Coping with copying*

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If somebody spends several decades in the world of scientific publishing as author, referee and editor, it is difficult to evade certain ethical issues. Researchers are fallible humans, after all, not free of vices like vanity, envy or jealousy. The range is wide from slightly tendentious selection among data to rudely falsified results, from distrait overlooking relevant results of concurrent groups, through cryptomnesia, ‘‘an unconscious plagiarism in which creative ideas expressed as new are actually unrecalled memories of another’s idea’’ (Garfield 1985, p. 407) to straight plagiarism.

The definition of plagiarism enjoys a variety of ranges. In the Oxford dictionary, plagiarism is ‘‘the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own’’. It clearly implies a voluntary act of cheating and dishonesty. For the Webster dictionary, plagiarism is ‘‘the act of using another person’s words or ideas without giving credit to that person’’. The difference between the two definitions is subtle but real: In Webster’s sentence, the interpretation may include an act of negligence or simply an accidental omission. Although not equally unethical, both circumstances are serious offences and constitute copyright infringements.

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The phenomenon is far not new, it can certainly be tracked back to the ancient Greeks or even farther. As contemporary developments, two factors can be highlighted that apparently act in opposing directions.

One is the umpteenth times damned ‘‘publish or perish’’ pressure. Pressure is on the authors to ‘‘produce’’ results by hook or by crook, and this may effectively lower their moral barriers. Pressure is on the referees to keep tight deadlines to give explicit and unambiguous advices even at the cost of less immersion into the topic. And pressure is on the editors to fill the prescribed volume of the journal with articles that will presumably be requested, downloaded, sold and cited in accordance with the Publisher’s aims and scope. This triple pressure obviously increases the chances of the publication of manuscripts of dubious ethical standing.

On the other hand, there is an ever evolving toolkit helping to detect various forms of deviant publication behavior. Text analysis software is able to pinpoint duplicate publications (even in different languages), or similarities in the text of articles of the same or different authors. In the latter case, if the earlier text is not properly referenced, the suspicion of plagiarism can justly be raised. A higher percentage degree of textual similarity may, however, stem from various innocent causes: the abundant occurrence of standard definitions, idiosyncratic methodological descriptions, shared references, etc. The suspicion, therefore, must not lead to automatic verdict. Like bibliometrics for research evaluation, the quantitative measures may help but not substitute careful human deliberation.

In a recent paper, Necker (2014) quantitatively analyses the attitude of economists toward plagiaristic ‘‘misbehavior’’ and the perceived ‘‘pressures’’ as its possible causes. The author concludes: although there is ‘‘a broad consensus among professional economists about the norms that should guide researchers’ behavior’’, ‘‘the extent to which economists admit having employed unaccepted behavior is noteworthy.’’ ‘‘The results indicate that the perception of pressure is positively related to the admission of several research practices rejected by a majority of economists.’’

The above explains the embarrassment of the publishers when confronted with plagiarism: which angle to use to judge the authors? Was the text accidentally duplicated? Was it just copied by easiness and not cited by negligence? Or was it purposely stolen and appropriated?

We hasten to assert: any form of plagiarism is an ethical misdemeanor and is unacceptable. But, as it is justly stressed in a recent Nature note (Chaddah 2014) and in the subsequent comments, the sanctions should be nuanced, and the wrongdoing should be placed in proper framework. It seems unjust to name plagiarism the main evil just because its possible presence can so easily be found even by lay outsiders. Each case must be, of course, carefully investigated by a proper expert body whose expertise is, at the same time, painfully needed to discern other, sometimes more severe, ethical issues that not so readily reveal themselves.

The appreciation is important and any verdict or penalty needs to be firm but weighted. A ‘‘soft’’ sanction may prove ineffective whilst an extreme ruling might sustainably harm the author’s career. In plagiarism, as in criminal cases, the benefit of the doubt is applicable. Quite a dilemma!

It may sound absurd, but plagiarism, however severe offence it is against those deserving credit, appears not to harm the body of scientific knowledge itself. A copy-pasted mathematical theorem remains true, a chemical synthesis method will work even if it was found in an expropriated document. On the other hand, manipulated results, fraudulent evidences, inadequate statistical inferences may cause serious harm if incorporated into the body of knowledge. We can only wish if we would have half as effective tools to unveil them as we have for plagiarism.

Until then, we are like the drunken guy who tries to find his lost key near to the lamp post. Not as if he would have lost it there, but because there is light.

Notwithstanding this approach, it is important to reiterate that Scientometrics is and will be actively fighting plagiarism and that every reported case will be carefully investigated and judged in accordance with the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines. The Editors and the Publishers strongly advise our authors to check any ambiguity before submission, with reference to the COPE chart (http://publicationethics.org/).

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