

Plagiarism: cutting out cut-and-paste jobs

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These days it's so easy to copy and paste. You might say it's as easy as "ctrl-c, ctrl-v". There is no speciality, field or medium into which this problem—which in its worst forms constitutes plagiarism or copyright theft—does not extend, and it could well be on the rise now that we live in a 'copy-and-paste' culture. Ironically, however, the solution might well lie in the source of the problem: ready access to electronic data.

In June 2008, a new antiplagiarism initiative, CrossCheck® (Publishers International Linking Association, Lynnfield, MA), was launched by CrossRef®—a nonprofit organization that has a cross-publisher linking service. Unlike previous plagiarism detection tools, which are limited by what content individual systems have access to, CrossCheck® allows publishers to check their own content against that within the CrossCheck® database. In return for access to this collective database, publishers will permit CrossRef® complete access to their manuscript databases. For the first time, academic publishers will have a shared database that will contain full-text, archived articles that have already been published. The system will be able to alert editors to any overlapping text within the new database, as well as being able to check whether text has been paraphrased from other sources. So, why is having this new scheme so important?

Whether plagiarism is on the rise or not is difficult to tell. When there is even a murmur of plagiarism, particularly in the candid field of scientific research, the media can be quick to splash it across the headlines, causing substantial damage to the reputations of anyone involved. No wonder plagiarism is under-reported, and this could explain why some journals and universities seem to be guilty of resorting to lax and discreet warnings

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and the quiet rejection of papers. With the amount of research and papers that come through journal doors, actively searching for plagiarism really is impossible; any finding is pure chance. Investigation into plagiarism, whether substantiated or not, can be extremely damaging to authors and consumes resources that would be much better directed towards research or editorial tasks. The relationship between author and editor is based purely on trust, and it is essential that the continued threat of plagiarism does not diminish this trust. Similarity between ideas and text is unavoidable and inevitable in academia, but if systems like CrossCheck® can highlight the extent of overlap, editors will be better able to judge whether plagiarism was intentional.

Electronic policing tools will not, by any means, stop plagiarism. This activity will happen, just like crime does on the streets, despite any measure that is taken to try and prevent it. However, these systems should help editors to detect plagiarism efficiently and effectively and, together with universities sanctioning authors appropriately, will help to stop reoffenders and reduce the incidence of plagiarism and redundant publication. Antiplagiarism devices will extend the safety net provided for editors and researchers, and collectively for universities and journals, by various organizations, such as the UK Committee on Publication Ethics, the World Association of Medical Editors and the US Office of Research Integrity. Antiplagiarism initiatives have the potential to protect and support public confidence and scientific research, improving the academic integrity of our journals and upholding the reputation of our contributing authors. Now, researchers can continue to be consumed with medical research and editors can focus on editing, just as it should be.