



News Release

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Statement on Published Plagiarism Percentage of Pedro Sánchez' Doctoral Thesis

(COLOGNE, Germany, Sept. 18, 2018) – The Spanish government investigated the recent plagiarism allegations against prime minister Pedro Sánchez and published its results on Sept. 14, 2018. The Moncloa used PlagScan as one of the plagiarism detection tools and released a result of 0.96 percent of plagiarism for Sánchez' doctoral thesis.

After applying the software internally – using the default settings and no filters – PlagScan cannot confirm this number. An initial scan revealed 21 percent of duplicated content. In order to receive a 0.96 percent result, one must have applied specific settings and actively disqualified sources. PlagScan has reached out to the Moncloa in order to gain an insight on the government's procedure and methodology.

“We are not accusing anyone of plagiarism nor are we plagiarism hunters – we are a service provider, assisting our users with the technology,” said Markus Goldbach, the Chief Executive Officer of PlagScan. “Given the publication of this big difference with results from other tools, we were curious to see what could have caused this difference. We are empathic with the government, which had probably been occupied with the case. However, in order to qualify the report, we would have appreciated receiving more detailed information.”

Due to the media reporting on the software's performance, PlagScan spent a significant amount of time to thoroughly investigate the entire plagiarism report after the scan. Various matches in Sánchez' thesis contained false positives. Those are:

- Commonly used phrases that were too long for technology to exclude them automatically.
- Self-plagiarism, for instance, sources that were published by Pedro Sánchez himself.
- Text that was published after the thesis – meaning other authors might have taken content from Sánchez.

Depending on the account configuration and custom filters, the number of false positives can be minimized. Accordingly, a percentage level from a service can only be thoroughly evaluated, if (a) the settings that were applied are known and (b) the findings were reviewed by a human being – ideally an expert in the concerning field.

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“Percentages are relative and a technical software result is just a starting point for further investigation,” Goldbach said. “Human intelligence is absolutely necessary if a text seems suspicious. Artificial intelligence isn’t quite at this point yet. Only humans have the knowledge and competence to actually judge text plagiarism.”

Plagiarism checking tools – no matter which ones – are not almighty applications that identify all plagiarists. Even though the software is time-efficient and highly accurate, it does not substitute for human evaluation. Plagiarism checkers are assisting applications, which simply serve as a support tool in content evaluation.

“PlagScan has the capability to scan numerous documents simultaneously and indicates the amount of duplicated content,” said Johannes Knabe, Chief Technology Officer of PlagScan. “This should be seen as a warning, rather than a final result, and call for further examination by a person.”

The turbulent cases of Montón and Sánchez last week had pushed the issue of plagiarism into the eyes of academics and the public. Educational institutions may want to increase their efforts to eliminate plagiarism at their institutions to prevent further scandals like Montón’s and create a fair standard to prevent plagiarism.

“Our vision is to raise awareness for academic integrity and promote scientific writing skills,” Knabe said. “We hope such high-profile cases can stimulate a public discussion on the general epidemic of plagiarism and lead to broad actions throughout higher education.”

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