A Case of Academic Plagiarism

What's to stop someone—desperate to fulfill a publishing quota—from copying an article posted on a publicly available Web page,repackaging it under another byline, and resubmitting it to another journal?

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The publish-or-perish philosophy continues to characterize academic career development in many universities and research centers around the world [6]. Young researchers and university professors are rewarded based on the number of academic publications they produce annually, as well as on the quality of these publications. Quality standards are often determined by the academic ranking of the conference or journal publishing the work. Special importance is given to "recognized" refereed journals, where peer reviews lead to rejection for 80%–90% of all submissions.

Extra pressure is put on university professors in tenure-track appointments to generate a certain number of publications (preferably in refereed journals) [1]. Requirements for the number published and the journal or conference ranking usually depend on the candidate's university and field of research [10]. Some universities grant tenure to candidates with two journal articles; others require more, with at least some in top-ranking journals. Such requirements can be particularly stressful for some candidates.

Pressured to publish to proceed up the ladder, or simply to keep a job, young tenure-track professors may be tempted to cheat their way up through the system. But how can they possibly get away with it? Faking research data is one option, especially when confidentiality prevents disclosure about sources. One famous case of alleged data fabrication involved the British psychologist Cyril Burt. Widely regarded as one of the world's most eminent psychologists, Sir Cyril (1883–1971) was, within a few years of his

death, publicly denounced as having fabricated data to show that intelligence is inherited [3]. His case caused so much controversy that books about his life have variously sought to accuse and exonerate him [5, 7].

Another alternative, apparently pursued by the principal character of the case involving an article I published, is plagiarizing the published work of others. For example, a researcher may submit a nearly identical copy of an article already published in a refereed journal to another journal in a related field. Choosing a journal in a related field, rather than one in the same field, would likely reduce the chance of an overlap of readership—and of being caught. Moreover, using a paper that's already moved successfully through a review process may increase the likelihood it would be accepted for publication again in another journal.

What prevents someone from plagiarizing the work of others, faking data, or both? Not much, as suggested by my experience. The temptation of having to spend just a few hours rather than years of work to fulfill a publication quota can be very strong for some. And holding transgressors accountable for their acts may be more difficult than it would seem. What remains unclear is whether such cases have any chance of gaining the interest of government prosecutors (as regularly happens in especially newsworthy murders, tax evasions by the wealthy, and government corruption). My experience also suggests that few lawyers would be interested in taking plagiarism cases on a contingency basis unless the transgressor's employer is the target—and large amounts of insurance money could possibly be collected.

Two years ago, I found that a paper submitted to a prestigious journal was virtually a copy of an article I had coauthored and published in a well-known research journal several months earlier. I describe here how I learned about the author of this paper, who until recently was a professor of information systems at a prestigious U.S. university. I also describe how I confronted him with the facts and how he reacted. My view of the case's legal aspects is based on my interaction with a number of lawyers. I cover some legal and practical implications for legitimate authors as well as for the academic community.

The Facts

In early 1997, I received an email message from a colleague telling me about a paper he was reviewing on behalf of the associate editor of a prestigious journal covering knowledge-based systems. My colleague mentioned that the paper "heavily referenced" some of my published work on process-based cognition and improvement, conducted while I was doing research for my Ph.D. dissertation.

I replied with a request for more details about the paper. He responded that, although he would probably recommend the paper for publication, he could give no more information due to the confidentiality of the review process. I was curious; being heavily cited in a paper with a chance of being accepted for publication in a prestigious journal was good news and an indication that my Ph.D. research had indeed been useful to someone. Moreover, chances were good the author of the paper and I could collaborate on related future research projects. I decided to try convincing my colleague to at least let me have a peek at the submitted paper.

Figure 1. First paragraph of the "Research Method" section in my article (top) and Plag's paper (bottom).

Cross-sectional research data about 22 instances of business processes was collected and analyzed in the sociotechnical environments of three organizations: a Brazilian plant of Westaflex, an international car parts manufacturer; University (pseudonym), a New Zealand university; and MAF Quality Management (MQM), a semiautonomous branch of the New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Cross-sectional research data about 20 instances of business processes was collected and analyzed in the sociotechnical environments of three organizations in the U.S. apparel industry: a major apparel retail chain, a large apparel manufacturer, and a large yarn producer.

A few months later, I met the colleague, who now told me the paper had been rejected due to its poor fit with the journal's editorial mission and readership. He then offered some information from the associate editor, who had attached the reviewers' comments and the formal rejection letter she had sent the author. The review was extremely detailed, impartial, and very professional.

The associate editor said she had asked three reviewers to read and comment on the paper. Two of them (one was my colleague) had strong business orientations; the other had a more technical orientation. The two business-oriented reviewers praised the paper and recommended acceptance; the other strongly rec-

Figure 2. Processes studied as listed in my article (top) and Plag's paper (bottom).

Process goal	Number of functions	Process type	Organization
Product design	5	Core	Westaflex
Parts manufacturing	4	Core	Westaflex
Order delivery	8	Core	Westaflex
Raw material purchase	6	Core	Westaflex
University course preparation	3	Core	University
University course teaching	3	Core	University
Communication of a pest/disease outbreak	5	Core	MQM
Quality management consulting	5	Core	MQM
University course improvement	8	Improv.	University
Software support improvement	3	Improv.	MQM
Newspaper editing improvement	4	Improv.	MQM
Pest/disease outbreak communication improvement	2	Improv.	MQM
Quality management consulting improvement	6	Improv.	MQM
IT users support improvement	11	Improv.	MQM
Staff training and development improvement	6	Improv.	MQM
Quality inspection of parts/maintenance	3	Support	Westaflex
Plant machinery maintenance	2	Support	Westaflex
Equipment adaptation for new product	3	Support	Westaflex
Software support for users	3	Support	MQM
Internal newspaper editing	5	Support	MQM
IT users support	5	Support	MQM
Staff training and development	5	Support	MQM

Process goal	Number of functions	Process type	Organization
Yarn design	5	Core	Yarn Company
Yarn manufacturing	4	Core	Yarn Company
Yarn Order delivery	8	Core	Yarn Company
Yarn Quality control	6	Core	Yarn Company
Apparel manufacturing	3	Core	Apparel Manufacturer
Apparel marketing	3	Core	Apparel Manufacturer
Just-in-time apparel inventory	5	Core	Apparel Retailer
Merchandising	5	Core	Apparel Retailer
Yarn production improvement	8	Improv.	Apparel Manufacturer
Design quality improvement	3	Improv.	Apparel Retailer
Staffing levels improvement	4	Improv.	Apparel Retailer
Interpersonal communication improvement	2	Improv.	Apparel Retailer
Quality management consulting improvement	6	Improv.	Apparel Retailer
IT users support improvement	11	Improv.	Apparel Retailer
Staff training and development improvement	6	Improv.	Apparel Retailer
Quality inspection of parts/materials	3	Support	Yarn Company
Plant machinery maintenance	2	Support	Yarn Company
Equipment adaptation for new product	3	Support	Yarn Company
Software support for users	3	Support	Apparel Retailer
Internal newspaper editing	5	Support	Apparel Retailer
IT users support	5	Support	Apparel Retailer
Staff training and development	5	Support	Apparel Retailer

ommended rejection because it was not geared toward the journal's target audience, suggesting the paper should instead be submitted to a business journal. The associate editor then reviewed the paper herself, concurring with the technically oriented reviewer. She formally rejected the paper due to the mismatch between the paper's content and the journal's editorial mission.

As soon as my colleague let me see the paper, I noticed the associate editor in her letter to him had not only mentioned the name of the person submitting the paper but included a copy of the paper's first page, which included the title, the name of the person submitting it, and his affiliation. The first page was

stamped "Received Mar. 1, 1997, 104135 0."

I immediately noted the wording was quite similar to the wording in some of my papers; even some phrase constructions and grammatical quirks were the same (for example, I usually refer to data in the singular, as in "the research data was obtained from"). Something was strange. The author of the paper (hereafter referred to as Plag) had apparently written it using large chunks of text from the article I had already published in the journal *The Learning Organization* several months before. I later found out Plag had used a version of the article whose electronic version was available from my Temple University Web page.

I then checked my publications until I found *The Learning Organization*, vol. 4, no. 2, published by MCB Press, Bradford, England, early in 1997, with my article, "The Nature of Data, Information and Knowledge Exchanges in Business Processes: Implications for Process Improvement and Organizational Learning"; my coauthors were Bob McQueen and Jim Corner, both at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. Comparing this article with Plag's submitted paper, I found about half of the sentences in both to be almost exactly the same.

THE TEMPTATION OF having to spend just a few hours rather than years of work to fulfill a publication quota can be very strong for some.

My article was based on research data collected over several years from three organizations, one in Brazil, the other two in New Zealand. Figure 1 shows the first paragraph of my article's "Research Method" section and that of Plag's "Research Method" section. A few paragraphs earlier in Plag's paper, it said "actual names of companies have been disguised for the sake of confidentiality."

Of the 51 paragraphs in Plag's paper, 38 were nearly sentence-by-sentence, word-for-word copies of paragraphs from my article. The order of the paragraphs in Plag's paper was nearly identical to that in my article. Three paragraphs in Plag's paper were partial copies of paragraphs in my article, from which approximately half the sentences had been copied verbatim.

All but one of the references in Plag's "References" section (the exception was a paper by Plag) were identical to the references in my article, including those to a book and a manual in Portuguese I had written two and four years before, respectively. I wrote the manual for a course on quality management I taught in Brazil; getting a copy from anyone but me would be difficult, and I had never received a request for it from Plag or sent him a copy.

Four of the five figures in Plag's paper were nearly identical to those in my article, including a flowchart with 12 symbols; the symbol shapes (such as square and oval) and their relative locations in Plag's flowchart were identical to those in my article.

The two tables in Plag's paper were nearly identical in shape and content to those in my article, including one showing the processes about which research data had been collected under the caption: "Table 1. General description of the processes studied." Plag's paper also had a table listing the processes studied, under the caption: "Table 1. Distribution of business processes studied." Note that, even though Plag's paper claims that 20 business-process instances are analyzed, his table shows 22 processes—the same number analyzed in my article (see Figure 2).

Good research papers usually include a section in which the authors seek to show they understand the limitations of their research. The section often warns the reader about possible sources of bias in the research, problems that could have arisen from the data collection and analysis methods used, and limitations on the extent to which the research findings can be generalized. In an apparent attempt to maintain such conventions, Plag's paper included the following warning in its section "Limitations of the Research":

> "It is important to point out that this research investigated business processes in the U.S. apparel industry and hence research findings may be limited to the apparel industry. Other correlations and relationships may emerge in other industrial (e.g., electronics, pharmaceutical, insurance), national or international organizations. These limitations call for further empirical research in other industries and settings."

I showed Plag's paper and my article to a number of close friends and colleagues; their advice on what I should do ranged from "Forget about it, this guy is going to be caught sooner or later anyway" to "Sue him for theft of intellectual property."

The colleague who had reviewed Plag's paper now

read my article, noted the striking similarities between them, and sent an email to the associate editor of the journal to which Plag had submitted his paper, informing her about the potential copyright infringement. He also faxed her a copy of my article for comparison. At my request, he asked her not to take any action until I had carefully analyzed the legal implications of the case and gathered more information about Plag. Most important, I wanted to make sure Plag had submitted the paper himself, as opposed to someone's having submitted it under his name. I reasoned that someone might have done so as a joke or as a deliberate attempt to undermine Plag's reputation.

Who Is Plag?

Plag's paper cited his affiliation with a department of a large U.S. university. I checked the Web page of his department, saw Plag's name listed as a faculty member, and downloaded his personal Web page from there.

Plag's page had several sections, starting with his contact information and address. Its "Background" section listed three degrees: doctor of philosophy from a prestigious U.S. university, MBA, and B.Sc. in mechanical engineering. There was also the following statement:

> "My involvement with information technology at both the operational and executive level in leading Fortune 500 companies has equipped me with an acute awareness of and sensitivity to the importance of information systems in organizations.
> "Standing on the threshold of the 21st century and well entrenched in an information age, I feel very privileged to be in the midst of this tumultuous and exciting era of change. As a trained IS professional anchored in a strong academic setting, I perceive for myself a dual role of integrating IS with other areas of knowledge and bridging the 'terrestrial gap' between theory and application of IS."

The "Publications" section listed several papers that had been published or accepted for publication. Among them were eight journal articles, one refereed book chapter, and 24 conference proceedings papers. Also listed were four articles under review and 10 working papers. Among the refereed journal publications, six listed Plag as the sole author. The other two journal papers listed coauthors; their dates ranged from 1995 to "forthcoming" (this was 1997). Of the 24 conferencing proceedings papers, 20 listed Plag as sole author, and the other four listed coauthors; their dates ranged from 1994 to 1997.

These publications suggested that Plag had published on a good number of topics from 1994 to 1997, including reengineering, strategic information systems, software testing, the Internet as a strategic tool, client/server systems adoption, global supply chains, software procurement, system development methods, organizational behavior, global information technology infrastructure, object-oriented systems development, neural network design, heterogeneous and multidimensional databases, and information systems outsourcing.

Plag's page's "Awards and Honors" section listed eight awards or honors, including "Best Dissertation International Award" followed by the name of a prestigious international conference (one I personally regard as the top conference in the information systems field). When checking for confirmation about the award, I indeed found it listed on the conference's official "Awards" Web page, which included all the awards granted since the conference's inception.

HE APOLOGIZED ONLY FOR IS "grave mistake"—too vague to be viewed as valid from a legal perspective.

Legal Advice and Implications

I next sought legal advice. I was looking not only for guidelines on how to proceed but the likely legal implications for both Plag and me. Over the next three months, I contacted 12 lawyers by phone and in person.

Initially, I contacted lawyers specializing in patents and intellectual property in general, but these contacts were frustrating, as I had to explain the details of my situation to each of them, only to be told they could not help me. Some expressed surprise; a few pointed out right away that (in the words of one), "There doesn't seem to be much money in [this case]." Some of them recommended caution dealing with Plag, saying, "He seems to have a lot more to lose than you do." I concurred; if Plag really wanted to pursue an academic career, he would do whatever

he could to discredit an accusation of academic plagiarism.

Later, one lawyer specializing in intellectual property told me I could always contact Plag directly and request he financially compensate me for the distress caused by his actions. He viewed my case as strong enough for me to win in court easily and believed Plag was probably aware of that outcome. He told me to make it clear to Plag I was seeking an amicable solution and to say I had no intention of suing him if it wasn't necessary. He added that I should cut a deal with Plag; it would scare him so much he would never plagiarize anything again. The lawyer also told me he could not represent me if the case went to court, as he only took cases involving corporate disputes.

Still later, I called the Philadelphia Bar Association's lawyer referral service. The lawyer answering my call said I should contact the bar association of my township (I live in New Jersey near Philadelphia). Because my house was near the border of two townships, I had to contact two bar associations. When I found the right one and called, I was told I should try the Philadelphia Bar Association again, asking specifically for a lawyer licensed to practice in Pennsylvania (where I work) and New Jersey (my state residence). I did so and was given a name. In the meantime, I was referred by a friend to another lawyer who was also a university professor.

In my phone conversations with lawyers from the bar associations, I was strongly advised to seek financial compensation from Plag. In the words of one, "This is your only option in this case," meaning there were not many other avenues through which I could seek justice in the U.S. legal system. However, this lawyer also told me that contacting Plag or someone close to him directly and making allegations about the submitted paper might prompt him to countersue me for harassment and slander. Since Plag was in a different state in the U.S., chances were I would have to hire a different lawyer to defend me in that state if Plag sued me for such offenses.

I met with the lawyer who was also a university professor. Although she agreed something should be done, her advice was filled with caveats, such as I would probably be doing myself a favor if I concentrated on something more productive than going after Plag. She pointed out that Plag would probably deny any wrongdoing and attack my reputation as a form of defense. "Believe me," she said, "this can turn into a bloody battle where there will be no winners."

I also met with an aggressive young lawyer, whose advice was quite different. He felt I had a strong case, given the similarities between the paper and the article, the fact that my article had been published before Plag submitted his paper, and the formal nature of his submission (including Plag's name, affiliation, and signature). He also felt I should not sue Plag directly, as Plag would probably file a lawsuit against me for defamation. The most appropriate tactic, according to this lawyer, was to sue Plag's employer. Not only would this guarantee financial compensation, as the lawyer felt Plag's university probably had some sort of collective professional liability insurance, it would also ensure that the university itself would take disciplinary or legal action against Plag. In a sense, this was probably the most pragmatic advice I had received so far. But I was not sure whether it would be ethical to sue Plag's institution.

After thinking further, I decided to contact Plag directly. I was determined to get a written apology from him as well as financial compensation for the time I had spent on the case.

Contacting Plag

On July 24, 1997, I called Plag from my office at Temple University. I introduced myself and told him I had a copy of one of his papers. I described some of its details, including its title and the journal it was submitted to. I then asked whether he had submitted it himself; he answered that he had.

I then mentioned the incredible similarity between his paper and my published article. He denied any wrongdoing, telling me the similarity was just coincidence. I told him I didn't think so and wanted him to send me a written apology. I also told him I wanted to be compensated for the time and distress the incident had caused me. He still insisted he had done nothing wrong. Later that day, he sent me an email, including:

"I am extremely sorry for my mistake. I sincerely apologize for this grave mistake. I will not do this again. I promise. As required by you, I will fax you an apology letter to you today. I kindly request you not to take any further action. I am still on student visa and I come from a poor family. I have worked very hard all my life to be in this position. I have a family and kids. If you take any action, my whole life will be ruined. I may have to end my profession. Please, I beg you. I will be eternally grateful to you if you pardon me this last time. I assure you that I will not commit this mistake again.

"Please, at least for my family sake, do not take any further action. Both my family and I will be ever very thankful to you."

In an apology letter he later faxed to me, Plag never mentioned what he was apologizing for. As in his

email, he apologized only for his "grave mistake"—too vague to be viewed as valid from a legal perspective. Plag could later claim, if the matter for some reason went to a court of law, that he had apologized for something else—unrelated to plagiarism. Although my intent was not to ruin anyone's life or career, I wanted Plag to apologize for using my published article in his paper. I wanted him to send me a signed letter; the letter he faxed me was not signed. I stated these points clearly in an email I sent to him a few days later. On July 28, Plag sent me another email, including:

> "I have taken some time from my busy schedule and investigated your accusations regarding my article. I am wrong to have apologized without investigating the matter myself. Now I have ample evidence to prove that my work was not plagiarized from any published/cited source. I have consulted a top attorney who is ready to take up the matter in court if you still plan to defame me on false grounds. In fact, my attorney suggests I file a 'defamation suit' to claim damages for tainting my 'outstanding research record.' It is unfortunate that you have managed to prey on my 'trusting' nature and caused me and my family lot of heartburn, physiological, and psychological problems since last week. I am willing to forget and forgive this if you recognize this error. Some of the senior colleagues in the field have also encouraged me to take a legal course if you still insist on pursuing this case.
> "I would like to rest this matter with this message. I would appreciate your reply; if not, I will assume that you are intent on 'defaming' my career and family and will proceed with my attorney's recommendations on the legal course of action open to me."

This email made me quite angry. In my reply, I said that if he thought he could sue me successfully, he should go ahead and do so. I pointed out that in a defamation suit, he would have to prove that my allegations were false—impossible for him, given his formal submission of a paper whose earlier publication by other authors was well documented.

His threats were frightening for at least one reason: The U.S. legal system does not require Plag or anyone else to automatically pay the legal expenses of the person sued if a lawsuit is unsuccessful. If a suit's winners so wish, they must sue later to recover their expenses but then might be facing an appeal of the first decision that can be considered a new lawsuit by itself. Unlike those of other countries (such as England), the U.S. legal system does not include the rule usually known as "the loser pays." The only exception is the state of Alaska [2]. This characteristic of the U.S. legal system may encourage someone in Plag's situation to sue first, then appeal as many times as possible to buy time (possibly until tenure is decided). This tactic could also be used to force the other party to abandon the case in the face of mounting legal bills. I consulted a lawyer about legal costs if a lawsuit were filed against me and was told my legal defense could easily cost me $10,000–$20,000. I was also told there was a good chance I might also have to defend myself in Plag's home state, thus adding transportation, communication, and other related costs to my defense.

I WAS NEVER CONTACTED BY Plag's university directly or given any satisfaction about how it had dealt with his claims against me.

Regarding Plag's threats, yet another lawyer told me it was unlikely that Plag would sue me, saying, "If [Plag] was really planning to sue you, he would have already done so." Although this comment was reassuring, I almost regretted having written my article in the first place. The whole situation had become inconvenient and distressful. Then on July 31, I received a long email from Plag, saying, in part:

> "I am writing this to you on the advice of some senior faculty in the field with the hope of resolving this amicably.
> "It is very unfortunate that two promising researchers should find themselves in this peculiar situation. Though the ideas represented in our papers are similar, I can truthfully say that I did not come across your 'in press' papers during my literature search. Had I come across them I could NOT have pursued this research. I can sincerely say that the motivation for the study came from unpublished sources on the Internet.
> "Some of my mentors who are very senior in

the field opine that this may be a coincidence and I have done the right thing in apologizing and that we should be laying this matter to rest as no credit has been taken away from you. I have been told that unintended cases such as this have happened in the past, but have been settled amicably without any talk/threat of legal action. These senior faculty feel that if you indeed take any such action, the credibility of the MIS field would be itself shaken, and they feel they would not be able to forgive us if we end up jeopardizing the future of MIS when we are fighting to stay credible in the eyes of the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business. I agree with their wisdom and advice because I believe that the interests and future of MIS is of overarching importance. I fear to think of the consequences and our futures if we end up jeopardizing all these years of hard work and hope that these visionaries have had for the rest of us. I fervently hope that we don't let them down. We could rise up to the occasion if only we put our heads together and settle this matter.

"Though you may not feel this way, I am still your well-wisher and I would hate to see a dark shadow cast on your future because of one irrational moment. Our academic community is very tightly-knit here in the U.S. and during my stint here I have learned how important the image of the field is in the overall scheme of things and that we shouldn't wash our dirty linen in public and jeopardize that. I have been fortunate to have the blessings of 'powers-that-be' in the field as my mentors. And I can honestly say that they do not like the course that this issue is taking. So in my humble opinion, I think it would be in our best interests to lay this matter to rest and get on with our lives.

"On a personal note, since we share some common research interests, I propose that we could collaborate on future research projects. Currently I am teaming with some very senior faculty in leading U.S. schools in a variety of research and consulting projects. We are forming a consortium to address a variety of issues and I could perhaps recommend you if you are interested in this. This would give you a lot of visibility and opportunity to climb greater professional heights. I cannot reveal the nature of these projects at this juncture, but if we can definitely explore these and other opportunities once this dust settles down."

I never replied, but given the reference to "senior faculty in the field of MIS," I decided to show the evidence I had been collecting to several senior researchers and faculty in departments of information systems at several universities in and outside the U.S. I figured that at some point I would be attending an international conference where these people would likely be gathered, an opportunity that came in August 1997 in Indianapolis, during the Association for Information Systems Americas Conference (AIS97). As for their reactions, all those I spoke with were outraged by what they saw. Many suggested I take the case to a public forum, others that I just wait, as word was spreading quickly and would eventually reach Plag's university.

I also contacted several representatives of academic and research associations in the information systems field. I showed them the evidence of plagiarism, requesting that disciplinary action be taken against Plag. In all cases, I was told no action was possible for one reason or another. The reasons were essentially the same: The associations lacked provision in their budgets for possible defensive lawsuits by Plag against them.

Short-term Consequences

A few weeks after returning from the conference, I was told by a senior academic colleague that he had contacted a faculty member in Plag's department, telling him about the evidence I had shown at AIS97. Later in the week, I was told by another colleague I met at AIS97 that Plag, when faced with the facts by his immediate supervisor, had accused me of plagiarizing his work.

I then asked the editor of *The Learning Organization* and representatives of MCB Press for help. MCB Press is the rightful owner of my article's copyright. After I faxed them the evidence about Plag's paper, they contacted Plag directly through a formal letter. Under U.S. copyright law, Plag could face severe penalties for what he did, including financial statutory damages. These, according to [4], could involve the following:

> "For a work that is registered, the author may receive statutory damages of up to $100,000 for each willful infringement, without having to actually prove what her [or his] damages were; that is the meaning of statutory damages—those damages provided by statute regardless of actual damages, which are hard to prove in most cases."

MCB requested a signed letter from Plag apologizing for what he had done. Plag quickly sent MCB such a letter; I received a copy. It was important for

me to have a copy as a future deterrent to lawsuits Plag might want to file against me—as a practical legal tactic or for revenge.

In September 1997, a colleague told me Plag had resigned from his assistant professor position, a fact later confirmed in an email Plag's immediate supervisor sent to several faculty who had inquired about the case. This email said Plag had resigned due to family and health reasons and his resignation had been accepted by his institution. However, I was never contacted by Plag's university directly or given any satisfaction about how it had dealt with his claims against me.

Meanwhile, another colleague told the university that had granted Plag his Ph.D. about his actions, prompting a full internal inquiry into his doctoral work. To my knowledge, this inquiry was continuing at press time.

No Unequivocal Right to E-files

Plag's case begs a basic question: Although posting files on a Web page can help disseminate academic results, are such files safe? Many publishers of scholarly journals act as if posting their content is a reasonably safe way to advertise their publications and disseminate scholarly work [8]. On the other hand, another recent case involving freelance writers reveals U.S. copyright law does not provide a way to unequivocally determine rights on material published electronically [9].

Based on my experience, making paper files available electronically may make it easier for someone to plagiarize them. But the same papers can be scanned and easily turned into text files with standard optical character recognition software or manually copied word for word from a publication's printed version. Moving away from the Web as a distribution medium for academic papers would not solve this problem.

Internet-based distribution of papers may make plagiarism easier, but it also makes it easier to catch a plagiarist, for at least two reasons: Electronic access to files in Web servers can often be traced back to the Web clients from which the files were downloaded, and downloading files from the Web for use in new submissions increases the chance that vital information and patterns in the text structure can be traced back to the original author(s). As in my situation, examples include peculiar grammatical constructions, symbol shapes in figures, and difficult-to-find references—all available in abundance in Plag's fraudulent paper. Also note that the same general platform Plag used to get my article—the Internet—was also the means for me and others to react quickly.

Plag could have put up quite a battle and caused me lots of trouble—if he had really wanted to and if he could have afforded to. He would not have had to do much more than hire a good lawyer who knew how to work expertly within the bounds of the U.S. legal system. After a while, chances are I would have found myself alone in my battle against him. From my conversations with colleagues, lawyers, and others, I inferred that many people would have tried to hold Plag accountable for what he did, though many would have given up to avoid further legal trouble and expense.

Perhaps the best way to prevent cases like Plag's from being more common than they are is to publicize and discuss them as widely as possible. They can be used to initiate debate on academic plagiarism and its implications for the emerging field of information systems research. This debate should include at least one important subject—establishment of ethics committees in the various associations of systems researchers—to bring some measure of justice to the people involved. Maybe other fields will follow suit; the problem certainly does not belong exclusively to the field of information systems. C

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