

# It was a dark and stormy night ...

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Plagiarism and fabrication in the newsroom



# Raison d'être: my interest

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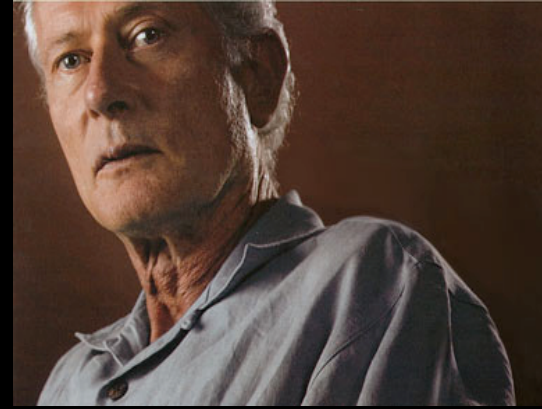
- 1. Apparent increase/cluster
- 2. Confusion/anger over failure to attribute
- 3. Ownership concentration: copy sharing
- 4. Agency changes
- 5. Ease of copy and pasting from Internet
- 6. Sense that not *just* the journalists to blame
- 7. *Fascinating* stories



- Janet Cooke – *Washington Post* (1980)
  - Invented an 8-yr-old heroin addict
- Stephen Glass – *New Republic* (1995-1998)
  - Fictions with fake websites & phone numbers
- Jayson Blair – *New York Times* (2003)
  - Habitual fabrication and plagiarism



- *National Radio's* Nina Totenberg – when young
- *New York Times's* Fox Butterfield – about plagiarism
- *New Republic's* Ruth Shalit – in five stories
- And looking beyond journalism:
  - Alex Hayley – in *Roots* (settled out of court)
  - Jacob Epstein – stole from Martin Amis novel
  - Martin Luther King – much of his dissertation



- Renee Kiriona, *NZ Herald* (2004) – Tawera Nikau story
- Bruce Logan, Maxim Institute (2005) – column thefts
- John Manukia (2005) – faked police iv and plagiarised
- *Southland Times*, Queenstown, reporter (2004) – from competitor - okay from interviewee, but no attribution
- Warwick Roger, *Metro* (1977) – notes from a film-maker

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- Also, among numerous anecdotal accounts:
    - A *Southland Times* sports reporter
    - A senior *NZ Herald* business staffer
    - A then *Waikato Times* staffer
    - A *Bay of Plenty Times* reporter

**Fabrication – & plagiarism of pics: Greg Hyam reports Afghani conflict from Wellington (*NZ Times* 1985)**

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- *Questions:*
  - *Does all this make a cluster?*
  - *Have most journos in this audience been plagiarised?*
  - *Is plagiarism on the increase with the new technologies?*
  - *Should a news room culture of “news at any costs” take part of the responsibility?*



# How does the industry view plagiarism?

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- No mention in the EPMU Code of Ethics
- Fairfax code briefly says: ‘take every reasonable precaution to avoid’
- No mention in the BSA Principles
- No mention in NZPC Statement of Principles
- *NY Times*: only that it “will not tolerate”
- Common view: an individual-level issue and an obvious wrong: open and shut, not worth studying
- Are the papers responsible to any degree?

# Nuances

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- News is about *getting* the news, from wherever: *how much/what sort* of copying is acceptable?
- What's okay between papers of the same stable?
- What obligation does agency cover require?
- Is *intent* an issue?
- Is a degree of background filling acceptable?
- Journalists differ in deciding when “appropriation” is wrongful

# Literature

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- Johannesen (2002): ethical offence came with shift from oral to print – words become commodities
- Snapper (1999): web lessens importance of piracy, but heightens need for protections against plagiarism
- Young (2001): Internet's "utopian rhetoric of freedom"
- Spender (2005): By continuing to apply "old rules", fail to recognise the move from print to digital
- Hirst & Patching (2007): It's the pressure of competition, deadlines, individual egos, that lead a small minority into ...cutting corners

# Lewis (2007): a “first ever” study of newspaper plagiarism behaviour

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- Analysed all known plagiarism cases (76) over 10 yrs
- In-depth interviews with eight of those
- Vast majority, “garden-variety plagiarism that afflicts exemplary journalists – inc. two Pulitzer winners
- Plagiarism *not* merely an individual-level violation, but results from a professional ideology justifying copying
- Finds:
  - Two individual causes: rationalising dishonesty; and problematic reporter techniques
  - Two are situational: definitional ambiguity; and attribution aversion

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- Papers prefer paraphrasing to attribution
  - Underlying: refusal to admit Journalism built on copying
  - The greatest influence shaping ethical conduct, not codes, upbringing, or teaching, but newsroom culture
  - *American Journalism Review (2005):*
    - *Ongoing cases of plagiarism and fabrication may result not just from a few bad apples, but also from a newsroom culture that rewards beating the competition more than it does accuracy*

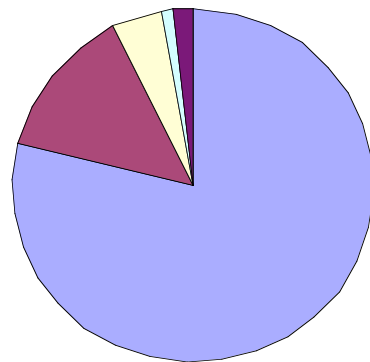
# Methodology of NZ study

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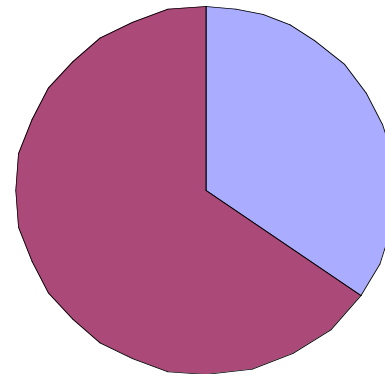
- 1. Surveyed NZ journalists on their own experiences of *being plagiarised* – to establish themes
- 2. Five qualitative interviews:
  - a metropolitan chief reporter/now assistant editor
  - a metropolitan business editor
  - a news website operator
  - an agency news editor
  - a small community reporter
- 3. Analysed every plagiarism case before the Press Council since its inception in 1972
- 4. Literature review, including prominent case studies

# Is plagiarism a problem? The Big New Zealand Survey (2007)

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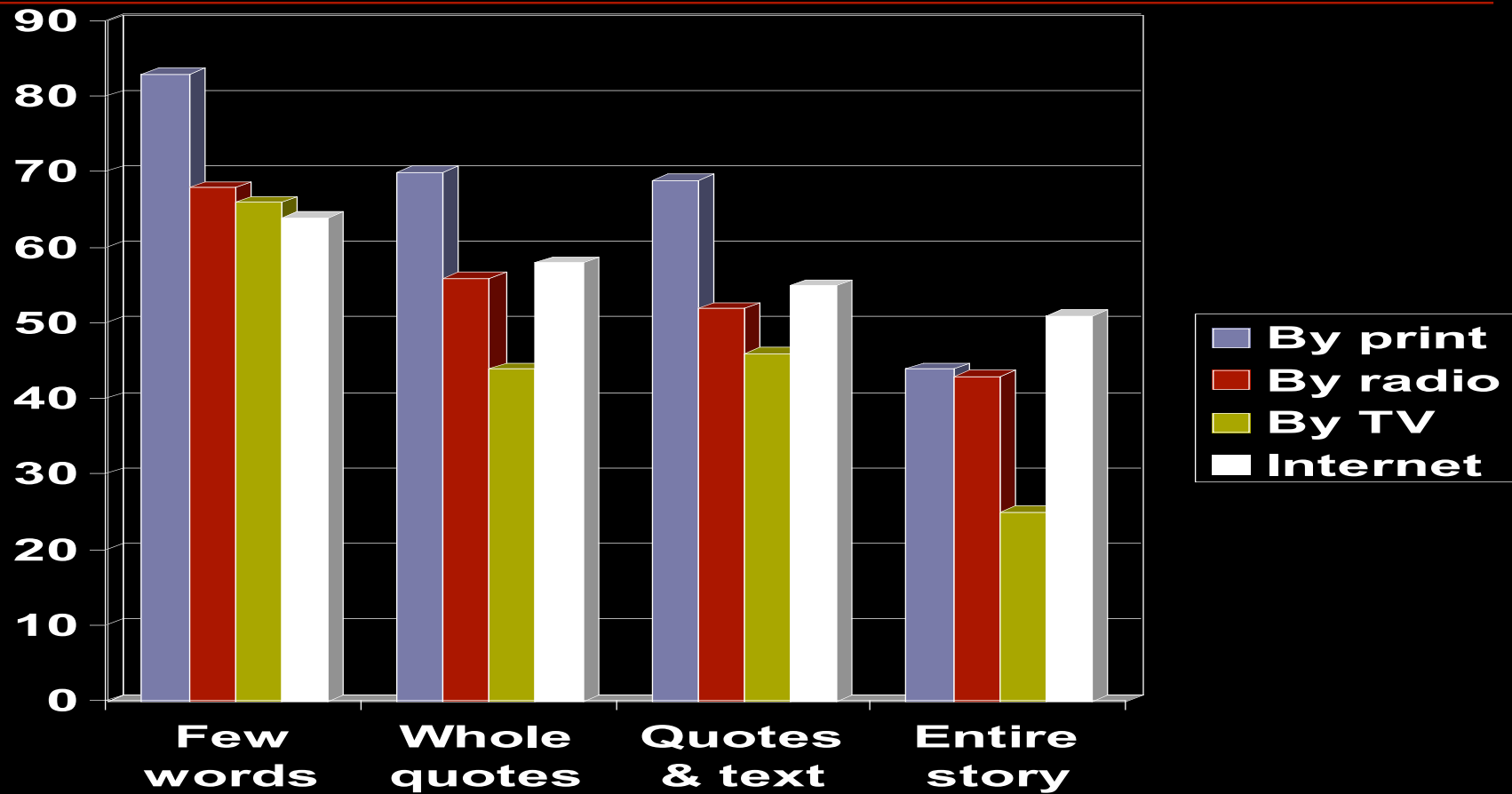
■ Reporter/sub  
■ Photographer  
■ Producer  
■ Reader  
■ Other



■ Growing problem?  
(34.7%)  
■ Not (65.3%)



# How much and who by?



# Reasons growth: survey themes

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- Laziness – which seemed to be a gut reaction
- Ease of the internet – “stealing”
- Poor resourcing – notably small-town radio
- Inadequate regulation – apparently misinformed

# And significantly...

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- *Demands of the news cycle – news now!*
- *Growing pool of younger journos under pressure to succeed quickly*
- *Declining value placed on intellectual property of written word*
- *Credit for the work seems to be increasingly blurred*
- *Newsroom aversion to attributions*

# Qualitative interview responses

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- **Agency man:** only plagiarism where vast bulk taken, rather than just dropped attribution (tho gotta have it!)
- **Community reporter:** taking credit without acknowledging. Happened three times a week.
- **Website editor:** Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Pressure definitively a cause.
- **Business editor:** It's insidious. There's a real risk of blurring the boundaries
- **Assistant editor:** Not a problem. [Within the group] I suppose we're flattered by it really.

# Some suggested solutions?

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- More regulatory clout – most not
- Naming and shaming
- Better training
- Resources, job satisfaction – most not
- Fact checkers/internet tool
- Internet: *A real worry*
- Financial sanctions against organisation

# Culture of copying

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- But *no-one* suggests news organisations need to acknowledge the “matching” ethos of their newsrooms

# It continues ... *Missouri J. School's* **John Merrill**

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- *Insts can make mistakes, sometimes unconsciously. Taking quotes from an AP story without credit was common 20 years ago.*
- *The AP is a cooperative of papers...it wasn't stealing if you already own it.*
- *That standard has been discredited.*
  - November 2007
- *Global Journalism pinged*
  - December 2007

