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A GHOSTWRITER'S MORAL QUANDARY

WHY WRITING AND AUTHORSHIP ARE NOT THE SAME THING

In 2013, a public relations firm introduced me as "Writer" to several of my first ghostwriting clients. I felt like a fraud. My experience, up until that point, consisted of college history papers and a stint wine-blogging (despite knowing diddly-squat about wine – a story for another time). Nevertheless, clients paid me to name themselves the author of pieces I wrote in their voice.

A few months into this paid identity crisis, the PR firm connected me with a seemingly brilliant client. According to his website, he was an author of best-selling novels (in multiple languages). A singer-songwriter. An Ivy League MBA. A patent-holding inventor. The founder of a publicly traded biotech company. A former CIA man.

This client was developing "geolocation" technology for the online gambling industry. In 2013, if you wanted to gamble in Nevada from a smartphone, the gambling app needed to prove to regulators that you were, in fact, in Nevada. But people could "spoof" their phone's location and thereby trick gambling apps into breaking the law. My client claimed to have the only "unspoofable" geolocation technology – my job was to convince the public.



We began with an article about how to "spoof" geolocation technologies like Wi-Fi and GPS. Then the client assigned me a "white paper," which is tech-speak for a wordy article that feigns intellectual curiosity in pursuit of a predetermined conclusion. The company's head marketer sent notes on my first draft: "Initial feedback from the team is that the whitepaper needs to get more technical...At the moment, reading a bit like spoofing-for-dummies."

That feedback was tough on a self-doubting pseudo-writer, but the marketer hadn't given up on me, yet. To steer me in the right direction, she shared an academic-style paper exploring how to spoof smartphone geolocation systems and, in turn, prevent spoofing. My client's name appeared on the byline. Maybe he really was a genius.

The marketer also shared several documents "for reference," one of which had a similar title to my client's paper. In fact, everything from the abstract, to the conclusion, to the references was identical, only it was authored by four European scholars – none of whom was my client.

Had he plagiarized an academic paper so lazily that his own marketer sent the evidence accidentally? Or was I merely expected to play along? I was pretending to be a writer. My client was pretending to be a scientist. I was pretending to be my client, as I wrote. My client was pretending to be four PhDs in Europe, as he copy-pasted. Who was spoofing whom?

I was faking it 'till I made it. He'd made it, allegedly, but couldn't stop faking it. As a result, a company built to prevent people from spoofing their location was spoofing its CEO's credibility.



There's some irony that as a ghostwriter I drew an ethical line at unpaid, nonconsensual plagiarism. That moment, though, taught me the difference between a writer and an author. Writing words does not make us their author. Placing our name on the byline doesn't make us their author. Authorship means owning responsibility for the origin of the words and their impact on others.

When I wrote my client's opinions, experiences, and stories, I did so believing they were authentic. Which is why the half-cocked plagiarism left me in such disbelief.

We could have written an article citing the four European academics, but the novelist-singer-inventor-CEO-spy wanted to be seen as the author of ideas over which he had no ownership. For that, I fired him. And for the first time, I felt like a real writer.

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