Editors' view

Plagiarism – please don't copy

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'The propensity of man to imitate what is before him is one of the strongest parts of his nature.'

Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics* (1872)

'Plagiarize,
Let no one else's work evade your eyes,
Remember why the good Lord made your eyes,
So don't shade your eyes,
But plagiarize, plagiarize, plagiarize – Only be sure
always to call it please "research"'

Tom Lehrer, *Lobachevsky*

This column is normally devoted to matters that are reflected in papers published in the print issue of the *Journal* in which it appears. However, on this occasion I have chosen to deal with work that will not appear in the *Journal*, because it bears too strong a resemblance to work that has appeared elsewhere.

Since writing began authors have been copying other authors. The literary aspects of this, with many instructive examples, have been entertainingly reviewed by Thomas Mallon [1]. As he reminds us, some of Chaucer's stories came from Boccaccio and some of Shakespeare's from Holinshed and Plutarch. Examples from science have been carefully documented by, among others, Broad and Wade, in the context of wider concerns about other forms of scientific misconduct [2]. Ptolemy, for example, in the 2nd century, is thought to have used the astronomical observations of Hipparchus in preparing his *Almagest* [3]. Less well studied are the works of the great herbalists, who not infrequently copied text word for word from their predecessors without attribution. In their magisterial study of illustrated herbals, Blunt and Raphael described Gerard's *Herball* (1597) as 'largely unoriginal and often corrupt' [4].

The Latin word *plagiarius* meant a person who abducts the child or slave of another, a kidnapper, and by extension a seducer, although on one occasion Martial used it to mean a literary thief. However, the word 'plagiary' did not enter the English language until some time in the late 16th century – the first instance recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is the adjectival form in 1598. The form 'plagiarism' is slightly later, the first recorded instance being from 1621. Even then, plagiarism, although often noted and complained of, was not considered a great crime. Authors became concerned by plagiary only when their professional status was threatened by it. The Statute of Anne in the UK (1710), for example, provided protection against theft for publishers rather than authors, and the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works was first adopted in Berne, Switzerland only in 1886, following the Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property of 1883. It was ratified, although not fully implemented, by Britain in 1887, and was not even ratified by the USA until 1989.

The recent availability of huge amounts of electronic text has made plagiarism much easier. By the same token, of course, it may be easier to discover. I was once asked to act as an independent arbiter in a case of plagiarism. The text in question dealt with an obscure saint and had been lifted from the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, cross-references and all. When I entered the name of the saint into Google and clicked on 'I'm feeling lucky', the plagiarized text instantly appeared on my screen. The offending student did not feel so lucky. Plagiarized academic texts, however, are not so easy to discover, since most are not available in this way. Learned journals therefore have to rely largely on the vigilance of their editors and referees. They may also be able to use

software designed to detect plagiarized texts and images [5]. However, more scientific texts are being captured all the time. JSTOR, for example, is a repository of many journals that would otherwise be unavailable except in large libraries. The *British Journal of Clinical Pharmacology* and its sister journal the *British Journal of Pharmacology* have recently been completely digitized and all of their archived contents, from volume 1 onwards, will soon be freely available.

Plagiarism of ideas is more difficult to spot. Most scientific ideas come of age at a particular time, in response to the zeitgeist, and most are not original – someone else has thought of them before or is thinking of them at the same time [6]. There is also evidence that plagiarism of ideas can be inadvertent and due to faulty memory [7] or diversion of attention by other tasks [8]. The history of science is replete with famous examples of simultaneous propagation of ideas: Newton and Leibnitz (the calculus), Gallois and Cauchy (group theory), Darwin and Wallace (evolution). Although disputes about priority are not uncommon, as in the case of the discovery of the human immunodeficiency virus [9], only occasionally can an idea be clearly shown to have been stolen from someone else, as in the case of William Withering and Erasmus Darwin – Withering taught Darwin about the beneficial effects of foxglove in dropsies in 1776 and Darwin published the idea without attribution in 1780, 5 years ahead of Withering [10]. The use of other people's ideas in grant proposals is also hard to spot, although deliberate theft is probably rather uncommon [11].

Self-plagiarism is another difficult area [12]. Clearly, publication of one's own data that have already been published (duplicate publication) is not acceptable, since it distorts the scientific record. However, there is no obvious reason why authors should not publish ideas or hypotheses in several different places, in order to advertise them as widely as possible and stimulate debate, although authors who do this would be expected to refer to at least the first publication in which the idea appeared. They would also be expected to seek permission from any publisher to whom they had already yielded copyright, although increasingly publishers are asking authors for a licence to publish and allowing the authors to retain copyright, which is as it should be.

An important question to be asked when plagiarized text is discovered relates to the probity of the data. An author unscrupulous enough to lift text from another may well have falsified the accompanying data (i.e. altered them) or fabricated them (made them up completely). There are statistical methods for investigating

suspicious of this sort [13], although the effort is great and most editors and referees will not be willing to take the time to do it. Editors will therefore reject papers in which plagiarized text appears, without checking the quality of the data. This does mean, however, that plagiaristic authors are free to rewrite their work and present it for publication elsewhere, since it would be a foolhardy editor who accused an author of falsifying or fabricating data without proof, and editors will often content themselves with rejecting the work for publication. But in the end we all rely on the honesty of each other. It is perhaps reassuring in this context that it has been suggested that most research findings are false, for most research designs and in most fields of research [14]. If that is so, falsified or fabricated data will in most cases make little impression.

We have become increasingly sensitive in recent years to the question of plagiarism and other forms of scientific misconduct. A Pubmed search for the terms 'plagiarism' or 'plagiarism' yields more articles published since 2000 (n = 266) than in all previous years put together (n = 249), with year-on-year rises (to 58 papers in 2006). Even so, the total number of papers on the subject is very small. But have we become too sensitive? Although Ian McEwan acknowledged his indebtedness to *No Time for Romance* by Lucilla Andrews (1977) as a source for his novel *Atonement* (2001), some critics dubbed his use of text from her work plagiarism. The debate simmered for a short while but did not linger, and his reputation has not been dented. Other cases make the headlines from time to time, such as the 1997 accusation that the Scottish writer James Mackay may have copied text from Lady Antonia Fraser's biography of Mary Queen of Scots. Plagiarism should certainly be exposed when it occurs. But allegations of scientific misconduct can cause untold trouble to honest authors and most prove to be unfounded [11, 15]; they should not be brought lightly.

What should we do to protect an author's text? Some students and young academics may not recognize that copying other people's work word for word, without proper attribution, is plagiarism [16]; we should educate them otherwise, although a clear definition of what actually constitutes plagiarism is lacking. Editors and referees should try to be vigilant and deny publication to any manuscript that they discover to contain plagiarized text. And if they suspect plagiarism they should implement the procedures laid down by the Committee on Publication Ethics [17].

Note to other editors: please don't copy this – or rather, please do.

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