Introduction

Germany has been intensively discussing the topic of plagiarism in doctoral dissertations over the past two years. Starting with the dissertation of the defense minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg in 2011, public documentation of plagiarism now extends to 46 additional works that encompass dissertations, a few habilitations, and a handbook on how to write professionally for law students.

Google

The first step should be to check for possible sources using a search machine such as Google. Good search terms include:

- a sentence from a suspicious paragraph,
- the misspelled word with other nearby words,
- a well-formed phrase, or just
- three to five uncommon words from the same paragraph.

The collaborative and public documentations found on the GuttenPlag Wiki [1], the VroniPlag Wiki [2], and the SchavanPlag blog [3] have led to eleven German dissertations being rescinded. The universities are still examining many of the other cases, sometimes taking more than a year to deliberate. Some dissertations have not been rescinded that have been extensively and publically documented, despite massive word-for-word text parallels that should be considered plagiarism (see in particular the cases Nk, Dd, and Jg on [2]).

The crowd

The three different platforms mentioned above all have different structures. The GuttenPlag Wiki had a core of activists somewhere between 50 and 100 strong. They were helped by an enormous crowd of transitory contributors, who contributed to the effort. They used an Internet Relay Chat (IRC) text chat system for real-time communication and documented the plagiarism found in a commercial wiki run by the San Francisco-based company Wikia.

The VroniPlag Wiki has a smaller core of activists, between 10 and 20 persons, with occasional contributors. They, too, use a chat and a Wikia wiki for documenting purposes. They are still very active, having just published the 46th case in April 2013. The SchavanPlag blog was put up by one individual activist from the VroniPlag Wiki group on a Wordpress blog and was occasionally assisted by persons from that group.

Dissertations to be examined by VroniPlag Wiki are suggested anonymously by the general public, or by a chat room. They are a collection of material submitted and do not make any use of other languages than English.

Obtaining the thesis

German doctoral dissertations must be published in some form or another. They are filed with the German National Library [4] and are kept on deposit in the university library of the university at which the dissertation was submitted, as well as in other libraries throughout Germany. The union catalogue for the national library is an invaluable tool for finding both theses and possible sources.

Reading

Once the thesis has been obtained, the first step should be to read it. As one reads, it is important to be sensitive to the tone and style of the writing.

- Does it proceed smoothly from topic to topic, or does the style jump from journalistic copy to dry scientific writing with interspersed sentences that are not grammatically correct?
- Are verbs missing in a sentence or are there interesting misspellings?
- Is the choice of wording or style not consistent with the author?
- Does the format or font change erratically?
- Are there odd words underlined? These could be links from an online source. Any of these could be a sign of possible plagiarism.

Citations and Links


Contact

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- Portal Plagiat: A collection of material about plagiarism, including the E-Learning unit "Fremde Federn Finden" http://iplagiat.htw-berlin.de (in German)
- Copy, Shake & Paste - A blog about plagiarism and scientific misconduct http://copy-shake-paste.blogspot.de/ (in English)