

Focus: Elections – regional, national, global

Jochen Zenthöfer

Plagiarism accusations during election campaigns: How should suspicions be reported?

Recommendations for editorial offices when dealing with discoveries by ›plagiarism hunters‹

Abstract: Shortly before an election, the editorial office receives some accusations of plagiarism. What should they do? Report on them or ignore them? This paper provides a structure that ensures that journalists do not become instruments of plagiarism hunters. After all, once reported on, some accusations take on a life of their own; while others later turn out to be false. Accusations of plagiarism have now become part of the political contest. The principles for reporting on accusations are also relevant. Just a few days before an election, absolutely nothing should be reported regarding accusations that cannot be investigated in such a short time. Yet media do not need to wait until a university has made its final decision, either.

Keywords: plagiarism in journalism, plagiarism in academia, reporting on accusations, political contest, abuse of media for political purposes, Germany

Translation: Sophie Costella

Just a few days before the state elections in Thuringia, a state in East Germany, a communication sciences researcher published accusations against the main CDU candidate, alleging that he had committed plagiarism in his doctoral thesis. Accusations of plagiarism are a provocative topic in the public perception, guaranteed to generate a lot of clicks and good audience figures for the media that report on them. This is because, when a doctoral thesis is found to contain

plagiarism, the author can be stripped of their title even decades later – not the case if a dissertation is merely poor in terms of content. Various politicians have resigned in the past when cases of plagiarism came to light, most recently Berlin's CDU Transport Minister in April 2024 (case discovered by: Schimmel 2023). Yet when it came to the accusations against the politician in Thuringia, most media kept quiet. One reason was that initial accusations had surfaced a few weeks before; the university announced an investigation, which led to interest waning. In addition, the second wave of accusations appeared to have been timed with precision: a few days before an election in which the candidate hoped to become Minister-President for the first time. The time chosen to publish the accusations was therefore – perhaps – a deliberate attempt to manipulate a political result. Busy with the final stages of the election campaign, the politician had little chance to defend themselves in depth. The doctoral thesis had been written more than 15 years ago; the papers used for research were unlikely to be close at hand. If media had reported on accusations against which no one could defend themselves shortly before an election, they would have become instruments – viewers would only have been able to hear one side rather than the whole picture.

First accusations of plagiarism for 2025 already signaled

2025 is another election year, and accusations of plagiarism are once again to be expected. In addition, candidates' résumés will once again be checked and their publications, whether academic or not, examined. During the federal election campaign in Germany in 2021, Annalena Baerbock was plagued by ambiguity in her résumé. A wave of scandalization hit her. It was not entirely unjustified – after all, someone who wants to become chancellor needs to be squeaky clean. But in Baerbock's case, correct objections were mixed with misogynistic motives and a hatred of the Greens. Reputable journalists cannot control these effects of their reporting, but they can use robust information and appropriate contextualization to make the progression into fake news, put out by populist groups or Putin supporters, more difficult. The communication sciences researcher named above has since announced new discoveries about German Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, and leader of the Green Party, Robert Habeck. *Overton Magazin* (2024) published an interview with him entitled »Will the ›plagiarism hunt‹ be followed by plagiarism research? Or just by the banishment of the hunters?«. In the interview, he says, »2025 will see another major case involving a top German politician. I want to finally make the prototype for my innovative, intrinsic, text corpus-guided plagiarism software presentable.« Asked »You don't want to reveal the politician's name yet?«, he

replies: »Yes, I do. It's Robert Habeck, but especially a huge amount about his wife and co-author of many years.« The next scandal has thus been signaled. Presumably, at the time of the interview in September 2024, the expert already has material. But he does not want to publish it until 2025, the year of the federal elections – when Habeck will be on the campaign trail.

What matters for journalists

Let us imagine how this case might go. Imagine that the accusations against the Habecks are put out ten days before the federal elections. There are three questions that journalists must consider: 1. Are the accusations against him (and/or his wife) justified? 2. Regardless of the first question: Should the accusations be reported on? 3. When should they be reported on?

I will attempt to answer these three questions below.

Are accusations of plagiarism justified?

Although accusations of plagiarism have played a key role in political reporting for many years now – it was in 2011 that then German CSU Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg resigned due to plagiarism found in his doctoral thesis –, many working in journalism still know little about the judgments and processes behind it. One minor issue is that people regularly and incorrectly talk about the »title of doctor,« even though it is not a title, but an academic degree. Much more dramatic, however, is the lack of ability, observed especially in the tabloid media, to understand and contextualize the accusations.

The first aspect that needs to be considered is the objective facts of the plagiarism case. A case of plagiarism exists as soon as a single piece of information is used without quoting a source. In a piece of academic work, everything that has been taken from someone else must be marked with a source, in full. Placing a footnote at the end of a sentence, when the quote continues in the next sentence, is not permissible, because it does not make it clear to the reader that the other author is also responsible for this subsequent thought. The only information that does not need to be marked is general facts (»water is heavier than air,« »Pina Bausch's dance theater is located in Wuppertal,« »the German Basic Law was approved on May 8, 1949«) and the author's own conclusions, hypotheses, and calls for change. Indications of plagiarism are generally accurate at the level of the objective facts. However, in order to check the accusations conscientiously, a journalist would need to look at the doctoral thesis for themselves. Many of these theses are available online in the catalog of the German National Library; if not,

they can often be acquired through inter-library loans. This can often take many weeks. And there is another problem: Universities assess the theses that are submitted. These may differ from the content of the books that are published later. Books may contain sentences that are not included in the original thesis, perhaps because the candidate was asked to add information before printing. Words of thanks at the start of a book are not part of the doctoral thesis itself, either, and therefore cannot be plagiarized. The Thuringian CDU politician was still accused of four cases of plagiarism in the words of thanks – nonsense.

Tip: When examining accusations of plagiarism, ask to see not only the concordance of the complaints, but also a copy of the entire doctoral thesis. Those checking for plagiarism usually have this in electronic form. If the thesis cannot be provided for copyright reasons, demand to see at least the full text of those passages that contain the alleged plagiarism. Ask whether what you are seeing is the original doctoral thesis or a later publication. The content of the latter may differ from that of the thesis submitted for examination – if so, you must make this clear in your reporting. The original doctoral thesis is usually only available in the library or archive of the university where the examination took place.

In order to rule out negligence due to oversights, the subjective facts must then be checked. This is the intent. The author of the doctoral thesis must have deliberately and knowingly plagiarized. To determine this without doubt, asking the person themselves will not help. Anyone would deny intent. That is why the universities conducting the examinations and ultimately the courts simply presume intent where a certain number of instances is present. Unfortunately, there is no schematic solution and no limit (»more than ten instances of plagiarism = intent«). When it comes to deciding whether to strip someone of their doctorate, administrative courts apply the following criterion: Plagiarism must characterize a thesis in terms of quality, quantity, or both. This is the case where the instances of plagiarism are excessive in relation to the overall length of the thesis. Plagiarism »characterizes the thesis qualitatively if the rest of the dissertation does not meet the content-based requirements of a respectable academic achievement.« Of course, this formula is not hugely helpful for everyday journalism. After all, every case is unique. A plagiarism expert should therefore always be consulted on the question of whether there is intent. Experts like this can be found by looking at who has made statements on plagiarism in the media before. The experts involved in the academic platform »VroniPlag Wiki« are a good place to start (Prof. Debora Weber-Wulff, Prof. Gerhard Dannemann, Prof. Roland Schimmel). Caution: This should not be confused with the commercial service »vroniplag.de« (ZENTHÖFER 2022: 416).

Tip: If you are considering whether the accusations merely refer to tiny cases or oversights, ask an expert! Ideally, choose someone involved in »VroniPlag Wiki« (»VroniPlag« with »Wiki«; vroniplag.de, on the other hand, is a service from a commercial provider). Those involved with »VroniPlag Wiki« will either give an open appraisal on which they are happy to be quoted, or will help you with contextualization behind the scenes.

If accusations are objectively justified and found to exist in such a quality or quantity that intent is present, plagiarism has occurred. However, this does not necessarily mean that a university will strip the offender of their doctorate for a »violation of the principles of good academic practice.« For one thing, universities are able to set their own rules, which might include different requirements for determining the facts of a situation, such as an irrefutable violation of copyright. For a while, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich even set a limit of five years, after which a doctorate could no longer be withdrawn. Furthermore, universities can always use their discretion, for example in considering what stripping the person of their doctorate would mean for their career. If a professor were stripped of their doctorate, for example, in some German states (such as Berlin) that would result in them losing their authorization to teach, which in turn could lose them their position as a civil servant, with huge consequences for their social insurance. But despite all this, how the university sees the case is immaterial for journalistic reporting. After all, they can report on accusations of plagiarism even if no investigation at an academic institution has taken place. Accusations of plagiarism can also be expressed in reviews of non-fiction books.

Tip: Plagiarists often like to point to the fact that universities already check everything. Although this is true, these kinds of checks, especially if they are followed by proceedings in administrative courts, can take years. Editorial offices cannot be expected to wait that long. They can report on a case where there is a clear, valid suspicion of deliberate plagiarism.

Some plagiarists point to the »presumption of innocence.« This phrase, now even found in some university regulations on good academic practice, is nonsense. No one can be innocent of plagiarism, nor can they be guilty. »Guilt« is a specialist term from criminal law and disciplinary law (for civil servants) and unnecessarily moralizes the issue.

Tip: It is best not to speak of the »presumption of innocence« in your reporting.

Should the accusations be reported on?

Where there are accusations of plagiarism, they cannot simply be reported on, even if they appear valid after a cursory look. The principles of reporting on suspicions apply. First, revealing the information must be in the public interest, regarding the deed itself and the identity of the person. This public interest applies in the case of a politician, but not to Robert Habeck's wife. Whether it is permissible to report on the spouse of a candidate for chancellor ultimately depends on weighing up the interest in reporting and the right of personality of the person involved. In the case of Robert Habeck's wife, the right of personality takes precedence. She is not active in politics, but stays in the background, nor does Habeck use her as part of his public image (he does not need to hide his wife, either). The fact that she is an author by profession does not automatically mean that the information is in the public interest. After all, a doctoral thesis is irrelevant for writing novels. Her position as the wife of a politician alone is not sufficient to justify a public interest in reporting on her as a person, either. This would only be different where they have written texts together. In that case, plagiarism must be found in precisely these texts.

If, on the other hand, reporting is in the public interest, a minimum amount of evidence must be present. This is the case where the plagiarism accusations are reasonable and have been cross-checked, either by the editorial office itself or by an expert. Next, the person in question must have the opportunity to comment. They must be given appropriate time for this – a few hours is certainly not enough. Even for well-known figures, a period of at least 48 hours (probably longer) after receiving the request must be assumed, given the complexity of plagiarism accusations and the fact that they often relate to occurrences in the distant past. If the person in question asks for more time, this must be given, as long as it is hours or days. Weekends, including Friday evening, do not count in this calculation. Nothing of this kind must be reported in the last few days before an election, because the risk is too great that the public will no longer be able to check the accusations for themselves and the accused no longer has time to respond conscientiously. Finally, when reporting on a suspicion, it is essential that reporting is truthful and that judgment is not passed on the accused prematurely.

In the case of the allegations against the Thuringian CDU politician, it became clear after the election that at least some of the accusations were not what they first appeared. But this was only discovered after more intensive investigation. For example, the particular way that a book was quoted was criticized. The citation actually was incorrect – but hundreds of other academics had done exactly the same thing over past decades, even at Ivy League universities. Of course it is impossible for an editorial office to recognize this kind of detail in a hurry,

just as the accused is unlikely to immediately remember the point 15 years after receiving their doctorate.

Tip: If the university announces that it will »open proceedings« based on the accusations, this means nothing in itself. After all, the university is obligated to do this. Opening proceedings, specifically receiving a letter or email, is a confirmation of receipt and not official information that makes it essential for a journalist to conduct their own research. The situation is different if a university comments on the content of the accusations (although this is not to be expected before the investigation has been completed).

When should they be reported on?

In the last ten days before an election, accusations of plagiarism against a candidate should be reported only with great care, unless the accused comments in detail on the content of the accusations. Rejecting the accusation and pointing to a university investigation is not a comment on the content that justifies reporting. With accusations of plagiarism, the risk is too great that they will be »kept in a drawer« to be »played« in the media at a specific point in time. Media thus become instruments to boost a political campaign. What matters in the case of plagiarism is the principles of good academic practice; academia itself. Academic topics like this need academic analysis and therefore time. Someone who wants and needs to defend themselves also needs time. In the closing stages of an election campaign, this time is not available. There is an asymmetry: The person making the accusations has an interest in creating a scandal, and always benefits from preparation and the element of surprise – even if the accusations eventually turn out to be largely or entirely untrue. The media need to create symmetry, perhaps by not reporting until after the elections. Even reputable experts would be unable to make well-founded comment on a case within just a few hours.

About the author

Jochen Zenthöfer, Dr. (*1977) has been reporting in media in Luxembourg and Germany on plagiarism in academia and journalism for 15 years, predominantly in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. He is a lawyer and lives in Luxembourg. Contact: zenthoefer@pt.lu

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