

Plagiarism and the News Media

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"The injured can be found in many homes, as well--men, women and children bearing bruises, fractures and bandaged limbs, the victims of Israeli gunfire, beatings, rubber bullets and tear gas inhalation."--Jonathan Broder, the Chicago Tribune, February 22, 1988, as reported in the Washington Post.

"The injured can be seen in many homes: young and older men and even children with bruises and fractures, women with black and blue marks and bandaged arms--victims of beatings, rubber bullets, tear-gas inhalation and sometimes gunfire."--Joel Greenberg, the Jerusalem Post, as reported in the Washington Post.

Jonathan Broder, a foreign correspondent for the Chicago Tribune, resigned in March after having been charged with plagiarizing from an article that appeared in the Jerusalem Post. Broder had been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize by the Tribune. Tribune Editor James Squires withdrew the nomination after the possibility of plagiarism surfaced.¹

In April, National Journal editor Richard Frank asked the Pulitzer Prize board to reconsider its award to Philadelphia Inquirer reporter Tim Weiner for his articles on the Pentagon's secret "black budget." Frank said the articles were simply a reworking of National Journal articles written almost a year earlier by David C. Morrison.

"We make no accusation of plagiarism, but by no account does the Philadelphia Inquirer series deserve a Pulitzer because Weiner's reporting on the size and composition of the black budget plows no new journalistic ground," Frank said in a letter to Pulitzer secretary Robert Christopher.²

In 1987, Philadelphia Inquirer reporter Steve Twomey came under attack after a feature story he wrote won two awards, a Pulitzer Prize and an

¹ Eleanor Randolph, Washington Post staff writer, "Reporter Accused of Plagiarism," The Washington Post, March 1, 1988.

² Eleanor Randolph, Washington Post staff writer, "Pulitzer Award to Philadelphia Inquirer Disputed," The Washington Post, April 7, 1988.

American Society of Newspaper Editors award for feature writing.³ The story "How super are our supercarriers?" contained about 200 words that critics said should have been attributed to Paul Eddy and Magnus Linklater, who wrote and edited the book The Falklands War with Peter Gillman. All three were British journalists for the Sunday Times.⁴

The passage in question described an incident in which the Sheffield, a British ship, was sunk by an Exocet missile during the Falklands War. Critics, including John Perry, editor of the Rome (Ga.) News-Tribune, said the article made it seem as though Twomey was a first-hand witness to the sinking of the Sheffield. The lack of attribution is "a possible breach of journalism ethics," said Perry.⁵

In 1983, a Cleveland (Ohio) Plain-Dealer reporter was suspended for three days for plagiarizing portions of an op-ed column from a column by the Washington Post's Carl Rowan that had been published two years earlier.⁶

In 1987, a columnist for the Pittsburgh Press was fired after he wrote a column which was found to be similar to another writer's column that had been published a few days earlier in the Providence (R.I.) Journal. "While the words were different, the idea and structure were exactly the same. The

³ Price Coleman, managing editor, "At the Source: Prize-winning story spurs debate over attribution," The Stuart News, from the files of Donald Fry, the Poynter Institute for Media Studies.

⁴ Andrew Radolf, "Mountain or molehill? Six-month-old controversy over the lack of attribution in an award-winning newspaper article is still drawing opinions from editors," Editor & Publisher, October 10, 1987, p. 11.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Carl Kovac, "Plagiarism in Cleveland: Reporter suspended 3 days for copying part of Washington Post's Carl Rowan column," Editor & Publisher, December 24, 1983, p. 7.

ending was the same," said Pittsburgh Press editor Angus McEachran.⁷

In 1985, Steve Smith, a columnist for the Missoulian, wrote a public apology that ran in his column's space. He had plagiarized from an editorial in the Shelton-Mason County Journal, Shelton, Wash. He was allowed to stay at the paper as a reporter and feature writer after a two-week suspension, but he lost his status as a columnist and the confidence of his editors and colleagues.⁸

As the examples above indicate, lack of attribution and plagiarism can create a special problem for journalists and columnists. It is difficult for a journalist to know when lack of attribution suddenly is no longer lack of attribution, but rather plagiarism. From the number and immediacy of the examples above, we know there is confusion about the sometimes fine line between lack of attribution and plagiarism. But there is even more confusion over how to solve the problem.

First of all, why should we be concerned about attribution, the lack of it, and plagiarism? To answer this question, we must consider some fundamental ethical statements that are the foundations of our democratic society.

Plagiarism comes from the Latin root "plagiarius," which means "kidnapper."⁹ Plagiarism is defined as "to steal and use (the ideas or

⁷ Editor & Publisher, "In Brief," June 13, 1987, p. 4.

⁸ Steve Smith, "Columnist apologizes for serious breach of ethics," The Missoulian, September 28, 1985.

⁹ MLA Handbook: For writers of research papers, theses, and dissertations, (New York: Modern Language Association), 1977.

writings of another) as one's own."¹⁰ According to Black's Law

Dictionary, plagiarism is:

the act of appropriating the literary composition of another, or parts or passages of his writings, or the ideas or language of the same, and passing them off as the product of one's own mind. To be liable for plagiarism, it is not necessary to exactly duplicate another's literary work, it being sufficient if unfair use of such work is made by lifting of substantial portion thereof, but even an exact counterpart of another's work does not constitute plagiarism if such counterpart was arrived at independently.¹¹

Perhaps the most relevant definition of plagiarism for the journalist's purposes is that of Alexander Lindley: "the false assumption of authorship; the wrongful act of taking the product of another person's mind, and presenting it as one's own."¹² The MLA Handbook elaborates:

plagiarism may take the form of repeating another's sentence as your own, adopting a particularly apt phrase as your own, or even presenting someone else's line of thinking in the development of a thesis as though it were your own. In short, plagiarism is to give the impression that you have written or thought something that you have in fact borrowed from another. Although a writer may use another person's words and thoughts, they must be acknowledged as such.¹³

The very word plagiarism means "to kidnap" and its most basic definition is stealing the work of another person. Certainly, any reporter, columnist, or editor would agree that stealing is wrong. A society cannot be civilized if it judges stealing to be acceptable behavior. This is

¹⁰ The American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 1982, p. 946.

¹¹ Henry Cambell Black, M.A., Black's Law Dictionary, Fifth Edition, (St. Paul: West Publishing Co.), 1979.

¹² MLA Handbook: For Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, (New York: Modern Language Association), 1977.

¹³ Ibid.

particularly true in a capitalistic, democratic society, in which the entire growth and existence of the society depends on the production and sale of goods and services. If stealing were commonplace and accepted behavior, the society would collapse. This is, of course, why stealing is against the law and why copyrights were created.

But more than stealing, plagiarism seems to be a form of lying. An author is lying about the source of his information. The author is lying to both the reader and his editors. Lying is morally wrong, said Kant.¹⁴ We are morally bound to tell the truth.

Practically, we, as journalists, are bound to tell the truth. We are in the business of making the truth known to the public. If we lie, not only are we breaking our moral obligation as civilized human beings, as characterized by Kant, but we are destroying the very purpose of our jobs. If we are caught in our lie, we not only embarrass ourselves, but we destroy the credibility of the newspaper for which we work. The public has no way of knowing which parts of the paper may be inaccurate and which parts are truth. The public, in order to perform its role in a democratic society, must have accurate information about what is going on in the world around it. And we, as journalists, have an obligation to the public to provide that information to the best of our abilities.

If we are lying to the reader when we do not attribute, it would seem that lack of attribution is coming dangerously close to the realm of plagiarism. That does not necessarily mean that neglect of attribution should be classified as plagiarism, but it does mean that journalists should

¹⁴ Discussion with Dr. Louis W. Hodges, Washington and Lee professor of religion, May 25, 1988.

be cautious when writing without attribution. It would seem that lack of attribution is also wrong for the same reasons that plagiarism is wrong, namely that it is possibly lying and stealing.

Besides it being morally wrong to steal and lie, there are more practical, applied reasons for attribution.

Many journalism textbooks and reporters themselves say attribution is a primary responsibility of those in the news media. Most journalists agree that attributing a direct quote is fundamental. That is, the public must know who made the statement and the speaker's relationship to the issue in order to evaluate the information correctly.¹⁵

According to Columbia University Professor Melvin Mencher in News Reporting and Writing, attribution is used:

1. "To give strength and credibility to material."
2. "When opinions are offered, or controversial statements are made."
3. "When a reporter is unsure of the accuracy of the information."
4. "When inferences, conclusions, or generalizations are made."¹⁶

It is obvious that quotations should be attributed to someone, for the public must know who made the statement in order to evaluate it. But guidelines for attribution are not so clear-cut when it comes to information that is gleaned from press releases, morgue clips, or articles in other newspapers.

Roy Peter Clark, associate director of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, in "The Unoriginal Sin: How Plagiarism Poisons the Press," listed

¹⁵ Hiley H. Ward, Professional Newswriting, (Washington, D.C.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.), 1985, p. 70.

¹⁶ Melvin Mencher, News Reporting and Writing, (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Publishers), 1984, p. 43.

"robbing the morgue," "abusing the wires," "lifting from other newspapers and magazines," "looting press releases," "hiding collaboration in the closet," "cribbing from the books, scholarship and research of others," and "recycling your old stories" all as "dangerous and unprofessional" procedures that could lead to an accusation of plagiarism.¹⁷ But many journalists disagree as to when, if ever, these practices constitute plagiarism.

One of the most common practices in journalism is to read other publications for either story ideas or background information for a current story. When or should a reporter mention that he received basic information from a previously published source?

In Free Lancer and Staff Writer: Newspaper Features and Magazine Articles, William L. Rivers said reporters should credit the source of directly quoted or paraphrased information.

The writer might take facts and figures from an article or book and accurately feel that he owed no credit because dozens of articles and books carry the same information. He must ask himself in each case: Did the person who wrote this have to work for it--dig--or are these facts widely known and readily available?

When honest answers to such questions result in paragraph after paragraph of attribution to others, a writer should not assume that he is spreading credits too liberally. Rather, like the bad scholar who leans [so] heavily on other scholars that he does little more than move the bones from one graveyard to another, the writer is merely rehashing.¹⁸

Most reporters agree that information that is common knowledge need

¹⁷ Roy Peter Clark, "The Unoriginal Sin: How Plagiarism Poisons the Press," Washington Journalism Review, March 1983, pp. 43-7.

¹⁸ William L. Rivers, Free-Lancer and Staff Writer: Newspaper Features and Magazine Articles, (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc.), 1976, p. 216.

not be attributed to a source. But common knowledge is not always easily defined. It is common knowledge that men, women and children are being hurt in the West Bank violence but, still, Jonathan Broder resigned when it came to light that his story had many similarities to one that appeared in the Jerusalem Post. In this instance, the facts were common knowledge, but the descriptive phrases were distinctive and easily identifiable.

According to a story in the Washington Post, the announcement of Broder's resignation in the Chicago Tribune read as follows:

The facts in the Tribune story, which included substantial original material, were accurate. The language taken from the Jerusalem Post column constitutes only a fraction of the total story and contributed significantly only to organization and imagery. But the byline inaccurately implied that it was all Mr. Broder's work.¹⁹

According to Tribune Editor James Squires, "[Broder] was obsessed with the story, wouldn't take any help. He was suffering from the physical fatigue and trauma of watching that story."²⁰ Squires suggested in the Washington Post article that this is an explanation, although not an excuse, for Broder's use of the Jerusalem Post article.

But many of Broder's colleagues defended him. According to an article in the Washington Post, many foreign correspondents who covered the Middle East at the same time as Broder said that Broder simply followed a common practice of foreign correspondents--he rewrote the local media. "Everybody rewrites the Jerusalem Post. That's how foreign correspondents work," said one Broder supporter in the Washington Post. Los Angeles Times Jerusalem correspondent Dan Fisher was quoted as saying, "As I understand what is

¹⁹ Randolph, "Reporter Accused of Plagiarism."

²⁰ Ibid.

happening, we're looking at capital punishment for a parking offense."²¹

Political columnist Charles MacDowell seems to disagree. "It's sinful to use the words, but not sinful to switch the words around," he said.

"That's hypocritical."²²

If rewriting is a crime, then Broder is certainly not the only guilty party, and foreign correspondents aren't the only group to rewrite other publications. According to Jerry Chaney, professor of journalism at Ball State University, "Making use of a competitor's news is common in the news business, but usually some attempt is made to disguise it by rewriting."²³

John Kimelman, Washington Bureau reporter for the Charleston Daily Mail, said, "the classic cheat-sheet for reporters in Washington is Congressional Quarterly." "It should be a tip-sheet," said Kimelman. He said often reporters engage in a "more sophisticated act of subterfuge" by rewriting an article just enough to disguise its origin.²⁴

Papers are notorious for doing rewrites of articles on events they missed that had appeared in other newspapers. In many cases, an afternoon paper will run a story printed in a morning paper after making only the slightest changes. How much rewriting is enough? Will attribution solve this problem of possible plagiarism?

Tom Goldstein addresses this issue in The News at Any Cost: How

²¹ Eleanor Randolph, "Media Notes," The Washington Post, March 4, 1988.

²² Interview with Charles MacDowell, political columnist for the Richmond Times-Dispatch, April 29, 1988.

²³ Jerry Chaney, "Plagiarism: A Skeleton in Journalism's Closet," The Quill, February 1984, pp. 29-30.

²⁴ Interview with John Kimelman, Washington Bureau reporter for the Charleston Daily Mail, April 29, 1988.

Journalists Compromise Their Ethics to Shape the News:

While using someone else's descriptions is plagiarism, it is not clear where journalistic "re-writing" ends and plagiarism begins. The rewriter is a time-honored, sometimes mythologized figure in newspaper firmament. The rewriter is ruffled, but resourceful, and on deadline he writes effortlessly--or so it seems--with several editors hunched over his shoulder, alternately encouraging him and trying to second-guess him. He also literally rewrites the stories of other reporters, either from his newspaper or from other publications.

How much borrowing is too much? Three words, four words, a paragraph? What about lifting quotes from another article and not sourcing them? Writers do this all time. Newspapers are stubbornly and notoriously ungenerous about giving credit to others, even though the lack of credit can easily mislead readers.²⁵

Kimelman suggests that Washington reporters continue to take the information in Congressional Quarterly, but get it confirmed. After confirmation, the information no longer needs to be attributed to the publication.²⁶

While rewriting articles in other publications is a common practice, it is perhaps even more an accepted practice to rewrite press releases without telling the reader the source of the information. A journalism textbook titled News Reporting and Writing includes a 10-page section in the chapter "Basic Stories" on how to rewrite press releases. "Some newspapers insist that you rewrite every news release if for no other reason than to avoid the embarrassment of running the same story as a competing newspaper. For some it is a matter of integrity and professional pride."²⁷ The authors suggest

²⁵ Tom Goldstein, The News at Any Cost: How Journalists Compromise Their Ethics to Shape the News, (New York: Simon and Schuster), 1985, pp. 222-3.

²⁶ Kimelman interview.

²⁷ Brian S. Brooks, George Kennedy, Daryl R. Moen and Don Ranly, News Reporting and Writing, (New York: St. Martin's Press), 1985, pp. 135-6.

that a copy editor should rewrite the release, correcting style and adding missing information and perhaps some "good quotations" to "spice up your story."²⁸ However, nowhere in the textbook does it suggest that the material found in the press release be attributed as coming from a press release.

But not all journalists agree with the text. Kimelman says that most reporters prefer to use press releases as a source for story ideas, but not a source for direct quotations. He suggests that the reporter try to "get it yourself." "Most quotes in press releases are canned and pretty plastic anyway," Kimelman said. However, if a reporter cannot get the information through other sources or does not have time to devote to the story, Kimelman suggests that he rewrite the release to say "in a statement released from so-and-so's office today..." and conclude that "so-and-so couldn't be reached for comment" (if indeed he could not).²⁹

Recently, the president of the student chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists/Sigma Delta Chi at the University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire was accused of plagiarizing from a university press release for a review he wrote for the student newspaper. The chapter adviser told Jerry Chaney, "Locally, the incident has had a salubrious effect on the city's daily newspaper, as news releases, or material taken from news releases, are carefully identified."³⁰

There are several reasons for wanting to identify carefully what

²⁸ Ibid., p. 137.

²⁹ Kimelman interview.

³⁰ Jerry Chaney, "Problem of plagiarism continues to plague us," article from the files of Donald Fry, the Poynter Institute for Media Studies.

information or which quotations came from a press release. Public relations writers are paid to get information about a group, business, or foundation into the media. They are trying to create a positive image in the public's mind about that group, business or foundation, and therefore press releases are often slanted to make a situation seem as positive as possible. Again, the press wants to give as much true, accurate information to the public as possible. In order for the reader evaluate the information she is receiving correctly and completely, she must know which information came from a press release and, therefore, may be biased.

While rewriting other papers' articles or using press releases without attribution can cause problems for reporters, columnists seem to have vulnerabilities uniquely their own. Columnists are accountable not only for the actual words that appear in the paper, but the structure and basic idea of the column as well. The difficulty often comes when a columnist reads something and subliminally absorbs information and ideas. Later, the ideas surface, and the columnist has a hard time discerning whether it is an original thought or something he read. Even if he does know he read it, often he cannot remember the source.

Donald Larrabee, former bureau chief for Griffin-Larrabee News Service and current public relations representative for the state of Maine, agrees. "I used to keep a lot of things in my head based on my years of reporting," he said. Often, the information could not be traced to a particular source, but was rather something Larrabee picked up in conversation or reading.³¹

Political columnist MacDowell says that he will get ideas from

³¹ Interview with Donald Larrabee, representative for the state of Maine, April 29, 1988.

newspaper articles he reads. Often the story will get him thinking about a topic, and he may eventually write a column about it, he said. If the column seems to echo closely the article or column that he saw, he will mention that he read the article in his column. If the column is about the same subject, but does not carry the same point, MacDowell said that he might not mention the article he read. His own work is governed by his "general sense of wanting to do right," he said. "When in doubt," he said, "rely on what seems professional, what seems most reasonable."³²

"Relying on what seems professional" may be an adequate guideline for a columnist or journalist who has been working for several years, but it would probably seem confusing and vague to an entry-level journalist. What can be done so that all working journalists can protect themselves from an accusation of plagiarism?

Perhaps the most important change that can be made is to recognize that lack of attribution and plagiarism can be a potential hazard for reporters and columnists. Everyone, editors and reporters alike, agrees that plagiarism is bad, but more time should be taken to consider what the word means and which circumstances might constitute plagiarism.

In 1984, Chaney did a survey on the attitudes of newspaper editors on plagiarism. His results showed:

- * 64 percent of the editors of larger newspapers feel that reprinting a press release without attribution is plagiarism, compared with 43 percent of smaller newspaper editors.
- * 94 percent of the larger-newspaper editors said that reprinting a press release as part of a signed column is plagiarism, compared with 77 percent of smaller-newspaper editors.
- * 86 percent of the larger-newspaper editors said that similar

³²MacDowell interview.

descriptive phrases are plagiarism, compared with 69 percent of the smaller-newspaper editors.

* editors of small and large papers seem to feel the same way about printing a wire story without attribution to the wire service--64 percent of small-paper editors and 63 percent of larger-paper editors said it was plagiarism.

* 64 percent of small-paper editors said that writing a story based only on the facts gleaned from another's article is plagiarism, compared to 50 percent of the larger-paper editors.³³

Recently papers have begun to include specific statements on plagiarism and the need for attribution. Tom Goldstein says in The News at Any Cost, "Newspaper editors mistakenly feel that plagiarism is a cut-and-dried issue. In the questionnaire I sent to fifty of the country's largest papers, I asked if they had a written policy regarding plagiarism. Few newspapers did. James Greenfield, assistant managing editor of the New York Times, said, 'Why would anyone want' a written policy--'it's so obvious.'"³⁴

In the fall of 1984, after much debate, the Society of Professional Journalists/Sigma Delta Chi adopted an amendment to the society's bylaws stating, "Plagiarism is dishonest and unacceptable."³⁵ The code does not define what plagiarism might be.

The International Federation of Journalists did not define plagiarism either. It had perhaps one of the earliest statements on plagiarism. Plagiarism is described in the 1954 code as a "grave professional

³³ Jerry Chaney, "Survey shows small papers softer on plagiarism," Publishers' Auxiliary, April 8, 1985, p. 3.

³⁴ Goldstein.

³⁵ Code of Ethics, The Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, adopted in 1973, amended in 1984.

offense."³⁶

The Scripps-Howard Code of Conduct states, more specifically, "Plagiarism strikes at the very heart of journalistic credibility. Material from other sources must be attributed."³⁷ A Scripps-Howard newsletter expanded this statement by including specific examples and concluded, "The fact that other people may be sloppy or stingy with attribution is no excuse. We intend to be fair with our fellow journalists and honest with our readers, regardless of how others may behave."³⁸

The Philadelphia Inquirer recently implemented a new set of staff guidelines. The policies, which went into effect in January 1987, include the following comment on plagiarism: "In constructing a story or column, a writer should be careful not to use someone else's analyses, interpretations, or literary devices, such as distinctive descriptive phrases, unless they are clearly attributed."³⁹

The Washington Post says in its "Deskbook on Style" that "attribution of material from other newspapers and other media must be total. Plagiarism is one of journalism's unforgivable sins."⁴⁰

Besides these major papers and news services, as Goldstein indicated,

³⁶ Declaration of principles on the conduct of journalists of the International Federation of Journalists, adopted by the Second World Congress of the International Federation of Journalists at Bordeaux, April 25-8, 1954.

³⁷ Scripps-Howard newsletter, June 1987, p. 9.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ The Philadelphia Inquirer, staff guidelines, January 1987.

⁴⁰ Ben Bradlee, "Deskbook on Style," as quoted in The News at Any Cost: How Journalists Compromise Their Ethics to Shape the News, (New York: Simon and Schuster), 1985, p. 223.

few newspapers have statements on lack of attribution and plagiarism. Of these examples, only a few give specific examples of what is considered plagiarism. Perhaps the understanding is, as New York Times' Greenfield said, that plagiarism is obvious and offenders are very aware when they are doing it. Kimelman agrees. "Crossing the line is pretty clear cut," he said. "We all know what being a copy cat is from the time we're little kids."⁴¹

Whether it is a case of obvious plagiarism or simply careless reporting is debatable. From the examples of reporters and columnists who have found themselves facing accusations of plagiarism, there clearly exists cause for concern. People are losing their jobs because of what seems to be confusion over when to attribute and when not.

But even more than individual reporters, the reputation of the industry is suffering as a whole. The Washington Post ombudsman Richard Harwood recently wrote:

The point is that the ethics and standards of journalism are a morass of contradictions and hypocrisies. We render each day moral judgments on the rest of humankind but tend to insist on divine rights of immunity for ourselves. The Society of Professional Journalists, in a referendum last year, voted for a code of ethics and for sanctions against members who violate it. The society's board of directors responded that if the proposal were adopted they would resign. The plan was rescinded. Sinners, in grand tradition, were saved.⁴²

It is not practical to try to footnote the newspaper. "It would be an undue burden on the reader and writer to identify every little bit of information," said Larrabee.⁴³ But solutions for specific instances where

⁴¹ Kimelman interview.

⁴² Richard Harwood, "Don't Judge Us, We'll Judge You," The Washington Post, April 3, 1988.

⁴³ Larrabee interview.

lack of attribution might cause an accusation of plagiarism seem to be relatively simple. For rewrites, simply weave the source of the original information into the story: "As reported in the Washington Post," or "In a story in the New York Times three years ago." To indicate information that came from a press release, a reporter can drop in the phrase "in a statement released from Sen. Brown's office today." There is valid argument that these disclaimers interrupt the flow of a well-written article. However, it seems wrong to leave out valuable information that strengthens the credibility of the article in deference to a style of writing that reads well.

These changes are relatively cosmetic. There does not have to be a great deal of restructuring of the way journalists think in order to adopt these solutions. But while there may be easy ways to write a story to include complete attribution, the problem of confusion over when lack of attribution becomes plagiarism still exists.

Short of restructuring the journalism profession to create an overall governing body similar to the law bar or the American Medical Association, there is no way to create a set of national guidelines on when lack of attribution might become plagiarism. The only place to deal with the current ambiguity of this issue is at the level of the individual papers. Naturally, editors are reluctant to codify staff policy so much that it becomes too large to absorb. However, journalists have shown through example that there is sufficient confusion on cases of lack of attribution and plagiarism to warrant a more specific policy.

Newspapers might adopt the following model statement, which is based upon the Philadelphia Inquirer's guidelines:

All material used in the construction of a story or column should be clearly attributed to the proper sources, including newspapers, columnists, or press releases. In addition to direct quotations, all paraphrased material, analyses, interpretations, or literary devices, such as distinctive descriptive phrases, should be attributed.

Using another person's words, phrases or ideas without attribution is plagiarism, an offense which may be cause for dismissal.

Newspapers should include this statement, or another similar statement defining exactly what constitutes plagiarism and the conditions for punishment. The statement should be included in the employee manual.

This will probably not prevent people from plagiarizing. But it will prevent many missteps where reporters did not realize the fine line between the sometimes-acceptable lack of attribution (as in common knowledge) and that which nears plagiarism.

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