hope that we don't let them down. We could rise up to the occasion if only we put our heads together and settle this matter.

On a personal note, since we share some common research interests I propose that we could collaborate on future research projects. Currently I am teaming with some very senior faculty in leading US schools in a variety of research and consulting projects. We are forming a consortium to address a variety of issues and I could perhaps recommend you if you are interested in this. This would give you lot of visibility and opportunity to climb greater professional heights. I cannot reveal the nature of these projects at this juncture, but if we can definitely explore these and other opportunities once this dust settles down [...]

I have not replied to this last e-mail message. However, given the allusion in the message to "senior faculty in the field of MIS", I decided to show the evidence that I had collected so far to
several senior researchers and faculty of departments of information systems at several universities in the US and overseas. I wanted to see the reaction of these senior researchers to the evidence I had collected. In order to accomplish this, I reasoned that I would have to attend an international conference, where all these people would be gathered at once. The perfect opportunity came in August 1997, in Indianapolis, during the Association for Information Systems Americas Conference (AIS'97). As for the reactions of those who saw the evidence, I could say, in a nutshell, that I could not find anyone who was not outraged at what they saw. Many suggested me to take the case into a public forum. Some suggested me to just wait, as the word was spreading quickly, and would eventually reach Plag's university.

I also contacted at this stage a few representatives of academic and research associations in the field of information systems. I showed the evidence of the plagiarism to them, and requested that disciplinary action be taken against Plag. In all cases I was told that they could not take any action against Plag, for one reason or another. Further conversation revealed that the reasons were all essentially the same -- the associations did not have a provision in their budget to handle a possible defensive lawsuit by Plag against them.

**Short-term consequences**

A few weeks after my return from the AIS'97 conference, I was informed by a senior academic colleague that he had contacted a faculty member in Plag's department, and informed him about the evidence I had shown him (my colleague) at the AIS'97 conference. Later in the week, I was informed by another colleague whom I met at AIS'97 that Plag had, when faced with the facts by his immediate supervisor, accused me of having plagiarized his work, rather than the other way around. He did so, according to this colleague, to defend himself and preserve his job.

At this point, I asked TLO's editor and MCB Press for help. MCB Press is the publisher of the journal where my paper had originally appeared (TLO) and thus the rightful owners of copyright on the paper. After I faxed them the evidence about Plag's submission, they decided to contact Plag directly through a formal letter. Under the US Copyright Law, Plag could face severe penalties for what he did, including the payment of financial statutory damages. Regarding statutory damages, Harper (1996) summarizes the letter of the law:

> [...] for a work that is registered, the author may receive statutory damages of up to $100,000 for each willful infringement, without having to actually prove what her damages were; that is the meaning of statutory damages - those damages provided by statute regardless of actual damages, which are hard to prove in most cases.

MCB requested a signed letter from Plag apologizing for what he had done. Plag quickly sent MCB such letter, and I received a copy. It was important for me to obtain such copy as a future deterrent to lawsuits that Plag might want to file against me (for practical reasons, or simple for revenge).

In September 1997, a colleague informed me that Plag had resigned from his assistant professor position. This was later confirmed by an e-mail that Plag's immediate supervisor sent to some faculty who had inquired about the case. This e-mail stated that Plag had resigned due to family and health reasons, and that his resignation had been accepted by his institution. However, I was
never directly contacted by Plag's university, or given any satisfaction about how his institution had dealt with Plag's claims against me.

In addition, another colleague informed the university where Plag received his PhD degree about his actions. I was later informed that a full internal inquiry into Plag's doctoral work had been started in consequence. To my knowledge, this inquiry was well under way at the time of this writing.

**Conclusion**

Plag's case begs a basic question: Although posting paper files on a web page may facilitate the dissemination of academic results, is it safe? Many publishers of scholarly journals act as if electronically publishing the content of their publications was a reasonably safe way of advertising their publications and disseminating scholarly work (Pavliscak, 1996). On the other hand, a recent case involving freelance writers reveals that the copyright law does not provide the mechanisms to unequivocally assess rights on material published electronically (Reid, 1997).

Based on my own experience, partially described in this paper, I do believe that making a paper file electronically available may make it easier for someone to try to plagiarize it. However, the same paper can be easily scanned and turned into a text file with standard optical character recognition (OCR) software, or simply manually copied word-by-word from the printed version of a publication. Given this, I do not think that moving away from the web as a medium for distribution of academic papers is going to solve the problem.

Internet-based distribution of papers may make plagiarism easier. However, it also makes it easier for a plagiarist to get caught, for at least two reasons. Firstly, electronic access to files in web servers can in many cases be traced back to the web clients where the files were downloaded from. Secondly, downloading a full paper from the web and using it in a new submission increases the chance that vital information and patterns in the text structure can be traced back to the original author. Examples of these are peculiar grammatical constructions and errors, certain symbol shapes in figures, and difficult-to-find references -- all found in abundance in Plag's fraudulent paper submission. Finally, it should also be noted that the same general platform used by Plag to obtain the paper, the Internet, was the vehicle that enabled me and others to quickly react to Plag's action.

However, I do think Plag could have put quite a battle and cause me a lot of trouble if he really wanted to and, of course, could afford it. He would not have to do much more than just hiring a good lawyer who was able to expertly work within the boundaries of the US legal system. After a while, chances were that I would be left alone in my battle with Plag. From my conversations with colleagues, lawyers, and others during this case, I infer that many people would go only up to a point to try to hold Plag accountable for what he did. Beyond a certain point many would give up to avoid further legal trouble.

Perhaps the best way to prevent cases like Plag's from becoming commonplace in the future is to widely publicize and discuss them. These cases should be used as a starting point for a frank debate on academic plagiarism and its implications for the emerging field of information systems.
research. I believe this debate should include one important topic -- the establishment of ethics committees in at least a few of the existing associations of information systems researchers to handle cases such as this and bring some measure of justice to the parties involved. Maybe other fields will follow suit, as I do not believe this is a problem exclusively of the field of information systems.

References
Cross-sectional research data about 22 instances of business processes was collected and analyzed in the socio-technical environments of three organizations: a Brazilian plant of Westaflex, an international car parts manufacturer; University (pseudonym), a New Zealand university; and MAF Quality Management (MQM), a semi-autonomous branch of the New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Cross-sectional research data about 20 instances of business processes was collected and analyzed in the socio-technical environments of three organizations in the U.S. apparel industry: a major apparel retail chain, a large apparel manufacturer, and a large yarn producer.

Figure 2: First paragraph of the "Research method" section of our TLO article (top) and of Plag's paper submission (bottom)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process goal</th>
<th>Number of functions</th>
<th>Process type</th>
<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Product design</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parts manufacturing</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>Westaflex</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>University course improvement</td>
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<td>MQM</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Improv.</td>
<td>MQM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff training and development improvement</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Improv.</td>
<td>MQM</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality inspection of parts/materials</td>
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<td>Support</td>
<td>Westaflex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plant machinery maintenance</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equipment adaptation for new product</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Software support for users</td>
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<td>MQM</td>
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<tr>
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Table 1: Description of processes studied (our TLO paper)

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<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Description of processes studied (Plag's paper)
Dear Prof. Kock:

Thanks for your fax. I am extremely sorry for my mistake. I sincerely apologize for this grave mistake. I will not do this again. I promise. As required by you, I will fax you an apology letter to you today. I kindly request you not to take any further action. I am still on student visa and I come from a poor family. I have worked very hard all my life to be in this position. I have a family and kids. If you take any action, my whole life will be ruined. I may have to end my profession. Please, I beg you. I will be eternally grateful to you if you pardon me this last time. I assure you that I will not commit this mistake again.

Please, at least for my family sake, do not take any further action. Both my family and I will be ever very thankful to you.

Sincerely,

[Plag’s name, removed]

Figure 3: E-mail message received from Plag after our phone conversation