

RESEARCH

Plagiarize, plagiarize, plagiarize!

Don't let anyone else's work evade your eyes.

But be sure to call it "research".

From a satirical song titled, 'Lobachevsky's Theorem' by Tom Lehrer

*When you steal from one author, its plagiarism; if you steal from many, it's research.
Wilson Mizner*

I am a member of a rather exclusive group. I am a qualified researcher. There are only three to four thousand of us. Our research covers every area of interest. It ranges from astrophysics to the minutest of material entities, from living things to everything that interacts with them as well as all the factors that enable the interaction of matter with itself and with energy, from the social sciences to the humanities, and from philosophy to the arts. We appreciate the critical importance of a maxim from Quantum Mechanics, which states that 'each thing is connected to all others'. This has led all the aforementioned disciplines to interact as much as possible.

The computer has made this possible. We each have computers that are linked to a database that encompasses all knowledge ever accumulated by humanity. Our computers are the most advanced. They can retrieve information at a speed that makes it appear instantaneous. They can perform programmed operations with equal facility. They are in control of every available technology enabling them to acquire new relevant measurements and gather new data. Most important of all, we are each able to alter the computing characteristics of our computers as we see fit.

The nature of research over the last number of centuries has dramatically changed. Our function is simple. We researchers are nothing more than question askers. We pose them to our computers who respond either by use of the vast storehouse of knowledge their data bases contain or by the generation of new knowledge which they garner by commanding the appropriate technology to acquire germane information. In other words they gather and store empirical knowledge in a manner never before achieved. When answering any question, they use the most advanced mathematical and rational algorithms with which they have been programmed. They very seldom give an absolute response. Usually they frame it in the form of a statistical probability.

Our function as inquirers is not as simple as it seems. However it does follow a tried and true logic. The answer to one question frequently leads to another level of inquiry and then to another and another and so on. This progression can appear to go on ad infinitum. Indeed some of us have spent our whole working lives following an endless trail leading nowhere that started with a relatively simple question. The perceptive researcher must recognize a quagmire when faced with one, and then abandon it quickly to start a new line of inquiry. Those who do not fall, by the wayside and are quickly replaced. There are very few of us who have ever come up with lines of inquiry that have revolutionized knowledge of either our universe or that of existence. Perhaps one of the most famous ones was when Einstein purportedly asked, "What would the world look like if I were sitting on the edge of a photon of electromagnetic energy traveling at the speed of light"? This presumably led to his famous Theory of Relativity. All of us dream of the day we come up with a question whose answer will have a similar impact.

One day while I was musing over the next question for my mundane progression of queries, my good friend and fellow researcher John stepped into my office. He seemed out of sorts.

“John, what’s wrong? You look as if something is bothering you. Can I help in any way?”

“I’m bored out of my skull. I have been searching for a new beginning since I dropped my latest line of inquiry a month ago. I have come up with absolutely nothing. It seems to me that all the important questions have already been asked or at least those that have any possibility of being solved. If you think about it, we represent the very average researcher. We have never come up with anything really innovative and imaginative. We will continue in this vein until we retire, accomplishing very little. I would love to cause a stir within the hallowed halls of our establishment. I was wondering if you have thoughts about it. After all, you cannot be very happy about your contributions.”

With much astuteness, John had hit a sore point that, for a long time, I had masked with a cheerful façade. I had always been overly concerned with my job security and had never dared ‘rock the boat’. For the first time I was faced with my lack of moral courage. I remained silent for a couple of moments and then decided to reply as honestly as I could.

“John, I have been profoundly depressed by the same outlook as yours. I have never been willing to face up to it. Why don’t we bounce ideas off each other? Maybe we can come up with something audacious enough to cause something more than a mild disturbance. After all, if we had no imagination we would never have gotten our researcher positions.”

We agreed to sleep on it. Actually we did that for a couple of months. During that period we met frequently but to no avail. Then something surprising occurred. I had a dream. Actually it was more of a very vivid nightmare. I found myself as an inmate in an insane asylum where all the rules of reason, logic and mathematical harmony had been discarded and replaced with a total non-rational mentality. I awoke shaking with fear. After all this was completely alien to someone like myself who had always lived by so-called objective reasoning within the rigid rules of deductive and inductive logic. As far as I was concerned that was the only way to achieve either absolute or relative truth.

However this crazy dream planted an idea in my head. I mulled over it for about a week and then proposed it to John. He enthusiastically endorsed it. He felt that it would certainly shake up the establishment. What I advocated was the following: with the aid of our computer we would start by creating a massive database containing nothing that was true. It would consist solely of distorted and totally fictional items posing as facts. Then we would create a computer programmed to be totally irrational, illogical, and using completely invalid mathematics, e.g. $1 + 1 = 3$. We would now have two computers. Our normal computer labeled NC and our abnormal one labeled AC. We would then test the following hypothesis: NC would always give wrong answers whenever it was connected to the phony database. On the other hand, AC would always give unpredictable answers when so connected. In other words, there was a probability, albeit a very small one, that under these circumstances, AC could come up with a correct answer while there was no chance that NC ever would.

This was the hypothesis which we subsequently tested. NC behaved exactly as predicted. However, we were completely caught off guard by AC's responses. Every single one, whether it was linked to the standard or distorted database, was a work of art, be it a painting, holographic sculpture, poem, short story, a musical, theatrical or cinematic opus, in other words an aesthetic response. As far as we were concerned this was an impossible reaction by AC since, as far as we could ascertain, there was nothing in its program that could have produced such a rejoinder. To this day we are at a loss to explain what had occurred.

What we found equally surprising was how we felt when exposed to these works of art. We were totally unprepared for the emotional upheaval they caused. While there did not appear to be any overt relationship between these responses and the questions that had been posed, somehow we felt that there was a deeper truth hidden in our emotional depths. For the first time in my life, I seriously questioned the methodology that I had been imbued with as the sole purveyor of truth. Indeed I even started to question the fundamental nature of 'truth'. All this was most unsettling.

With some misgivings we presented a paper that included all our findings, to the Evaluation Committee of the International Governing Body of Researchers. We had hoped that we would be commended for our original and innovative creativity. The response was quick and very negative. We were informed that we had one week to abandon this line of inquiry and to destroy all vestiges of these endeavors, otherwise we would be stripped of our research positions with all associated benefits together with our computer technology. Obviously, we had become a threat to the established order of things.

John and I agreed that we had no choice but to comply because without the tools of our trade we would be thoroughly useless. However I felt that there was one more question to put to both AC and NC, the ultimate question. Reluctantly, John agreed.

"Is there a prime cause for existence? In other words, is there a God?"

This time the replies took slightly longer than usual. NC's response was that the question could not be answered because there was not enough data and there was no way of knowing if existence had ever had a starting point, "Big Bang Theory or Not". Further there is too much uncertainty associated with all the data that has been accumulated. This agnostic point of view was shared by AC who, for the first time, seemed to agree with NC. It responded with a musical dirge like chant that was continuously repeated,

"I propose
That eternity knows
I suppose."

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