Original thought, time and technology

The recent scandal involving Timothy Goeglien, deputy director of the White House Office of Public Liaison, serves to illustrate the frightening prevalence of professional recycling of information rather than creation/ writing of original content.

Goeglien, who presented a college publication as his own work is, according to newspaper reports, a habitual plagiarist.

Politicians from Tony Blair to Barack Obama have been accused of plagiarism in recent years. People of this stature obviously don't have time to generate their own material. Instead interns do their research/writing (and by default, their thinking?) for them. How often don't we see a breathless 20-something thrust a cue card with the obligatory six points into VIP hands just before a press conference/interview begins—reactive and frantic responses to the latest opinion polls rather than an original stance on specific issues?

How different would the Goeglien/ White House scenario be from so many of us who run to *Google* as the first point of reference in the search for information? So busy are we that the first few hits just have to do. I am quite sure that many consider this valid research. In the haste for ready answers, is much thought given to who wrote the material or even who posted it? Most professionals lead such fast-paced lives that they have no time to agonize over issues, let alone think out original angles and viewpoints.

Rather than a wonderful tool-kit, the available array of modern information technology is seen as a fool-proof panacea that delivers and shares information on demand. I cannot resist repeating Marshall McLuhan's notion that technology extends, rather than replaces, the wonder of human excellence.

That our own industry favours recycling known information bears some scrutiny. I believe news, programming and artistic accommodation are all negatively affected by safe second-hand information practices.

Take a look at most media reports today—despite diverse political leanings, media outlets carry generic material and photographs all clearly downloaded at the same point. So much quicker to tap into an existing source! Countless articles, seminars, speeches and talks all quote extensively the words of others. How often do we hear the words: "I think/believe..." followed by a truly original statement?

Similarly, entertainment programs and themes that have worked well financially are shamelessly duplicated. Copycat reality shows and an almost *de rigueur* preoccupation with forensics and the paranormal seem to dictate television content. For the most part, if a thought-provoking, cliché/sensation-free film makes it to production and release, it is at best labelled an *art movie* and relegated to the video store shelves.

In the professional development world, template-driven analysis/delivery models that label individuals into easily recognizable and downloadable bytes, seem preferred. Exploratory work with the nuts and bolts of an individual's make-up and real circumstance is oftentimes considered high risk and time consuming.

Similarly, entitlement to the intellectual property of others seems normal. I am often taken to task for not providing seminar material electronically. Recently, one dear soul actually had the gall to tell me: "I am tired of having to scan your work... with electronic material I can just cut and paste the useful diagrams and paragraphs I need for my own presentations". Clearly not ashamed to openly admit a preference for pilfering the work of others rather than developing her own content.

It is no secret that books and articles are often written to meet market demand.

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I have also noticed that most publishers and book reviewers are loath to risk giving an opinion of entirely new or original content. They openly state preference for a recognizable bibliography that enables a quick assessment of content provenance and proven worth. On occasion, paraphrased/recycled material actually garners acclaim and wins awards!

Does this phenomenon have its roots in an academic world, notorious for hobbling student thinking from the outset? How many degrees, significantly at masters/doctorate level, are awarded only if content is kept within the confines of professorial dictate?

How ironic then, that some universities are opposed to students sharing information in the social media forum. More ironic is that they are accused of plagiarism and cheating when all they have done is feed at the common trough.

I guess my point is that time costs money, and thinking takes time. Has time become too expensive for thinking to be accommodated?