ACADEMIC CYBER-PLAGIARISM: A CASE STUDY IN ROMANIAN MASS-MEDIA

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Abstract

The computer and even more so, the Internet, is an example of how technological advances in society have been intertwined into formal educational processes and teaching pedagogues. We live in a digital age that facilitates free access to a panoply of information resources. Often, however, the use of information technology is carried out in an unethical way. The purpose of this study is to make a brief presentation of the lack of academic integrity in relation to taking educational resources from the internet and the reasons why some students resort to such strategies, and the resulting plagiarism. Last but not least, we are considering an analysis of the phenomenon of plagiarism based on the information provided by the Romanian media, based on content analysis. According to this analysis, most articles referred to opening an investigation into the suspicion of plagiarism, taking appropriate steps, confirming or not confirming plagiarism, and, ultimately, withdrawing the title of doctor and attacking the decision by the person under investigation.

Keywords*: Cyber-plagiarism, digital age, higher education, mass-media*

1. Introduction

Humanity goes through one of the most dynamic stages, characterized by profound structural changes in all areas of life. "It was computer science", "the age of robots", "the digital age", all forming a new environment of life and a new consciousness about them. Referring to the importance of the computer in contemporary society, Servan Schreiber (1990) opines: "... the electronic computer today does for mankind what five centuries ago the invention of printing did.

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It produces radical changes in all aspects of our lives, advancing with a vertiginous speed and unlocking forces that can often be traumatic."

Information technology plays an important role in the 21st century causing profound changes in all areas of life, which signals that we have reached a new era: the "digital age". Education is one of the fundamental areas in any society that must adapt to change to function effectively in this new era. The real transformation lies not in the increased and diversified pathways of access to information, but in the increased opportunities for individuals to contribute to content production and knowledge creation. Some researchers appreciate that is a close relationship between current technologies and education: "technological advance is a consequence (and) of the strength and amplitude of education, but education also subsumes these benefits in a specific way. Any educational process is attentive to the technical component not only by training the educators in this direction but also by exploiting technological valences in the profit of training". We live in a digital age that facilitates free access to a panoply of information resources. New technologies have caused major changes in the way people access information. Printed books, dictionaries, and encyclopedias are now available in an online format and can be distributed by allowing access anywhere and at any time if an internet connection is possible. Access to these educational sources is often free, which makes it easier for students to take content. In other ways, creating an account on a specific specialized site facilitates unlimited access to an impressive book fund. In this context, it is increasingly aspected the phenomenon of academic dishonesty among university students. This issue is also supported by Stogner, Miller, Marcum (2013) for whom cases of academic dishonesty can be operationalized by non-dishonest digital behaviors, which are achieved through a technological device, such as a smartphone and an app, email or social network.

The purpose of this paper is to make a brief presentation of the problem regarding the lack of academic integrity highlighted in relation to the taking of educational resources from the internet from which it results and the reasons why some students resort to such strategies, thus talking about plagiarism. Last but not least, we are considering an analysis of the phenomenon of plagiarism based on the information provided by the Romanian media, based on content analysis.

2. From plagiarism to cyber-plagiarism

The Internet has become increasingly important for all actors involved in the educational process, in this case, among students. The Internet offers various opportunities for students from social

interaction, communication, the development of civic interests to the easier realization of academic tasks. In this respect, the Internet has introduced opportunities to improve learning but at the same time has brought major changes to academic integrity among students. The academic area is one of the areas where the change brought about by the introduction of technology has been extremely significant, given that the way information is sought, managed, evaluated and used to create knowledge (Comas, Sureda & Oliver, 2011), whereas students have quick and unimpeded access to information.

Access to information is no longer a problem in the development of an academic task, but the excess of information and the ease with which it is accessed, stored, and edited has become a challenge. In this respect, an element appears that has been highlighted in recent years (Heckler & Forde, 2015; Hu & Lei, 2012) the concept of hyper-plagiarism. This phenomenon can be defined as the appropriation of information in any format (text, images, videos, etc.) on the Internet and its use as its own, without any reference to the author, as stated by Nechita, Casanovas, and Capdevila (2019). If plagiarism "is the act by which someone acquires someone else's idea or work and transmits it as if it belongs to them," according to the Oxford Dictionary of Education (2015), cyber-plagiarism means, as the authors Comas and Sureda state (2007): "the location, adoption, and presentation of ideas, theories, hypotheses, results, texts, etc., as your own in any academic work" (apud Egaña, 2012, p. 19). Plagiarism is a recurring problem in higher education (Jiang, Emmerton, & Mckange, 2013). The internet age has brought a remarkable opportunity for students to learn, but it also brought challenges to academic integrity and good practices. Scientific literature indicates that there is a relationship between the digital age and the decline of ethical values among students in terms of plagiarism, according to Rawul (2009, p. 179). For Youmans (2011; p.750) the „widespread to the internet and other electronic media has served as something of a double-edged sword concerning plagiarism". Nowadays, the internet allows students to plagiarize by copy-paste but also enables teachers to easily identify plagiarism as well as the source of the plagiarized materials.

In *Attitudes of Business Students' Toward Plagiarism*, Quah, Stewart, and Lee (2012) point out that with the development of information technology in recent years, academia has witnessed the emergence of new trends of plagiarism or digital plagiarism. They refer to authors who develop the problem of the relationship between the internet and plagiarism by highlighting several key concepts specific to this relationship. Fold, digital sources, academic databases or various search engines such as Google or Yahoo (Lathrop, Foss 2000) provide easy access to information and, at the same time, increase the opportunity and temptation to plagiarize, a phenomenon known as

"cyber plagiarism" (Anderson 1999) or "mouse-click plagiarism" (Auer and Krupar 2001) or "academic cyber-sloth" (Carnie 2001). In this context, students can easily purchase academic materials (Whiteneck, 2002) written by "ghostwriters" online (Howard, 2002) or download free essays/references/projects from websites (Furedi, 2000) and pass them as theirs.

A survey by Sureda and Comas (2008) showed that a large number of students who claim to practice cyber-plagiarism are documented. For example, almost 61.1% of students acknowledged having copied and pasted fragments of the Internet and, without citing them, having included them in an academic assignment presented as original. Bugeja (2001) and Park (2003) make a difference between intentional plagiarism, in which the ideas and texts of others are presented directly as their own, and unintentional plagiarism, in which quotations and paraphrases are made incorrectly or when sources are simply not cited because one does not know how to do it. Another research conducted by Nechita, Casanovas, and Capdevila (2019) on a sample of 2098 students at the University of Lleida. The participants were presented with the four statements related to the concept of cyber-plagiarism and the citation of digital sources, on which they had to express their agreement or disagreement (p.116): 1. copying and pasting from a website with no author is not plagiarism; 2. copying and putting it in my own words is not plagiarism; 3. copying and translating a text is not plagiarism; 4. it is not necessary to quote if you extract information from the Internet. According to the authors, regarding the concept of plagiarism, 39.2% of students do not identify copy-pasting as plagiarism. As for paraphrasing, 68.3% believe that it is not plagiarism. Conversely, 82.1% consider the practice of translating as plagiarism.

Motivations for inappropriate use of the Internet by students can be analyzed from ethical, pedagogical, economical, and psychological points of view (Blau and Eshet-Alkalai, 2016; Fishman, 2016). For example, from the ethical perspective, Newton (2016) has shown that students who were more confident in their understanding of plagiarism as a problematic behavior not only performed better on simple tests of referencing but also recommended more severe penalties for conducting academic dishonesty offenses.

The model of Murdock and Anderman (2006) is based on pedagogical, economic, and psychological motivations. For authors, the factors that encourage plagiarism are mainly those that emphasize elements that are external to learning (for example, focusing on grades and not on mastery development, low self-efficacy of academic performance, poor teaching quality, perception of assessment as being too great or unjust and the expectation that the punishment for being caught will not be severe).

According to McMurtry (2001), there are three relatively simple ways to use the Internet to commit an act of plagiarism. The first method, considered also the easiest, includes locating appropriate websites using search engines, copying relevant texts, and pasting them into an essay. The second method is to receive works prepared by students from other universities through online communication channels such as e-mail and the third and most serious method is to download essays from online sites that collect and distribute resources, either free of charge or for a fee. Therefore, the main cause of internet plagiarism, according to the literature, is the assumption that the Internet is a public domain and therefore the information taken from the internet can be accessed and used without attribution (Groark, Oblinger & Choa, 2001; Oliphant, 2002).

The literature invokes a multitude of reasons why students plagiarize in the performance of academic tasks. Various studies conducted over time by Stevens and Stevens (1987), Davis et.al. (1992), Love and Simmons (1998), and Park (2003), showed the reasons why students choose to violate academic ethics. The central element is that plagiarism is motivated by a genuine lack of understanding of 'appropriate ways of quoting, paraphrasing and referring' or 'when the meaning of 'common knowledge' or the expression 'in their own words' is not clear. Alongside these, personal values and student attitudes related to the social pressure that causes them to plagiarize are invoked. If Straw (2002) believes that plagiarism is an effort by students to achieve good results and save time using the phrase "efficiency gain", Silverman (2002) has concluded that students' commitment to various responsibilities can be timeconsuming.

Devlin and Gray (2007) appreciated that poor academic skills are the main contributing factor to the occurrence of plagiarism. Dordoy (2002) analyzed the causes of cyber-plagiarism from the perspective of North American university students and teachers stands out. According to the results obtained by Dordoy (2002), the university students plagiarize, using, above all, the Internet, for the following reasons: to obtain better grades and better academic results; for laziness and mismanagement of the time devoted to study and work preparation; for the ease and comfort of access to material via the Internet and, finally, for lack of knowledge of the basic rules to follow for the preparation of academic work.

Devoss and Rosati (2002) suggested several reasons why students turn to the internet to plagiarize. According to them, one of the reasons is related to the ease and popularity of copy-paste actions, which are considered natural operations in computerized environments. A second reason is related to the fact that many websites, unlike printed sources, fail to write down the author's name. Finally, the lack of knowledge in dealing with these situations leads to acts of

plagiarism. For Freedman (1998, p. 40) along with its many advantages, the Internet is considered a key factor in the propagation of plagiarism. In his opinion, however, placing exclusive responsibility for the increase of plagiarism rates on new technology is like "counting one's own failure to recognize and reward originality".

3. Methodology

The methodology of the research is a qualitative-quantitative one based on the content analysis of the Romanian written press on the issue of plagiarism in higher education. As an analysis process, we chose the frequency analysis, which is the classic process of content analysis. It consists of determining the number of occurrences of recording units in the system of analysis categories.

2.1. Research method

Content analysis (Fr. analysis of content; Engl. content analysis) is a "set of techniques for quantitative/qualitative research of verbal/nonverbal communication consisting in the identification and objective and systematic description of the manifest/latent content of communication to draw scientific conclusions on the personality of those who communicate, the society in which communication is carried out, as well as communication itself, as social interaction" (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1993, p. 25). In sociology, "content analysis is a technique of quantitative-qualitative research of verbal and non-verbal communication, to identify and describe objectively and systematically the manifest and/or latent content, to draw conclusions about the individual and society or communication itself, as a process of social interaction. In the analysis of a press article about corruption, the registration unit can be the article in its entirety, but also the theme, paragraph, phrase, sentence, or word" (Chelcea, 1985, p.79).

If P. P. Cartwright considers that 'content analysis is the systematic analysis of ideas expressed and contained in a text, document or verbal communication' (apud Miftode, 1995, p. 349), Brimo A. argues that this analysis consists of 'decomposition simple elements in the scheme of classification, measurement, quantification or ranking of elements of a different document or group of information". The most well-known definition given to content analysis was that of Berelson (1952, p. 18) according to which "content analysis is a research technique used for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication'. In the view of the American author the analysis of the content had to meet three assumptions:

- a relationship (inference or interpretation) may be established between the content and its effect (intent);

- meaning of the message analyzed may be established, a message which can then be encoded from its visible, manifest form;

- meaning can be established based on the occurrence frequencies of some items/symbols depending on the study theme. However, the link between the frequency of occurrence and the degree of exposure/interest of the public remains an open issue.

These clarifications were taken up and then improved by other important authors. For example, O. R. Holsti (1969, p. 14) considered content analysis to be "any technique used to make inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specific characteristics of the message". Last but not least, in another definition, content analysis is 'a set of methods of document analysis, most often textual, allowing the meaning/meanings they contain to be explained and/or the manners in which that meaning is required' (Muchielli, 1996, p.36).

2.2. Research procedure

In an attempt to capture how the Romanian written press presents the phenomenon of plagiarism, we carried out a quantitative study (using the technique of documentary analysis) of articles that appeared between January 1st, 2018 and March 1st, 2020, in the pages of the newspapers *Libertatea*, *Cotidianul,* and *Adevărul*. For that period, 120 articles were identified. Through this monitoring, we propose an inventory of the main aspects related to the specificities and peculiarities of this phenomenon under the conditions of our society, as shown by the selected articles. We also aim to evaluate how the Romanian press presents to the public the main dimensions and components of plagiarism (magnitude and intensity, affected areas, solutions, and measures). To achieve this, we will consider the following indicators: frequency, areas of activity susceptible to this phenomenon, categories of professions, title, content, photography, themes, measures, and solutions.

3. Results

The problem of plagiarism is a topic of interest in the written press. Most of the articles refer to the situation of plagiarism in the case of public figures who have completed their doctoral studies in various university centers. Moreover, during the period under review, we did not find articles that highlight plagiarism among undergraduate students or master's students but, surprisingly, or not, only cases of plagiarism in the Doctoral Schools are mentioned. A media interest can be seen

in this issue only in the case of people who have a public function and do not relate to the seriousness of this phenomenon among academia, whether we are talking about undergraduate, master's or doctoral students. Of the 120 articles analyzed, fewer than 10 refer to the general problem of plagiarism, causes, consequences, solutions, or promoting examples of good practices. In *Cotidianul*, an article is highlighted in which some general information on the notion of citation, main forms of reference, their role, plagiarism, and how it could be avoided. In terms of the frequency of articles, the newspaper *Adevărul* comes first with 86 articles, followed by the newspaper *Libertatea* with 22 articles and *Cotidianul* with 12 articles and the distribution per year (Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of items analyzed

	2020	2019	2018	Total
Libertatea	3	9	10	22
Cotidianul	0	6	6	12
Adevărul	25	30	31	86

Two types of articles on plagiarism can be identified in the written press. The first type is the exposition of the facts, articles that we have called descriptive, and the second category of analysis and attitude, whereby journalists, NGOs or civil society draw attention to this phenomenon, subsequently carrying out investigations to confirm or disprove those situations.

Regarding the content (themes) of the articles studied, they all seem to provide the same kind of information, namely: the social actors involved, their names or initials, the position they occupy within the social structure, where they are employed, who resolved the referral, the final result. One tool used by journalists, which strengthens the sensational side, is photography. Along with the title, the photograph is the item that readers view first. Made to capture the essential, the photos, which accompany articles showing cases of plagiarism, often depict either the face of the person accused of plagiarism or a picture of the university at which the person completed his studies appears. The main areas in which people who have been reported with plagiarism problems work are (according to Table 2) education, politics, religion, justice.

Table 2. Areas where suspects/proven to have plagiarized

	Libertatea	Cotidianul	Adevărul
politics	5	2	14
education	6	3	9
religion	0	0	3
justice	3	3	4
other domains	1	0	2

Table 3 contains the most common categories of professions, which appear in the articles studied, in the case of persons suspected or proven of plagiarism. In most cases, doctoral studies were done before a public office was filled.

Table 3. The main categories of professions highlighted in the three newspapers

	Libertatea	Cotidianul	Adevărul
minister	2	1	6
policemen	0	0	1
judges/prosecutors	2	2	3
university employers	1	0	5
staff of faculties/ universities	1	1	4
state secretaries	1	0	3
state counslers	1	1	1
European commissioners	1	0	1
other categories	3	2	6

Regarding the content of the articles studied, the press highlights the situations of opening an investigation to prove plagiarism, confirmation of plagiarism, withdrawal of the title of doctor, confirmation of non-plagiarism in certain situations, confirmation of plagiarism, situations of self-plagiarism as well as the existence of lawsuits for plagiarism. An important aspect is that, following the confirmation of plagiarism, apart from the withdrawal of the doctor's title, no other sanctions such as dismissal from office have been highlighted.

Several solutions highlighted by certain decision-makers can also be extracted from the articles, including:

- changing the legislation;

- withdrawal of title;

- introduction of ethics courses in university studies;

- creating an online platform that is accessible to the general public where the doctoral thesis is uploaded;

- antiplagiarism software.

The main means by which the press sensitizes readers are:

- the type of speech used, which takes different forms: ironic, vulgar, shocking, etc.;

- publishing photos;

- the title, by which the reader is drawn to reading and by which the unusual nature of the situation presented is emphasized.

The essential element of the titration in the written press, the title, contributes overwhelmingly to the reading of the text. Titles contain various elements such as the name of the person who plagiarized, the position he occupies, and the institution that withdraws his title or the penalty imposed. Here are some headlines that were about plagiarism issue stalk in the three newspapers analyzed:

- „Ministrul 'pamblică', între autoplagiat şi plagiat" [Minister "ribbon" between self-plagiarism and plagiarism] (Cotidianul, 1 February 2018);

- „Îndepărtaţi plagiatorii din structurile de decizie ale Ministerului Educaţiei!" [Remove plagiarists from the decision-making structures of the Ministry of Education!] (Cotidianul, 27 February 2018);

- „Plagiatul se predă şi se învaţă din primii ani de şcoală." [Plagiarism is taught and learned from the first years of school.] (Cotidianul, 4 May 2018);

- „Fostul ministru al Sănătăţii este plagiator cu acte în regulă". [The former Minister of Health is a certified plagiarist] (Libertatea, 27 July 2018);

- „Şeful Inspecţiei Judiciare, acuzat de plagiat" [Chief of the Judicial Inspection, accused of plagiarism] (Cotidianul, 27 September 2018);

- „Plagiatul este o problemă minoră a învăţământului din România." [Plagiarism is a minor problem in education in Romania.] (Libertatea, 29 December 2018);

- „Câţi doctori plagiatori avem?" [How many plagiarist doctors do we have?] (Cotidianul, 14 March 2019);

- „Trei sferturi din tezele de doctorat de la Academia de Poliţie sunt suspecte de plagiat. [Three-quarters of the doctoral theses from the Police Academy are suspected of plagiarism.] (Libertatea, 10 July 2019);

- „Lector universitar la „Ovidius", acuzat de plagiat. CNATDCU a decis retragerea titlului de doctor." [University lecturer at "Ovidius", accused of plagiarism. CNATDCU decided to withdraw the doctorate.] (Adevărul, 31 July 2019);

- „Plagiat la Teologie. CNATDCU îi retrage titlul de doctor unui stareţ." [Plagiarism in Theology. CNATDCU withdraws the title of doctor from an abbot.] (Adevărul, 21 December 2019);

- „ONG-urile îi cer premierului să îl demită pe plagiatorul de la Interne şi să adopte măsuri concrete pentru stoparea fabricii de impostură din universităţi." [NGOs urge the prime

minister to fire intern plagiarist and take concrete steps to stop fake university factory.] (Adevărul, 14 January 2020);

- „Doctoratele, băgate la secret! Ministerul Educaţiei caută să-i salveze pe plagiatori invocând GDPR-ul." [Doctorates, kept secret! The Ministry of Education seeks to rescue plagiarists by invoking the GDPR.] (Adevărul, 19 February 2020).

Last but not least, the analysis of the visibility of the articles, according to the daily newspaper in which they appear, reveals to us that they have significant visibility, since all three newspapers have positioned most of the articles in such a way that it is easyly viewed by readers.

5. Conclusions

The content analysis carried out aimed to highlight some of the components of the plagiarism problem, as well as how it was presented in the written press. Referring to the peculiarities of this phenomenon, under the conditions of our society, we can conclude that the problem of plagiarism is presented mainly about persons who hold a public office and have attended the Doctoral School. The articles mostly referred to: opening an investigation into the suspicion of plagiarism, taking appropriate steps, confirming or not confirming plagiarism, and, ultimately, withdrawing the title of doctor and attacking decision by the person under investigation.

As mentioned by the author, the extent of the plagiarism phenomenon was presented on a one-off basis, concerning certain people who have completed their doctoral studies and not as a general phenomenon affecting the academic system both at the level of their undergraduate studies and master's degree. The main areas in which people whose plagiarism has been confirmed in the doctoral thesis are: political, educational, legal, and religious. As concrete measures there can be recalled the following: changing the legislation, introducing courses of ethics and academic integrity, withdrawing the title, the visibility of theses on an online platform that is accessible to all interested as well as more rigorous verification through anti-plagiarism programs. The main measure referred to in the articles studied is that of withdrawing the title of doctor. There was no question of the dismissal of those persons or the return to the State of the financial benefits obtained as a result of receiving the doctoral salary increase.

Acknowledgments

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