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Term Paper Project, Part II

By CHARLES McGRATH

IN these pages last week, an article reported on a spur-of-the-moment experiment The Times conducted in buying custom-written term papers over the Internet. The papers that eventually arrived were pretty awful — disorganized, muddled, full of padding and repetitions. One of them was written in language that was almost like English, but not quite. And there was even worse news to come.

The whole point of buying a custom-written paper, the article noted, is that technology now enables suspicious teachers to spot passages or even entire papers that have been lifted from elsewhere on the Net. We therefore sent \$49.75 to one company, Term Paper Relief, precisely because it promised on its Web site papers that are “completely non-plagiarized” — a description that turns out to be accurate only if you take out the “non.”

Though we weren't aware of it at first, the paper that turned up, an essay comparing and contrasting Orwell's “1984” and Huxley's “Brave New World,” was a clip job, a collage assembled entirely — and hastily, it now appears — from other sources.

Just a few minutes with Google or with Turn It In, a service that enables teachers to vet student papers, revealed that every single paragraph of the essay was borrowed from material already floating on the Internet or in Nexis. The whole first paragraph, for example, complete with a glaring error (that awkward juxtaposition of “works books”), comes right from an essay that can be found on www.essays.cc/free-essays/c2/wujj213.shtml, and so do several subsequent passages. Other paragraphs come from an online version of Monarch Notes, and even from a U.P.I. wire-service story about Huxley. None of these sources are acknowledged in the essay's footnotes.

When informed of the plagiarism, Term Paper Relief declined to provide a refund. In the case of “deviations from the ordered requirement,” an e-mail message replied, the company's policy is to offer a “free revision,” but in this instance — a “special case,” the message said — Term Paper Relief offered to redo the entire assignment. This offer is similar to the one The Times received last week from SuperiorPapers.com, which failed to provide a requested essay in the first place.

Neither company seemed particularly concerned about deadlines, which surely oppress students as much as they do newspaper reporters, and the whole experience suggests that, far from being a last-minute remedy, ordering a paper online requires advance scheduling. You have to plan so far ahead, in fact, making allowance for delays, failure and possible plagiarism, that you might as well do the work yourself.

“Most of the pay-per-paper sites are scams and rip-offs,” Kevin Smith, an expert in this business, said in a telephone interview. “Anyone who pays is an idiot.” Mr. Smith is one of five founders of a Web site called Asian Grade, whose motto is “Next to every successful student ... is a successful Asian student.”

Asian Grade — which doesn't break even, much less make a profit, according to Mr. Smith (who is himself half-Asian) — offers thousands of free papers as a kind of public service. The site argues that a lot of term-paper assignments are mindless make-work, and that many teachers don't even bother to grade them carefully.

“In fact, the biggest academic con is not plagiarism by students,” the site says, “it's the fact that teachers pretend to read 25-30 papers on the same subject, semester after semester, year after year ... come on, did you honestly think your teachers enjoy your opinion of Robert Frost's poems.”

The point of Asian Grade, Mr. Smith said in the interview, was to provide students with research help, not to encourage them to plagiarize, though he admitted that “we can't control what they do with it afterwards.” He also did not mention that the site also offers a removal feature whereby, in exchange for a modest fee, a paper — or, rather, research material — can be temporarily or even permanently erased from the database.

“This will help prevent your professor from finding your original source,” the site points out, “as well as making sure other students in your class don't submit a similar paper to yours.”

A random search of Asian Grade suggests, moreover, that most papers there are not of the footnote-heavy, time-wasting research sort but, rather, single-topic essays of the kind The Times originally ordered — papers that require you not to track down sources but ostensibly to think for yourself. And at least a few, among them an essay comparing “Hamlet” and “Oedipus Rex” and a thematic analysis of “The Great Gatsby,” aren't nearly as bad as the papers The Times paid for. They're not A work, certainly, but in a pinch they might squeak by.

PERHAPS not for long, though. Turn It In, for the teachers and schools that make use of it, is a powerful deterrent to plagiarism. The service is essentially a powerful search engine and database that keeps track of every paper submitted to it — now some 60,000 a day, according to John Barrie, the company president, with usage doubling every 12 months or so. About 30 percent of those papers turn out to be “less than original,” Mr. Barrie said.

The database now includes not just material available on the Web but also, say, those moldy Psych 101 papers that have been circulating around the frat house for decades, and the search engine has a very long memory. It was able to determine, for example, that chunks of that Orwell/Huxley paper were included in an essay turned in by a student at Helensvale State High School, in Queensland, Australia, in November 2002.

“That's one of the values of our service,” Mr. Barrie said. “If you're a student, you know that you might get away with a plagiarized paper today, but next semester, next year, you might just get a wake-up call.”

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