

# Cyberplagiarism

## A look at the Web term paper sites

by Gregory L. Anderson

**A t first I just wanted to let people steal what ever they needed.”<sup>1</sup>**

Stealing other people's papers is plagiarism. Students have been plagiarizing since the time “term papers” were written on clay tablets. When I was an undergraduate—which now seems like before the time of clay tablets—term paper mills, such as Research Assistance, were just starting to advertise in *Rolling Stone*. I—if I had a cheatin' heart—could have sent \$2 for their 306-page catalog of 15,778 pre-written papers, or I could have called them toll-free for a quote on a custom-written paper.

Today, I'm a librarian and associate professor—and I still don't have a cheatin' heart. Students with cheatin' hearts, however, can cure their term paper blues by pointing their Web browsers to Research Assistance's Web site. Today, scores of Web TeRm Paper siTes (Web TEMPTs) tempt thousands of students to download their workloads by submitting, as their own work, term papers written by others. This cyberplagiarism is a serious problem for faculty and librarians.

This article will help you meet the challenge of cyberplagiarism. It discusses Web TEMPTs, proposes countermeasures, and suggests some Web sites to surf and articles to read.

**“We cater for all.”<sup>2</sup>**

There are thousands of personal Web pages that post term papers. These are not what I refer to as Web TEMPTs, however. I define a Web TEMPT as a site that has posted at least 25 term papers and promotes downloading them.

There are more than 100 well-known Web TEMPTs. At the end of this article I have listed ten, most of which have links to other Web term paper sites.

Web TEMPTs come in a variety of sizes and colors. There are totally free sites, sites that charge for pre-written or custom-written papers, and hybrid sites that are partly free and partly fee. Although most paper sites are less than four years old, a few, which started out as term paper mills (like Research Assistance), have been doing business for up to three decades.

Some term paper companies own enormous inventories of as many as 30,000. The larger sites usually have searchable, online catalogs of their papers, often with abstracts. Many will deliver by Federal Express, Priority Mail, fax, or e-mail.

Web TEMPTs do indeed cater for all.

But they don't stand behind their products. More and more Web term paper sites are posting disclaimers, which indemnify them from any liability for how their customers use their papers.

**“School Sucks is looking to improve the education system.”<sup>3</sup>**

School Sucks is the most famous, or infamous, Web TEMPT because its creator, Kenneth Sahr, portrays himself as a champion of higher quality higher education.

He has written, “Unlike the rest of the world, the education system has no checks and balance. By forcing mediocre professors, who have been giving the same assignments since the Truman administration, to rethink their

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## Articles to read

- Applehome, Peter. "On the Internet, Term Papers are Hot Items." *New York Times*, June 8, 1997, Late Edition, sec. 1, p. 3, col. 5.
- Chidley, Joe. "Tales Out of School." *Maclean's* (November 24, 1997): 76.
- Drogemuller, Richard. "Designing Cyber-Assignments." *Australian Science Teachers Journal* 43, no. 4 (November 1997): 42.
- Gannon, Frank. "Surfing for Credit." *New Yorker* (December 1, 1997): 104.
- Hickman, John N. "Cybercheats." *New Republic* (March 23, 1998): 14–15.
- McCollum, Kelly. "Web Site Where Students Share Term Papers Has Professors Worried About Plagiarism." *Chronicle of Higher Education* (August 2, 1996): A28.
- Post, David. "Brave New Classrooms." *American Lawyer* (January 1998): 38.
- Rocklin, Tom. "Downloadable Term Papers: What's a Prof. to Do?" From the *Online Exclusives* section of *TALK*, the Newsletter of the Center for Teaching, the University of Iowa, August 1996, pp. 5. Online available at: <http://www.uiowa.edu/~centeach/newsletter/online-exclusives/term-paper-download.html>, January 24, 1999.
- Sanchez, Rene. "University Tries to Pull Plug on Internet Term-Paper Mills." *Washington Post*, November 5, 1997, Final Edition, sec. A, p. A01.
- Wang, Wallace. "Online Term Paper Plagiarism." *Boardwatch Magazine*, January 1998, 3 pp. Online available at <http://www.boardwatch.com/mag/98/jan/bwm19.html>, March 31, 1998.
- Witherspoon, Abigail. "This Pen for Hire: On Grinding Out Term Papers for College Students." *Harper's Magazine* (June 1995): 49.

assignments—and maybe even add a bit of creativity to them, School Sucks *is* education's check and balance."<sup>4</sup>

In addition to his op-ed essays, Sahr has posted articles on plagiarism, letters from students and teachers, and links to media articles. His outspokenness has drawn a barrage of attack from both the press and the professorate. Undeterred, Sahr continues to represent himself as a misunderstood and much-maligned crusader for better education.

He has good reason to.

While "Download Your Workload," is School Sucks's official moto, its real credo seems to be "This Space for Rent!" Its 2,000-plus papers are free—although downloading the entire database costs \$15.95—but its ads are not. Sahr makes over \$5,000 a month from advertising. Potential advertisers can link to a media kit or call, toll-free of course, for information. The audience is huge. School Sucks receives over 3,000 hits a day, with a grand total of more than 2 million. So, is Sahr really looking to improve the education system, or is he looking to improve his own bottom line?

**"I've never had to go to the library again."<sup>5</sup>**

When I first read this student testimonial, I thought to myself, "Instead of closing the li-

brary doors, let's unplug all these Web term paper sites."

Boston University (BU) is trying to do just that. In the fall of 1997, BU sued eight term paper companies in seven states, charging them with violation of the Massachusetts law that prohibits the sale of term papers, mail and wire fraud, and racketeering. Sixteen other states have similar laws. Such laws raise serious First Amendment issues, however, and the disclaimers many sites have posted make litigation problematic at best. Furthermore, most of us academic librarians would oppose legislating or litigating the Web (see Sanchez article above).

And, even if we wanted to, we couldn't. The Evil House of Cheat, for example, is located in Copenhagen, Denmark, and is not subject to the laws of Massachusetts.

Sahr was correct when he observed, "It's a small world, but it will never be too small for a server in some remote area."<sup>6</sup> Web TEMPTs, like Web pornography, cannot be legislated or litigated out of existence. The same technology that makes it possible for our students to do their research without going to the library also makes it possible for them to not do any research at all.

**"Education doesn't suck . . . it just needs a little push."<sup>7</sup>**

Let's push it a little, then. We, as librarians, can push it by educating our faculties and teaching our students about Web TEMPTs.

Before we start pushing, though, we need to warm up. We can surf and we can read; the list of Web sites and articles following will get you started. We can talk on our mail lists, at our conferences, and in our literature. Once we are warmed up, we can start to prod our faculties.

- We can alert them to the problem. I published an earlier iteration of this article in my library's weekly online newsletter. To my surprise, among the many responses I received were several from those who were not aware that WebTEMPTs exist.

- We can suggest a solution. The most effective way faculty can discourage plagiarism is to mentor the writing process. Mentoring involves assigning course-specific topics, reviewing thesis statements and outlines, and reading drafts. An excellent article on this proactive approach is "Downloadable Term Papers: What's a Prof to Do?" by Tom Rocklin, director of the Center for Teaching at the University of Iowa. This article is posted on School Sucks. Mentoring is work, but it works.

Most importantly, we can start nudging our students.

- Many students don't know what plagiarism is. We can teach them. A well-written plagiarism guide can be an effective tool. It should define plagiarism (*Black's Law Dictionary* has a short, clear definition), quote the institution's policy on plagiarism and cheating, and illustrate what is and is not plagiarism (both APA and MLA style manuals have excellent examples). Plagiarism guides can be handed out to

classes, put in literature racks, and provided to faculty.

- We can introduce our students to WebTEMPTs. When teaching about the Web, we can use School Sucks as an example. Give our students its URL. Point out its links to similar sites. Suggest that they surf some of these sites themselves. Ask them to think about what they find (working with faculty, this could be a course assignment).

- Lastly, we can teach our students how to properly use the Web for their research. Search engines and directories, meta sites, electronic libraries, research help sites, NetFirst—these are all tools our students need to be familiar with. Furthermore, they must be able to evaluate the authority and reliability of Web sites, and know how to cite them correctly. All these things, and more, we can teach them.

Cyberplagiarism is an old enemy with a new face confronting the academy. WebTEMPTs pose new challenges to us as academic librarians. But we tackle new challenges every day. By prodding our faculties and nudging our students, we can give education the little push that Kenneth Sahr is asking us to—and help push School Sucks out of business.

## Notes

1. *Other People's Papers*. 1997 (copyright). Online, available at <http://www.OPPapers.com/faq.html>. April 9, 1998. Note: as of April 1999, this information could not be found at this URL.

2. Schriver, Jens. *Evil House of Cheat*. 1995–98 (copyright). Online, available at <http://www.cheathouse.com/pay/pay.shtml>. January 18, 1999.

(continued on page 394)

## Web sites to surf

- *1 Stop Research Paper Shop* at <http://members.tripod.com/~TexasTwister>
- *Absolutely Free Online Essays Student Essay Network* at <http://www.elee.calpoly.edu/~ercarls/papers.htm>
- *Academic Research Group, Inc.* at <http://www.academicresearch.com>
- *Academic Term Papers* at <http://www.researchcentral.com/>
- *Evil House of Cheat* at <http://www.cheathouse.com>
- *Glatt Plagiarism Services* at <http://plagiarism.com/>
- *Instructor's Guide to Internet Plagiarism* at <http://www.carleton.ca/~gsenecha/guide/>
- *IntegrIGuard* at <http://www.integriguard.com/>
- *Research Assistance* at <http://research-assistance.com>
- *School Sucks* at <http://schoolsucks.com>

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faculty on your campus are doing. How do they carry out their work? How might you and your colleagues help students to learn and to assist students and faculty in their search for information and resources? What experiences and best practices can you share with others in the profession? What contributions can you make to the improvement of learning and the quality of life in the campus community?

### **Believe in the people with whom you work**

As human beings, we all have the capacity to contribute beyond what our position descriptions and current organizational roles demand. Each of us has an inherent desire to achieve. Learn what motivates you and your colleagues. Discover the hidden talents and real interests of your colleagues. Develop and nurture trust in your relationships. Recognize the contributions and achievements of others.

### **Accept change as a natural and important part of organizational life**

Organizations and the individuals who work in them are in a continual process of change. Yet, we often see change as something to be avoided or controlled in some way. Once we recognize change as a natural and critical process for growth and development, we can focus on how to help everyone to accept change as a way of life. This acceptance of change then frees everyone to find the work that is meaningful and has value for the community served.

### **Attend the 1999 President's Program**

Margaret J. Wheatley, co-founder of the Berkana Institute, a nonprofit research foundation supporting organizational change, will give the keynote address at the ACRL President's Program in New Orleans. The program will be held in the New Orleans Convention Center, 2:00–4:00 p.m., on Monday, June 28, 1999. Wheatley is an engaging and dynamic speaker who will help us explore how we can recognize academic and research libraries as self-organizing systems. She will offer ideas about how libraries can become effective organizations; how librarians can become more effective leaders; and how all of us can learn to thrive in the ever-changing world in which we live.

### **Focus on personal change**

Take time to assess your strengths and to identify areas for your development. Identify what you do well and what you enjoy. Prepare a personal mission and vision statement to clarify your purpose, goals, and desired changes. Consider your feelings and attitude toward change. Discover the benefits of embracing change rather than fearing it. Seek support from others as you pursue your personal plan for change.

### **Prepare to change the organizational systems**

The work we perform has changed significantly. Technology and integrated library systems; changing needs and expectations of students, faculty, and administrators; changes in scholarly and commercial publications; increasing costs; the availability of information in new formats; the global economy: these are but some of the forces that have led to fundamental changes in the work we do and the ways in which we perform this work.

### **Wheatley to speak at ACRL President's Program**

Spend an afternoon with Margaret Wheatley, the keynote speaker at this year's ACRL President's Program. See sidebar for details. ■

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*("Cyberplagiarism" cont. from page 373)*

3. Sahr, Kenneth. *School Sucks*. 1998–99 (copyright). Online, available at <http://www.schoolsucks.com/newsucks/info/white.shtml>. January 18, 1999.

4. Sahr, Kenneth. *School Sucks*. 1996–98 (copyright). Online, available at <http://www.schoolsucks.com/main.html>. April 10, 1998.

5. Allbright, Christie. Quoted in: Schriver, Jens. *Evil House of Cheat*. 1995–98 (copyright). Online, available at <http://www.cheathouse.com/pay/pay.shtml>. January 18, 1999.

6. Sahr, Kenneth. Quoted in: Bivens, Teel and Kenny Sahr. "Click Here To Cheat; The Net Is Brimming with Term Papers, Making for a Revolution in Cribbing. Can Laws Really Turn the Tide?" *Time*, (November 1997): 25. Online, Reed Elsevier, *LEXIS-NEXIS*, NEWS/MAGS, March 1998.

7. Sahr, Kenneth. *School Sucks*. 1996–98 (copyright). Online, available at <http://www.schoolsucks.com/newsucks/info/>. April 10, 1998. ■