Editorial

Plagiarism, copying, imitation: an increasingly unavoidable issue

The article "Editorial Ethics: Fraudulent Arbitration" [1] by Ernesto Spinak, published on the *SciELO in Perspective* blog on 20 February 2015, highlights the growing problem of plagiarism and describes new ways of fooling automated plagiarism controls, which are generally unable to effectively evaluate the content of articles [2,3]. According to the text, *an almost handmade procedure is sufficient* to overcome plagiarism detection software:

1. Take the text of your article and proceed to plagiarism control with one of the classic software programs (iThenticate, Turnitin, Urkund, or any other).

2. The result will be a document with a series of observations on the parts of your text recognized as plagiarism.

> *2.1. Modify the paragraphs marked as suspicious, changing the order of a few sentences, making paraphrases, or using synonyms;*

> *2.2. Another procedure is to translate the text into another language using Google and returning the translation. For example, write in English, translate into Portuguese, then in Spanish, and finally back to English.*

3. Return to step (1) until the text appears without comments.

4. If there are no comments, then your text will not be considered plagiarism by the control software [1].

This process consists of verifying what, exactly, the programs identify as plagiarism, and then adopting methods to disguise the copy. A simple way to achieve this is to translate the work into different languages a number of times, in order to disguise the expressions used by the author, with each new version being increasingly distant from the original. The use of automatic translation tools has made this task, which would otherwise require considerable linguistic ability, much easier.

This adulterated translation technique, facilitated by open access web tools, has been practiced for decades. Until recently, however, its use was limited by the difficulty an ordinary reader faced when translating the original text from one language to another and back again. While much practiced, the approach did not become widespread until the advent of the internet, when suddenly programs offering instant translation into 90 languages appeared, and millions of articles became available for consultation. The popular use of the internet has confirmed the existence of authors from all specialties who use the translation technique to "create" their scientific articles or book chapters.

The article by Spinak also explains how, if the translation is not sufficiently removed from the original to confuse the plagiarism identification programs, the so-called authors often rework sentences by changing the order of words and by replacing the most striking terms with synonyms. What Spinak does not say, but what the editorial experience of those involved in this publication has shown, is that, even if these procedures fail to avoid the identification of plagiarism, the plagiarists simply cite the copied original, establishing a type of *literary pastiche* [3,4], which makes the identification of a copy difficult. This maneuver tends to confuse the reader, as it is based on the presupposition that two "authors" would naturally use common terms and similar language to describe the same subject.
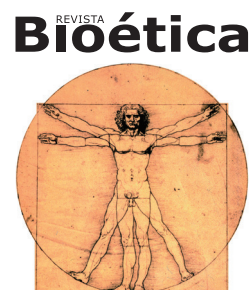
While the issue of plagiarism dates from Ancient Times [3], a number of studies have argued that the practice is currently growing, causing increasing concern among the academic community: *a plagiarism audit carried out on 285,000 scientific texts (…) retrieved more than 500 documents which were most likely plagiarized, along with another 30,000 documents (20% of the collection) which showed strong indications of excessive self-plagiarism* [5]. Despite such alarming numbers, we would suggest that it is difficult to state with certainty that the practice of plagiarism is growing.

What can be said with confidence is that, before the internet, it was more difficult to identify copies, whether created through plagiarism or self-plagiarism. In fact, until recently the idea of self-plagiarism barely even existed. An author generally considered what he or she had written as his or her "production", which could subsequently be used as he or she pleased, even through the reproduction of entire passages. Indeed before the issue of academic plagiarism came to be identified and discussed in Brazil, authors would be offended when it was pointed out that they had reproduced the same extracts in a number of works. It is only in recent decades that the culture surrounding scientific output has undergone a process of change, and issues of plagiarism and self-plagiarism have begun to be tackled more effectively [6].

Until recently, it was only possible to spot similarities between texts through a systematic literature review, which was usually performed manually in post-graduate academic works, meaning that the identification of plagiarism was restricted to the most obvious of cases. Such literature surveys were organized only to register the studies which had been read, which made the identification of plagiarism difficult, due to problems with obtaining and collating the original documents. The fact that online translation did not exist also made identifying copies difficult, as interpretation of the original was subject to the vocabulary and language skills of each reader. It was therefore an extremely complex task to check for the copying of content, which greatly facilitated the unscrupulous actions of those seeking to take advantage of the work of others.

The emergence of the internet, however, has changed this situation dramatically. With journalistic and academic material now available online, a systematic verification of plagiarism can reveal copied extracts, simply by using Google. Even without using a plagiarism detection program, the misappropriation of the work of others, and reproductions by an author of his or her own work, can be easily identified.

In the case of the former, it has become easier to identify plagiarism by the differences between well-written extracts and other, less competently produced sections, as well as through the awkward use of words and phrases that link sentences, alerting the attentive reader to the fact that something does not "sound right" in the text. Meanwhile it has become easier to identify self-plagiarism by searching for phrases and words that, in some cases, reveal the existence of more than one study by an author that uses the same ideas and vocabulary, without reference to such previous versions being made.

Yet identification of plagiarism remains a challenge. Those wishing to deceive not only their peers but also the wider academic community have perfected the process of obtaining material that they then pass off as their own, as described above in the description of how to carry out plagiarism [1]. At the end of his text, Spinak ponders, like other authors before him, whether it would not be less work for the plagiarist to write the article him or herself, considering all the subterfuges and artifices required to copy the ideas of others (not forgetting the fact that he or she runs the risk of being penalized for such a crime).

While this editorial does not aim to provide a conclusive answer to this question, it is worth remembering that this form of plagiarism can be performed by anyone with even a basic command of online translation programs and plagiarism detection software, and, for whatever reason, feels that he or she does not have the ability or time to write an original article. Furthermore, the plagiarist may delegate a substantial part of the task of "production" of his or her academic research, especially the translation, identification

and alteration of a copy, to others. The existence of an increasingly lucrative and unscrupulous market for the buying and selling of academic works means that sometimes people working as assistants to a plagiarizing author are involved in performing these tasks. It is also possible that many such individuals are not aware of the ramifications of their actions, but believe they are simply following instructions.

Today plagiarism is being identified more and more frequently, and is classified as a fraudulent procedure that offends the ethics of authorship and breaks the rules of academic production. The practice occurs in all areas of scientific knowledge, with plagiarized work appearing in articles, book chapters, paragraphs and sentences in final coursework, dissertations and theses. Accusations of plagiarism, whether by paraphrasing or the copying of content, are still unusual in Brazil. This increases the value of scientific publications, while at the same time undermining the relevance of academic papers (such as term papers, dissertations or theses) where the identification of plagiarism may harm the reputation of the author, his or her academic advisor, and even the academic institution itself. That the law of the jungle and the pact of silence still dominate within the governing bodies of universities has a direct impact on the decision of whether or not to combat plagiarism.

Faced with this situation, the task of scientific publications – such as *Revista Bioetica* – is clear: to draw attention to and tackle the problem of plagiarism, by clearly identifying suspected cases, stimulating debate on the subject and educating the academic community about the ethics of knowledge production. It is exactly because of this that we are adopting a second plagiarism identification mechanism, which we hope will greatly reduce the chance of our publishing plagiarized work. We are aware, however, that even with these precautions, there is a possibility that something may slip through the net. Therefore we once again urge our writers and contributors to continue to carefully evaluate their manuscripts, something which has been essential in improving the quality of published works and encouraging reflection on the subject of ethics in Brazil.

The editors

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