

Brainless Text Culture and Mickey Mouse Science

Review of Stefan Weber, *Das Google-Copy-Paste-Syndrom: Wie Netzplagiate Ausbildung und Wissen gefährden*. Heise Verlag, Hannover: 2009.

By Dennis Deicke

The Google-Copy-Paste-Syndrom: How Web-Plagiarism endangers Education and Knowledge, written by Stefan Weber, deals with the influence of the ever-increasing internet use on the prevalent culture of knowledge. Austrian media scholar Weber states that the soaring spread of the new media results in a „text culture without brains.“ Stefan Weber decided to become a plagiarism-scientist after he discovered that a theologian from Tübingen has written off 90 sites of his own dissertation. Since that he has collected 14 folders with over 60 cases of plagiarism which build the base of his work. Internet enhances plagiarism in schools, journalism, the arts and especially at universities. Weber criticizes current media and cultural studies programs which ignore the augmented emergence of plagiarism due to an exaggerated optimism towards new media, thereby enhancing the problem by spreading their infinitely technophile theories.

The author, who lives and works in Dresden and Salzburg, states that today's students follow a process of three steps to create academic texts. Initially, they Google their topic. Then they copy and paste significant parts of text found on the Web. Knowing the importance of the outside appearance they finally layout their produced mosaic. Weber cites American studies proving that 36% of the students have admitted to have copied sentences in the web and have pasted it into their academic work. For Weber this development is the consequence of the omnipresent use of the internet, because it facilitates the appropriation of texts. The author argues that by allowing this „culture without brains“ to spread, the elaborate academic system of reference puts itself in danger. Weber's position is that a „recycling“ text culture, which permits people to plagiarize, will end up in scientific stagnation.

The number of plagiarism cases has increased over the past years and Weber relates this to the increased employment of the internet. He uses studies in the United States and the UK, which show that ca. 30% of all students are plagiarizing. But these numbers also reveal that the source of plagiarism is more often a printed book than an online text. This weakens Weber's argument that a new culture of plagiarism has risen online because it shows that the writers of these studies mostly wrote off paper books and that plagiarism is not an online problem in most instances. Though that does not debilitate his thesis, saying that the culture of appropriating texts (no matter of what kind of source) without comprehending them derives from extensive internet use. Because it is still possible that using the internet lowers the threshold to begin plagiarizing.

Weber admits that there are no empirical data that prove a positive influence of the Web 2.0 on the number of plagiarism cases. In spite of that he claims that there is a positive influence on the culture of producing texts without reference. This „sampling culture“ is enhanced by the free licensing ideas existing in the internet. Weber traceably argues that the idea of free licensing derives from the development of software and should not be transferred unconcerned to a knowledge culture that is based on texts.

Weber asserts that content is not the most important thing on the Web 2.0 because it provides the user with the technical preconditions to put up websites easily (with software like media wiki). After creating a new site it needs to be filled with content that is usually copy-pasted from elsewhere. I hold the view that this argument is not very convincing. Concluding that the existence of a technology that facilitates the production of content results in plagiarism seems to be too critical. Logically, it should be the other way around. Because technical investments are marginal, there are more resources available to create content. Today, nobody would assert that Gutenberg's invention of the printing press caused intellectual decline. Additionally, Weber tries to prove the proximity between Web 2.0 and plagiarism by stating that plenty of web portals and social networks are copies of American originals. But claiming that users of such a copy are more likely to plagiarize appears to be a bit farfetched, too.

Weber also mentions further reasons for the increase of plagiarism that go beyond blaming only the internet and new media. For example, he mentions that some universities do not teach introductions into academic working methods or teach them wrongly. Another interesting reason noted by Weber is that studying at universities has become a sort of CV management. Studying itself has become less important while the managing of achieving certain titles by simulating competence is becoming the main task for students. But he also claims that some students are lazy or too dumb and therefore plagiarize and he tries to prove these assertions by showing a few examples from internet forums citing students who are searching a way to reduce their work. But lazy students have always existed and giving single forum-extracts is neither a way to show that this really leads to plagiarism nor does it show that students of today are lazier because of the internet.

Furthermore, Weber gives a good indication to what is often forgotten when we talk about Google and its official aim to „organize the information of the world.“ Weber mentions that Google just organizes the world's information. So, if we only rely on knowledge transferred by Google, we will probably miss out on a lot. Weber also doubts the benefits of Google's book scanning project Google Books. The availability of a lot of texts online makes it possible to penetrate them by scanning and superficial browsing and as a consequence this could reduce reading competence significantly because it is just not necessary anymore to read and understand texts as a whole. Thus the scanning project of Google could be a real threat for the book as a medium. But he also criticizes Google Books because it enables plagiarism by supplying texts, although they could not be marked and copy-pasted, the texts could at least be written off. But that is not a problem of Google Books or the internet, writing off has always been possible—also from paper books.

Weber points out that the culture of plagiarism also spills over to journalism and arts. He complains about journalists who use information they gather from Google to simulate their competence in regards of the issues they are dealing with. In this way they do no longer have to do classical investigation. But for me the question is if this changes the facts that are provided to the audience. If the information found on Google is the same as the information the journalist received by local research it does not change what kind of knowledge reaches the audience eventually. But Weber points out an interesting effect as a consequence of the use of Google by journalists. They lose their function as Gatekeepers which is now executed by the Google-algorithm.

According to Stefan Weber, the intensified usage of Google and Wikipedia builds the base for a generation of students that will be incapable to read and comprehend texts. This principle of not capturing full content and just using texts partially and superficially causes problems for the academic system. In Weber's view a new culture of simulating competence emerged that has started to replace the prevalent culture of academic practices and knowledge. This „culture of hypocrisy,“ as Weber calls it, flourishes in a milieu of technology- and media optimism that can be found in media studies circles. That is another important and striking aspect of Weber's book. He consistently criticizes media- and cultural studies because he is of the opinion that they follow a paradigm that does not leave any space for a critical opinion on the increasing digitalization. He refers the uncritical position existing in the media studies to certain myths dominating them. One myth, for example, is the hidden technical determinism, which means that technology is always emphasized as something mankind has to follow. Weber does not like this idea of technology as an almost auto-poietic system that operates completely independent of human beings. His opinion is that we should not forget that humans produce and control the technology. Another example is the myth, most central to Weber, which says that current media studies consistently disagree with all positions that take negative consequences of New Media usage into consideration.

Weber criticizes cultural studies and the media itself for supporting this development with something Weber calls „bullshit PR.“ He uses a definition of bullshit from Harry G. Frankfurt who called it a discursive strategy to maintain everything you want to. In Weber's opinion cultural studies and constructivism provide an academic background for the new text culture of plagiarism and stupidity. In Weber's view constructivism builds a fertile ground for plagiarism by questioning the idea of an author. Constructivists legitimize plagiarism by declaring the idea of authorship to a social construct. The cultural studies supply the „culture of hypocrisy“ because they do something, which Weber calls „Mickey Mouse science“. That means that during the last years a lot of cultural scientists did qualitative researches that in Weber's eyes did not gain any knowledge and were open for any kind of result or „bullshit.“ By using „soft“ methods and choosing research themes of which the outcome is already clear the cultural studies in their today's shape support the emerging change of our knowledge culture.

Moreover Stefan Weber claims that the extensive use of the internet is a menace to our existing language culture. He is of the opinion that trends like „weblish“ and „cyber talk“ can become a real danger for the written language, especially in science. He accuses media and cultural studies again for being too optimistic towards enhancing mediatisation and for ignoring studies that show negative outcomes of it. Weber also emphasizes on the education of adolescents who are confronted with an growing amount of media. His opinion is that this has more negative implications than positive ones. Furthermore, he mentions the lack of critical emancipation of the new media users. During the 90s there was the hope of democratization and informational independence that would result in a critical publicity, but these ideas have vanished and Weber concludes that we mostly use new media for its own sake.

Stefan Weber's book is an interesting work, which encourages the reader to think about the increasing spread of new media in all parts of our lives. He warns us to keep in mind that digitalization and mediatisation can also have negative outcomes, which should be examined by media scientists. Weber tries to fight for appropriate methods in the academic world,

which are threatened by the increased 'Googlization.' Unfortunately, Weber weakens his own argument because in my opinion he does not follow the strict academic demand he postulates throughout his own book. The whole work is written very emotionally and the reader sometimes gets the impression that it is Weber's personal campaign against plagiarism. His criticism on cultural studies and constructivism appears polemical and it does not seem to follow scientific rules too strictly, although his points may be advisable. According to this, he often uses single examples he has found somewhere in the internet. He for example demonstrates the laziness of students with one extract of a forum. A further example of this practice is his proof of the decline of language, Weber shows extracts from the internet showing gross samples of „Weblish“ and then concludes that this is a severe threat to the written culture. At another point he criticizes mobile phones because they provide a good opportunity to cheat during exams. This seems to be a bit pedantic, cheating has always happened and before mobile phones existed students used cheat sheets. So this is not a good example of how new media can be a threat to our knowledge and academic system.

In spite of this criticism, The Google-Copy-Paste Syndrome is an alarming book that reminds us to stay critical towards new media. Because, as Stefan Weber states correctly, by being too optimistic and uncritical, the scientific world loses its power of interpretation and leaves the cultural development regarding media to the technology and entertainment industry. The book is a like a thorn in the side of media studies telling us not let go our capability of criticism concerning internet, digitalization and new media.

An interview with Stefan Weber in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung:

<http://www.faz.net/s/RubCF3AEB154CE64960822FA5429A182360/Doc~E8E6AE7133D524A489ECAE90CB0B2558A~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html>

List of Stefan Weber's publications:

<http://www.kfj.at/publikationsliste-stefanweber.htm>

An interesting article concerning this issue by Nicholas Char:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200807/google>

German Wikipedia site about Stefan Weber:

[http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stefan_Weber_\(Medienwissenschaftler\)](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stefan_Weber_(Medienwissenschaftler))

Heise website about „The Google Copy Paste Syndrom“:

http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/buch/buch_25.html