Detecting and (not) dealing with plagiarism in an engineering paper: beyond CrossCheck – a case study

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Abstract: In papers in areas such as engineering and the physical sciences, figures, tables and formulae are the basic elements to communicate the authors' core ideas, workings and results. As a computational text-matching tool, CrossCheck cannot work on these non-textual elements to detect plagiarism. Consequently, when comparing engineering or physical sciences papers, CrossCheck may return a low similarity index even when plagiarism has in fact taken place. A case of demonstrated plagiarism involving engineering papers with a low similarity index is discussed, and editor's experiences and suggestions are given on how to tackle this problem. The case shows a lack of understanding of plagiarism by some authors or editors, and illustrates the difficulty of getting some editors and publishers to take appropriate action. Consequently, authors, journal editors, and reviewers, as well as research institutions all are duty-bound not only to recognize the differences between ethical and unethical behavior in order to protect a healthy research environment, and also to maintain consistent ethical publishing standards.

Key words: Plagiarism, Engineering and physical sciences, CrossCheck, Journal editors

1. Plagiarism detection in engineering and physical sciences papers

CrossCheck is a powerful tool that enables editors to compare the text of a paper against a large database of published academic literature, as well as against material freely available on the internet (www.crossref.org/crosscheck.html; Garner 2011; Wager 2011; Baždarić et al. 2012). However, almost all plagiarism detectors, such as CitePlag, CrossCheck and PlagScan (Abdelmoneim 2010), can only decide whether a given body of scanned text exceeds a threshold of similarity when compared to another body of text (Garner et al. 2012); human judgment is still needed to make the final decision on whether plagiarism has actually taken place. Furthermore, materials copied from other papers may have been reworded, or paraphrased, making any plagiarism difficult to detect by text-matching. Specially, in engineering and physical sciences papers, there is the added complication that non-textual elements - figures, tables, formulae and, more recently, videos and audio files - are often the basic elements that directly communicate the authors' ideas, concepts, methods (especially algorithms), data, results and inferences of a study. Such non-textual material may represent a significant portion of the content of a paper, even main

intellectual component (Bouville 2008). Thus, any plagiarism can only be found by examining and comparing these elements, as well as the text.

As Morris et al. (2013) indicated that copyright provides the legal underpinning for much of what journal publishing does, Brinkman (2013) and Wager (2011) also stressed that the invention of various detecting tools is aimed at help journal editors protect copyright and safeguard academic integrity. Recently, due to the research grant of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) with the aim of developing evidence-based guidance for journal editors on how to deal with different kinds of plagiarism detected through the use of CorssCheck (COPE, December 2010), we have conducted several research surveys and published a few papers on what journal editors actually do in different subjects (Zhang 2010a; 2010b; Zhang and Jia 2012; 2013; Jia et al. 2013; Zhang and Jia 2013).

As a computational text-matching tool (Li 2012), CrossCheck is unable effectively to find matches in figures, equations, tables, videos or audio files. The following is a typical case prompted us to think about how to confirm, deal with and avoid plagiarism in these areas.

2 Case study

2.1 Background

It is not easy to use CrossCheck to identify matching formulae, tables, and figures, so a low similarity index report on engineering papers may not tell the whole truth. In this paper, we present an interesting case study on this matter. All persons involved have been anonymised.

The case began when Author A, who had identified and reported an alleged case of plagiarism involving one of his papers, wanted to obtain more data to support his claim. He discovered from correspondence published in *Nature* (Zhang 2010b) that the present authors used CrossCheck to detect plagiarism. He therefore wrote asking them to help him check a paper written by Author B (with a co-author). Author A had previously published a paper (Paper A) on structural stability in Journal A. He noticed that a paper (Paper B) on a similar topic published a few years later by Author B in Journal B took large sections of material from his earlier paper without adequately acknowledging the source.

Before contacting us, Author A had already performed a detailed analysis of the similarity between the two papers to support his case, putting similar sections of text and similar equations side-by-side in a table for ease of comparison. The table clearly showed that the piece of analysis carried out in Paper B was very similar to that published in his earlier paper, albeit with some slight modifications to take into account the interactions between neighboring structures. Although Paper B did cite paper A, Author A felt that it gave inadequate acknowledgement to his paper as the source of much of the material, especially the core formulae; the impression given from reading Paper B was that Author B did most of the analysis himself. As an independent check, the present authors used CrossCheck to compare Paper B against our database. If a paper has an overall similarity index (OSI)[1] >~40% or a single match similarity index (SMSI)[2] >~10%, we usually reject it out of hand (Zhang et al. 2013). The CrossCheck report gave an OSI of 32%; the highest SMSI was only 5%. There was no long paragraph of closely matching text.

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[1] OSI: The overall similarity index (OSI) is the percentage of similarity between a submission and information existing in the iThenticate databases selected as search targets (CrossCheck_Manual; Zhang and Jia, 2012).
[2] SMSI: The single match similarity index (SMSI) is the percentage of similarity from a single source between a submission and information existing in the iThenticate databases selected as search targets (CrossCheck_Manual; Zhang and Jia, 2012).

2.2 Interview with Author A

JZUS editor: How did you come across Paper B?

Author A: I was updating my CV at the time and one of the pieces of information required was the citation of my papers. So I googled my papers and began compiling a list of papers that cited them. When I was doing that, I noticed that Paper B had a very similar title and abstract to mine (Paper A) that it cited. Upon further reading of the paper, I was surprised by how similar the main contents were too. Even worse was the fact that my name was misspelled in the reference list, which was really sloppy on the author's and the journal editor's part. After carefully comparing the two papers and consulting articles on plagiarism, I came to the conclusion that I had a case for complaint. Although the problem addressed by Author B was more specific, and he had made some small extensions to the analysis, it was obvious that he had borrowed a lot of materials from my previous paper, but without giving it due credit.

JZUS editor: What is your evidence that Paper B copied your research work?

Author A: I had worked on the problem for quite some time for my Master's degree. I was very familiar with its contents. There was no doubt in my mind that misconduct had been committed by Author B for the following reasons:

1. In the Abstracts, the beginning and concluding sentences were very similar between the two papers, even though they had been reworded in Paper B. These gave an inkling of what was to come.

2. Paper B had the same sections with the same titles, which were arranged in the same order as those in my paper. Within these sections, you could find 17 equations that were similar or even identical to those in my paper, together with many similar sentences, albeit reworded, to convey the ideas, assumptions and deductions. Paper B used these contents liberally without giving immediate citations to my paper; my paper was only cited in the final third of the paper when we came to two core equations in the derivation of the key parameter, the working of which was probably too long and tedious for Author B to reproduce in its entirety. Even then, the citation was no more than a mention in passing. According to my understanding, paraphrasing without giving credit is plagiarism, irrespective of whether the source is cited elsewhere in the paper. While he might not have done it deliberately, Author B was misleading the reader to think that all the foregoing equations and sentences were derived and composed independently by him.

3. More tellingly, for one important part of the analysis in my paper, I provided a reference to support the simplifying assumption that I had made for the boundary condition, as requested by one of the reviewers. It was intriguing to find that the same assumption with the same supporting reference also appeared in Paper B, but without mentioning my paper. It was highly unlikely that Author B came up independently with the same assumption which was supported by the same reference. That would have been an amazing coincidence. I consider this to be unequivocal evidence that Paper B took ideas and materials from my paper without acknowledging its source.

JZUS editor: What actions did you then take?

Author A: I first contacted the editor of Journal A that had published my paper, but he just told me to write to the other journal that published Paper B. When I did so, the reply I got from the editor (Editor B) was: "Shouldn't you contact the authors of the paper in question?" I then had to

point out to him that, according to his own publisher's guidelines, it was his responsibility as the editor-in-chief to evaluate all cases of complaints and then to take appropriate actions where necessary.

JZUS editor: Do you feel that Editor B was avoiding his responsibility?

Author A: Yes, but I understand that dealing with alleged cases of plagiarism could be a time-consuming and troublesome affair, and many editors would prefer not to have to deal with them.

JZUS editor: What happened next?

Author A: A few days later, I got another reply from Editor B saying that he had reviewed both papers, but he did not see any problem as my paper was already cited by Author B. He also commented that the timing of my complaint was unusual, as both papers were published quite some time ago. I countered that, had he read my supporting document carefully, he would have realized that the very first citation of my paper only appeared more than half-way through Paper B, yet most of the materials that were presented before that point were taken from my paper. I pointed out to him that paraphrasing without properly and adequately acknowledging the source is indeed plagiarism. I also reminded him that search engines such as Google were recent inventions, and prior to their introduction, plagiarism was much harder to detect. People may think that I was making the complaint for my personal gain; however, I was already a tenured faculty member with an endowed position, working in a completely different field from my Master's topic, and I did not need the recognition for something that I no longer worked on. But I felt strongly that researchers such as Author B needed to be better educated on what constituted plagiarism. After all, is that not what we are teaching our undergraduate students?

JZUS editor: What was Editor B's reply?

Author A: He said he could see my point, but said that cases such as that of Paper B happened frequently, especially with authors whose mother tongue was not English. He also added that Paper B was not the type of case that he would 'go after'. It was then that I contacted you for help with CrossCheck, hoping that an independent check would help my case. Although the report from CrossCheck was not conclusive, your support and understanding kept me going. Shortly after that, I received an official email from the publishing manager of Journal B, who I guess was more familiar with the definition of plagiarism. He advised Author B and myself to discuss the matter in order to reach a satisfactory conclusion, and said that he and the editor anticipated that a suitable outcome would be a written note published in Journal B to clarify the full extent to which the findings presented in my paper should be acknowledged.

JZUS editor: That's encouraging; so did you contact Author B?

Author A: Yes, I did. I sent him, in my view, a very courteous email, saying that I did not believe that he had plagiarized intentionally but I would appreciate it if he were to publish a note acknowledging his oversight in not giving my work adequate citation.

JZUS editor: How did he take it?

Author A: Initially, he was very apologetic (for spelling my name wrongly in the reference),

adding that my paper had been very useful for his work. However, when it became clear to him that my complaint was of a more serious nature, he became defiant. He argued that the problem he had addressed was so different from mine – actually, it was only more specific – that he did not feel the need to cite my paper earlier, even though he had admitted that his work was built on mine and papers dealing with general problems similar to the one in mine were quoted in his introduction.

JZUS editor: So did you come to an agreement?

Author A: It was clear from our communications that Author B's English was not that great. Finally, after several rounds of email communication that did not go anywhere, I got so frustrated that I took the liberty of drafting a note for him which basically stated that he should have acknowledged my work earlier and more adequately in his paper. I must emphasize that the word plagiarism was not mentioned in the note at all. Throughout, to keep them informed, I copied all my communications with Author B to Editor B and the publishing manager. However, Editor B did not like my note at all; he sent me a very stern email saying that I had crossed the line. He said that it was solely up to Author B to decide whether to submit a note or not, and he, as the editor-in-chief, had the right to decide whether or not to publish the note, even when it was submitted to the journal. He even questioned my motive for making the complaint.

JZUS editor: That must have been very frustrating for you; did you give up at this point?

Author A: No, I did not. I told Editor B that, referring again to the web site of his journal's Publisher, it was really his responsibility to consider and evaluate the responses and make a judgment, based on his knowledge and experience in the field and then take appropriate action. The guidelines clearly stated that these matters should not be abandoned. It later dawned on me that if Author B had taken material from my work, he could have done the same with other people's work, too. Lo and behold, I soon found that he also "borrowed" a lot of materials from another paper, again without giving due credit to the authors. I duly presented my new findings to Editor B and the publishing manager, adding that if Author B refused to send in a note acknowledging his mistakes (the word I used, to save his face, was oversights), I would submit an article summarizing my findings on the two papers and let people make up their own minds. It did not take long before the publishing manager wrote back to say that they would consider my submission as Author B would not agree to publishing the requested note, but he insisted that my article would only be published if the editor considered it beneficial to their readers.

JZUS editor: Did you go on to submit your article?

Author A: I have to say that, by that time, I had been so upset by Editor B's responses that I was determined to prove him wrong. However, when I was about to submit my article, I decided to contact Author B's mentor who was also a co-author on the paper. He was a well known researcher and I wanted him to plead with Author B to come to his senses, as I realized that if the article did get published, his reputation would also suffer.

JZUS editor: What did the mentor say?

Author A: He confided in me that he had had many sleepless nights since learning about my complaint. But he had no doubt about Author B's integrity. He said he was a hardworking

individual but his English was poor, perhaps far from sufficient to express himself accurately. Like Editor B, he did not think the lack of adequate citation was a serious problem; he certainly did not think it was plagiarism. He went on to say that some of his works had also been used by others without citation, but he looked at the matter from a positive viewpoint, and took it as a compliment when his work was used, whether or not it had been cited.

JZUS editor: Did you feel that Author B's mentor also did not fully understand the definition of plagiarism?

Author A: That seems to be the case, and I believe that this problem is actually quite common even amongst established engineering and physical sciences researchers. However, it is simply not right to fail to cite people's work where credit is due. It is very unfair to the researchers who have done all the hard work. Having problems with the language cannot be used as an excuse.

JZUS editor: Was your article published?

Author A: No. I never submitted it. I had calmed down by then. I did not want to cause irrevocable damage to anyone's career or reputation. I also realized that the whole thing had become a huge distraction for me; I could not focus on other, more important jobs. I therefore decided to move on. But I still wanted people to have a better understanding of what plagiarism is by learning from Author B's mistakes, so that similar things would not happen again. I also wanted editors to take a more balanced view and a more proactive role in dealing with cases of alleged plagiarism. That's why I approached you with the proposal of publishing my story anonymously. Given the emphasis you place on countering plagiarism and improving the overall quality of papers by Chinese researchers, I think JZUS would be the ideal place for my story to be told.

Finally, JZUS editor asked Author A whether, if he had been the reviewer of Paper B, he would have rejected it outright. Much to our surprise, he said he would not. He went on to explain that provided his work had been given enough credit and cited properly, he would recommend Paper B be accepted for publication after some revisions, since it did extend his own work. It is clear that Author A is a decent and fair scientist, but nevertheless he would not tolerate plagiarism.

3 Discussion

Today, not only do we know 'Plagiarism is more than theft. It represents a challenge to your integrity and expertise and puts your reputation on the line' (Bugeja 2012), but are aware of 'Not so many years ago, we got one or two alleged cases a year. Now we are getting one or two a month' (Butler 2010). There is an increasing challenge to find and deal with plagiarism. However, everyone has a common duty to clean the academic environment.

3.1 Problem and limitation

The case study presented above highlights the inadequacy of purely text-matching tools such as CrossCheck for identifying plagiarism in papers in fields such as engineering and physical sciences since such tools are unable effectively to compare the formulae, tables and figures that frequently form the bulk of the content of the papers. Unfortunately, as far as we are aware, no

suitable tool currently exists to spare editors and peer reviewers the arduous task of comparing non-textual elements in papers where plagiarism may be suspected.

The case study also highlights the difficulty of detecting plagiarism that involves paraphrasing with no or inadequate citation. As discussed in the ACM Policy and Procedures on Plagiarism (2010) "plagiarism manifests itself in a variety of forms, also including verbatim copying of portions of another author's paper with citing but not clearly differentiating what text has been copied (e.g., not applying quotation marks correctly) and/or not citing the source correctly". Nevertheless, "if the case can be made that one's work consists predominantly of someone else's words or ideas, one may still be susceptible to charges of plagiarism" (Plagiarism FAQs; Bouville 2008). It is often difficult for editors to determine whether authors have obeyed the rules.

As journal editors, we cannot help but ask, what to do with this kind of problem?

3.2 Experience and responsibility

For users of CrossCheck in our experience (Zhang et al 2013), a lower SMSI may be appropriate to highlight papers containing possible plagiarism (CrossCheck_Manual; IEEE CrossCheck user's guide; Zhang and Jia 2012). The editors should then compare the papers returned with the suspect paper, paying special attention to similar contents that contain no citations, including the captions and main-body text that describe figures, tables and formulae. There are warning signs, too. Because plagiarized material is written for other purposes, it is often slightly off topic, has odd references or content, unusual phrasing or vocabulary, and maybe the level of the work could not match the known standard performance of the researcher (Abdelmoneim 2010).

If the journal editor lacks expert knowledge in the specific topic of the paper, he or she may be unable to distinguish between generally accepted facts, arguments and results and those given or derived by specific researchers, warranting proper citation. This is just one reason why high-level peer review should always be carried out by experts in the subject (who, of course, do not have any conflict of interest due to current or previous collaboration or other relationship with the authors of the paper in question) (Hames 2007; Morris et al. 2013). The journal's guidelines for reviewers should always include a request to determine whether the paper appears to contain elements of plagiarism and, if so, to indicate whether in their opinion the paper should be rejected outright or should be revised to include the appropriate citations.

This case also touches on the difficulties of finding ideas plagiarism. As Author A said in our interview that, "Paper B took ideas and materials from my paper without acknowledging its source", he thought that if Editor B could consider him as a reviewer at the beginning, this event will be avoided. This implies that it is very important and is the responsibility for the journal editor to find appropriate referees in this area, specially paying attention to those authors whose papers are cited in the key parts of the current article. In our editorial experience, maybe the appropriate reviewer should be the best hunter to judge idea plagiarism.

Nowadays journal editors not only do their normal editing and publishing work, but also spend much time to deal with misconduct problems (Sox and Rennie 2006; Wager and Williams 2011; Zhang et al. 2013; Zhang and Jia 2012). However, it is not the excuse to escape the responsibility to deal with the misconduct and solve the dispute. In this case study, similarly, the dispute could have been resolved had Editor B taken a more proactive role in the discussion

between the authors in order to reach a satisfactory conclusion for all concerned; leaving the authors to sort out their differences clearly did not help. The COPE Code of Conduct for editors stated that 'Editors should be responsible for everything published in their journals', and 'always be willing to publish corrections, clarifications, retractions and apologies when needed' (Wager and Williams 2011; COPE, 2011).

3.3 Ethic education's necessity

Our case study also identifies a lack of understanding on what constitutes plagiarism, both by a seasoned researcher and, rather worryingly, by the editor of an international journal. Author A, through his detailed investigation and comparison between his and Author B's papers, demonstrated unequivocally that plagiarism - specifically paraphrasing without prompt and proper citations - had been committed by Author B, even if unintentionally. It is surprising that, when presented with these findings and reference to the guidelines given by the very publisher of the journal involved, both the senior author of the paper in question and the editor-in-chief did not appear to believe that any serious wrongdoing had been committed by Author B.

While online guides and tutorials are available for students and researchers in many universities (Maurer et al. 2006), familiarization with the relevant rules should be made compulsory as part of their training and given special emphasis. Authors should be properly educated in what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it by giving adequate credit to the originator of the ideas or text that they copy or paraphrase. Researchers who are not native English speakers will then no longer be able to use deficient language skills as an excuse for their "oversights".

Watson and Hayter (2013) commented that for sometimes it is difficult to find obscure misconduct, such as plagiarism etc., in the process of peer review, some organizations, like universities, should vet research outputs before they get to the publishing (and scandal) stage. Research institutions have the responsibilities to investigate misconduct, correct the scientific literature, and furthermore, prevent misconduct and its consequences (Sox and Rennie 2006).

In a short, authors, journal editors, reviewers, as well as research institutions all have responsibilities not only to train themselves, but also to set criteria so that the next generation can recognize the differences between ethical and unethical behavior (Carraway 2009).

3.4 Common international publishing ethical standards

In recent years, some handbooks of journal publishing or essays writing for editors and authors have presented references to international publishing ethical standards (Morris et al. 2013; Greetham, 2008; Hames 2007). The first issue of *Nature* in 2012 showed a special comment to discuss "how to stop plagiarism", which applied some active advices (Garner et al. 2012). Furthermore, the COPE gave helpful standards, guidelines, and many cases about publication ethics, which are widely accepted by many publishers, e.g., the international standards for editors and authors, the flowchart on how editors should respond to suspected plagiarism, guidelines for journal editors, the cooperation between research institutions and journals on research integrity cases, as well as the retraction guidelines when plagiarism is confirmed, etc. (http://publicationethics.org/resources/).

4 Conclusions

Editors should apply a lower threshold when using detectors, such as CrossCheck to identify potential plagiarism, especially papers are heavy in non-textual content, such as engineering papers. It goes without saying that all papers should be reviewed by relevant experts who have no connection with the authors; guidelines to reviewers should include the need to identify potential plagiarism and to recommend appropriate action. If plagiarism is confirmed, editors and publishers should have the courage and responsibility to take the appropriate action. The COPE (http://publicationethics.org/) has given helpful and valuable standards, guidelines, cases, etc. about publication ethics for authors, journal editors and publishers, which are widely accepted.

Everyone has a responsibility to promote a culture in which research misconduct does not happen (Sox and Rennie 2006). Only then, can plagiarism be eliminated and the integrity of scientific research be protected.

Acknowledgments

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