

# Time to join the war on the error of plagiarism

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2015/07/24/time-to-join-the-war-on-the-error-of-plagiarism/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2015/07/24/time-to-join-the-war-on-the-error-of-plagiarism/)

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*A national debate around plagiarism has been sparked in India following accusations made against writer Rajiv Malhotra. Here, **Swati Dhingra** challenges the notion that plagiarism increases societal welfare. She argues that it is not hard to cite, and that presenting someone else's work as your own is unegalitarian in the increasingly competitive academic world.*



Earlier this month, historian [Richard Fox Young](#) charged an influential Indian-American writer of plagiarism. The writer, [Rajiv Malhotra](#), has written four books on Hinduism, and argues that the way Hinduism is taught in the west denigrates its traditions. Young posted extracts from Malhotra's books revealing that Malhotra had apparently plagiarised material from various books, particularly [Andrew Nicholson's](#) book [Unifying Hinduism](#) [i]. This was followed by several web posts by well-known author, Ananya Vajpeyi, calling fellow scholars, writers and academics to join the war on the error of plagiarism.

There have been endless posts on the matter and the plagiarism and the discussion has grown into a national debate (see for example [here](#)). Being an economist, I will keep the moral question aside. Yes, of course, you should give credit to the original thinker, that would be the right thing to do. I want to ask instead in economic parlance: does plagiarism increase societal welfare? If people could freely steal ideas, wouldn't it enrich the body of knowledge, through freer flow of ideas. Then in the grand scheme of things, plagiarism should be fine? I am going to give two reasons why this is not true and, why plagiarism requires corrective action.

First, plagiarism at best means that the writer is lazy and the work is shoddy – the writer couldn't even be bothered to reference what's incorporated. Free flow of ideas would happen just as easily if the original writer's name is added. Every word processing program now comes with a footnote or bibliography feature, so this is a trivial task. In fact, citing others is great because they even help you with your dirty laundry. The computer scientists know this all too well. The [free software movement](#) lets a programmer copy other people's work and modify it. As the code references the contributors' names, programmers can ask the original contributors for help with any unanticipated glitches with the code. My co-authors and I have written successfully to several contributors to clarify or fix issues with their code and ours, so there are organic improvements to the body of knowledge all the time.

Second, plagiarism is unegalitarian because the plagiarising self-proclaimed pundits benefit at the expense of typically junior academics. It takes two hours to re-hash a piece of scholarly work whose original author probably spent two years doing the necessary research behind it. Academic jobs are getting harder and harder to come by and basically until most young academics write a book or 'become' a pundit or consultant later in their career, they are stuck with at least ten years of stress scrambling for tenure at a job that pays relatively little [ii]. Each citation counts and plagiarism of your original piece can be absolutely devastating, especially if it happens before you have formally published your work in a journal.

To sum up, it's painless to cite people and doesn't really take away from the glamor of being a thinker. Reputations matter and we need to name and shame people who plagiarise so that they don't drive out the less connected original researchers. But most importantly, a systemic change is needed because plagiarism is rampant and comes with few penalties. For instance, 24% of responding editors to a survey of economics journals said they had encountered at least one case of plagiarism in a typical year. Yet less than 19% of responding journals had a formal policy regarding plagiarism ([Enders and Hoover, 2004](#)). Publishers need to take strict action and give credit or co-authorship to the original writers. So yes, it's time to join the battle against the individual plagiarisers and the institutional inaction against plagiarism.

*Endnotes*

[i] This line has been subsequently edited out from the entry on Rajiv Malhotra on Wikipedia, but the content is available [here](#).

[ii] A couple of years ago CNBC published an article on how university professors had the least stressful jobs. The real experiences of young academics are in [this article](#) that went viral a couple of years ago, and from which I've taken the above lines.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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