

# Wikipedia:Wikipedia Signpost/2024-01-31/Opinion

< [Wikipedia:Wikipedia Signpost](#) | [2024-01-31](#)

## Opinion

# Until it happens to you

By [Oltrepier](#)

In the last issue of *The Signpost*, [Smallbones](#) addressed the explosive public fallout between *Business Insider* and [Bill Ackman](#). This arose from the newspaper's [exclusive story](https://www.businessinsider.com/neri-oxman-plagiarize-wikipedia-mit-dissertation-2024-1) (<https://www.businessinsider.com/neri-oxman-plagiarize-wikipedia-mit-dissertation-2024-1>) about the hedge fund billionaire's wife, Neri Oxman, who had been accused of plagiarizing from several academic and online sources (including Wikipedia) without any attribution. In a series of tweets (<https://twitter.com/BillAckman/status/1743792224020619450>) on his [Twitter](#) profile, Ackman quite vehemently defended his wife from the accusations, and questioned whether somebody could even plagiarize Wikipedia to begin with.

Now, the claims of Ackman and several other commentators who dived in the original discussion have already been tackled by [Smallbones](#) in [his brief piece](#), as well as fellow Wikipedian [Molly White](#), who explained how Wikipedia ultimately works in a [detailed YouTube video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_jM6aoTDK0) ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t\\_jM6aoTDK0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_jM6aoTDK0)). If you haven't already, I'd suggest you to check both sources out before moving on. In this article, though, I'd like to reflect on the same theme from a slightly different perspective, which involves a user — [me, myself and I](#), more specifically — who *did* fall victim of plagiarism.

So, to be fair, I come from a generation of pain, where murder is mi— **[Vinyl scratch noise]** No, wait, I've picked up the wrong script, I'm sorry. Allow me to do a second take, please... So, to be fair, I come from a [generation](#) that is considered to be very used to the dynamics of Internet, and rightfully so: in some instances, maybe we're even [too tied](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/) (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>) to the online world. This, though, doesn't necessarily mean teens and people in their twenties are better at selecting, double-checking and, most importantly, citing their sources. In fact, I made my own mistakes as a little kid, and I suspect that



Bill Ackman, the man who inadvertently inspired both [an article in our last issue](#) and mine with his claims about Wikipedia.

there are many more students across the globe who have copied from Wikipedia or other sites for their school projects/assignments in good faith (hopefully), without knowing that using those text blocks without proper attribution potentially violates CC BY-SA license and copyright law. Although I've been lucky to have high school and university teachers who emphasized the importance of declaring and checking your sources, I had never fully understood how serious this aspect is until I got more familiar with fact-checking, while also keeping learning through my experiences on Genius, and then here on Wikipedia. This summer, finally, I had kind of an epiphany in this sense.

So, both on English and Italian Wikipedia I very often cover articles related to football —no, not this football... not this, either... ah, there we go! Among other things, I've also tried creating new pages from scratch, including the one about French-Malian footballer Coli Saco, which first saw the light of the day roughly a year ago ([https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Coli\\_Saco&oldid=1137289993](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Coli_Saco&oldid=1137289993)). In August 2023, on the “deadline day” of the summer transfer window, Saco was sent on loan to an Italian club, whose name will be kept undisclosed here — you can see for yourself, anyway. Geregen2 updated the page first, but I still wanted to check the official announcement by the club, out of pure curiosity. As soon as I started reading through the text, I was like, “Hmm... looks familiar, but they still did their research!” After a closer look, I realized it was more than just familiar: in fact, whoever wrote the announcement most likely copied the information on Saco's article, slapped it in a translator, trimmed it down slightly and, finally, pasted it on the club's website.



Remember to be honest about your sources, kids (and youngsters, and every other generation)...

DALL-E 3, prompt: Bri

"They... they c-c-copied... my p-precious boy... How could you be so cruel?", I mumbled in desperation, as I felt my mind deeply descending into the arms of— **[Vinyl scratch noise]** Just kidding, I wasn't too bothered by that, to be honest. Nevertheless, it was quite evident that the article had been plagiarized, even when assuming good faith one more time and imagining that the club's website admin was likely scrambling to get the press release done in a reasonable amount of time — and by the way, for anyone who's not too familiar with association football, this is just one of the many (<https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/international/how-a-football-transfer-works-a7546121.html>) and stressful (<https://www.skysports.com/football/news/11095/10558620/how-does-a-transfer-work>) phases of transfers.

Back to the topic, though. Was I annoyed by seeing "my" article<sup>[1]</sup> getting copied so blatantly? Yes.

Was that an example of the Italian media's chronic bad habit (<https://www.ilpost.it/2017/02/10/daily-mail/>) of not double-checking their sources, or even not citing them appropriately, before publishing their articles? Yes, kind of.

Is this incident as bad as the one who is currently putting the career of Neri Oxman at high risk? Well, no, not even close. Let's try to let it sink in for a moment, though.

Do you remember I listed fact-checking as one of the reasons why I started taking sources and citations more seriously? That's because it helped me discover not only how to recognize and debunk fake news, but also how much damage they can do if left unchecked. Wikipedia isn't immune to disinformation, either: just last July, we reported on the series of over-enthusiastic edits made by a suspicious user on the article about OceanGate, which (disturbingly enough) might have played a role in the tragedy of the Titan submersible implosion. Obviously, not all the lies are this dangerous, but putting in place a solid system to detect and tackle them, as Wikipedia volunteers have done, still plays a key role in preserving a community built on trust, reciprocal respect, reliability and neutrality.

The same goes for plagiarism: whether we're talking about a plain-simple Wikipedia page, an article from a respected newspaper, your school-book or the Sacred Scriptures, they have all been written by someone who (hopefully) cared about the information or the message they had intended to convey. They might not necessarily take you to court if you don't give them credit, but in most cases, it could hurt their feelings, and you might not realize it until it happens to you.

So, even if we're all just piles of flesh, blood and bones trapped in a life-long state of imperfection, a.k.a. humans, or at least until artificial intelligence will have improved so much that we'll be toe-to-toe with humanoid versions of HAL 9000 who will constantly threat to destroy us if we don't take them to eat the best Bolognese spaghetti in the world every freaking day... [**Inhalating intensely**] In other words, even if we all make mistakes or go out of character sometimes, we should always remember to disclose the sources who are helping us in our research, if anything, out of respect for the people behind them. It could make their day, but also help us nurture that positive cycle of trust, accountability and quality information we all desperately need in these challenging times.

1. Technically, as we all know, Wikipedia articles are *not* an exclusive property of their creators; rather, they are shared between everyone who decides to improve them. Still, I hope you've got what I'm saying here...

[\*← PREVIOUS "Opinion"\*](#)

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Damnit, now I need spaghetti Bolognese. All the best: Rich Farmbrough 15:38, 31 January 2024 (UTC).

@Rich Farmbrough: That was the plan all along... : D But seriously, thank you for the feedback, I appreciate it! Oltrepier (talk) 19:26, 31 January 2024 (UTC)

I'm reminded of the time -- many years ago -- where I typed in Google a very distinctive sentence from material I added to the article Lake Tana. (IMHO it was distinctive because it was an awkward & clumsy sentence.) And I found that what I wrote about the largest lake in Ethiopia had been copied in the webpages of a couple dozen travel agencies headquartered in Ethiopia. I contemplated alerting someone to this, but let it go: so much has been stolen from various Third World countries that I could tolerate a little plagiarism. Especially as it was not my best writing. -- llywrch (talk) 23:39, 31 January 2024 (UTC)

@Llywrch: I think we might assume good faith about that, too... : D Oltrepier (talk) 21:43, 2 February 2024 (UTC)

Heh. I remember one of the websites that used that sentence even commented on the oddity or awkwardness of the sentence. So I'm convinced that they copied the Wikipedia article. But as I wrote above, I really don't care that it happened. (On the other hand I've found a number of NGOs working in Ethiopia copy paragraphs from Wikipedia into their reports without attribution, so that might be worth pursuing for plagiarism.) -- llywrch (talk) 23:59, 2 February 2024 (UTC)

It's all too common. There's a fair chunk of *The Tottenham Outrage and Walthamstow Tram Chase: The Most Spectacular Hot Pursuit in History* that was directly lifted from the text I wrote for Tottenham Outrage and Siege of Sidney Street. Our Outrage article was written in mid 2016; the book was published in mid-2017 and there is no attribution or recognition of either article in the book. - SchroCat (talk) 22:57, 1 February 2024 (UTC)

@SchroCat: That's sad, especially because the author likely made a profit out of that book... Oltrepier (talk) 21:45, 2 February 2024 (UTC)

- The very first Wikipedia article I wrote in 2009 was a biography of an acclaimed Dutch-American coppersmith, Dirk van Erp. Roughly five years later, I was visiting a very well known Northern California art museum that I will not name. I noticed that they had a small temporary exhibition of eight or ten of van Erp's works, with a sign on the wall - a brief biography of the artist. Sure enough, about 2/3 was lifted word-for-word from my writing, without attribution. I felt a strange combination of pride and irritation. Cullen328 (talk) 01:48, 3 February 2024 (UTC)

A couple of years ago a local history page on Facebook that I follow included a piece that I recognized was taken word-for-word from what I had written in Wikipedia, without any attribution. I did complain to the admin for the page, and it was taken down. I am well aware that act will not stop or slow down plagiarism. - Donald Albury 09:04, 3 February 2024 (UTC)

Well over a decade ago, something I had written about an obscure facet of American telephone switching systems was proposed for deletion for copyviol. Turned out, it was vice versa. It was clear from our article history that I had written it bit by bit onwiki, and the British site had copied mine, not noticing that it was irrelevant to British switching practice at the time (and spelt in Yank style). Soon our copyright police became more thorough in their investigations. Jim.henderson (talk) 05:01, 4 February 2024 (UTC)

Template:Backwards copy has its uses. Gråberg's Gråa Sång (talk) 09:30, 4 February 2024 (UTC)

I had something similar come up during my GA of James Tissot with a pair of random art blogs. One was so lazy they actually copied the wikisource markup for the image files without copying the images themselves. Orchastrattor (talk) 16:21, 7 February 2024 (UTC)



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## 31 JANUARY 2024

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- [In focus](#)
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