Essays

Patchwork plagiarism

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Abstract Plagiarism is a serious breach of publication ethics and a concern for all science editors. It has many forms, with patchwork plagiarism being one of the most common. A patchwork article is constructed of pieces from different sources and presented as a work with original text. Modern digital technologies provide plagiarism detection software, for example, CrossCheck®, which is currently employed by journal editors to filter out plagiarized manuscripts. One of the main reasons for patchwork writing is inadequate knowledge of English. This is why non-native English-speaking authors are frequently advised to prepare their manuscripts with help of language professionals and native English speakers. Such assistance increases their chances of getting published.

Keywords: Patchwork plagiarism; plagiarism detection software; publication ethics; periodicals as topic.

Plagiarism, or "appropriation of another person's ideas, processes, results or words without giving appropriate credit to the source or author",[1] has many forms. It ranges from minor to major or blatant scientific misconduct.[2,3] Minor forms include the appropriation of small portions of text, particularly in Materials and Methods section of research papers. If an author copies phrases such as "the authors declare no conflict of interest" or "$P<0.05$ was considered statistically significant", it will not be judged as stealing words. The verbatim appropriation of descriptions from Methods sections is usually viewed as a minor offence, or 'technical plagiarism', which is less likely to cause rejection of a manuscript submitted to a journal. However, appropriations from other sections of scientific articles, especially from the Discussion, which is supposed to bring intellectual novelty, is regarded as a serious breach of publication ethics. The latter requires a prompt investigation, and often leads to the rejection of the manuscript.[2,4,5]

A prime example of major plagiarism is the resubmission of someone's work under a new name. Translating books, articles and other material without permission of the original authors and passing the work as the translators' own is also a form of major plagiarism.[2,3]

A special form of major patchwork plagiarism is when text of an article contains several parts from different sources. Such "articles" are usually composed of two, three, or sometimes more original sources.[3] The author of a patchwork article cuts parts of sentences, paragraphs, or even whole sections from different articles and compiles a mosaic body of a new article.[2,5]

Patchwork plagiarism may comprise false paraphrasing and text recycling, mostly in review articles, where appropriate synthesis of the literature with substantial intellectual contribution is expected. In the case of false paraphrasing the author copies textual information, cites the original article(s), but does not use quotation marks, with a false impression of paraphrasing.[6] Miguel Roig puts in his guide to ethical writing *Avoiding plagiarism, self-plagiarism, and other questionable writing practices:* "Any verbatim text taken from another author must be enclosed in quotation marks"[6]

Options to avoid plagiarism are becoming increasingly available, particularly with the advances in information-communication technology. Science editors, even those editors with minimal computer skills, can now detect various forms of plagiarism in journal submissions and publications. Plagiarism detection software can help to identify text similarities which then have to be verified by the editor. The software is valued highly as it can help detect plagiarism, at the submission stage, avoiding unwanted retractions at a later stage.[4]

The plagiarism detection software compares the text of a submitted manuscript with sources available on the Internet and bibliographic databases. The result may include an index of text similarity between the submitted articles and other sources.[7] The most powerful plagiarism detection software is CrossCheck®, a product of the cooperation between CrossRef and iParadigms company. CrossCheck searches through texts freely available on the Internet and in the CrossCheck subscription database of articles, which currently contains more than 50 million articles from journals with a CrossRef membership.[7] The *Croatian Medical Journal (CMJ)*, for example, used CrossCheck to detect plagiarism during 2009-2010 and revealed that one tenth of the submitted manuscripts contained plagiarized parts.[3]

CrossCheck detects various forms of appropriation in patchwork plagiarized articles, because of its high sensitivity (Figure 1). It detects similarities in an article with original sources, with text similarity rates exceeding a threshold (eg 10%).[3] Additionally, it tracks an article in which text is copied from dozens of sources, with some not reaching the threshold similarity rates. The first case is a more serious offense, as it violates the copyright regulations.

Each scholarly journal should approve its own criteria and threshold of plagiarism, as there is still no universal definition of plagiarism.[2,4] In *CMJ* a manuscript with more than 15% text similarity with multiple sources (a minimum 5% from each text) is manually verified to exclude patchwork plagiarism. After the verification, *CMJ* editors discuss each case individually and either request re-writing of the texts with similarities, or reject the manuscript without a re-submission chance and a notification sent to the author's institution.

Despite some good examples, such as *Anesthesia & Analgesia, Chest* and *CMJ*, not all scholarly journals currently use the plagiarism detection software. Perhaps some good advice to those who do not use any plagiarism detection software is to pay attention to any unevenness in the style and quality of the writing, mixed use of British and American English, differences in terminology, or lack of cohesive sentences.[8] This alternative approach may increase chances of detecting patchwork plagiarism.

Patchwork plagiarism may have the same causes as other forms of plagiarism. The Editor in Chief of *Anesthesia & Analgesia*, Steven Shafer, in his article *You Will Be Caught* concludes that the main reason is poor knowledge of English.[5] Based on my own experience with processing *CMJ* submissions and communicating with the authors of 'suspected' manuscripts during the past three years, the same conclusion can be drawn.[3]

Fortunately, the language problem is possible to overcome. Manuscripts can be edited before submission to a journal with help from native speakers and professionals. Authors with inadequate English proficiency should write articles in their own words or in their mother tongue, instead of stealing large chunks of text from different sources. The draft text should then be properly edited or translated with the support of author editors, translators, or experts from various commercial writing and editing services. This may increase chances for eventual acceptance of the manuscripts in high quality journals and avoid accusations of plagiarism.[8]

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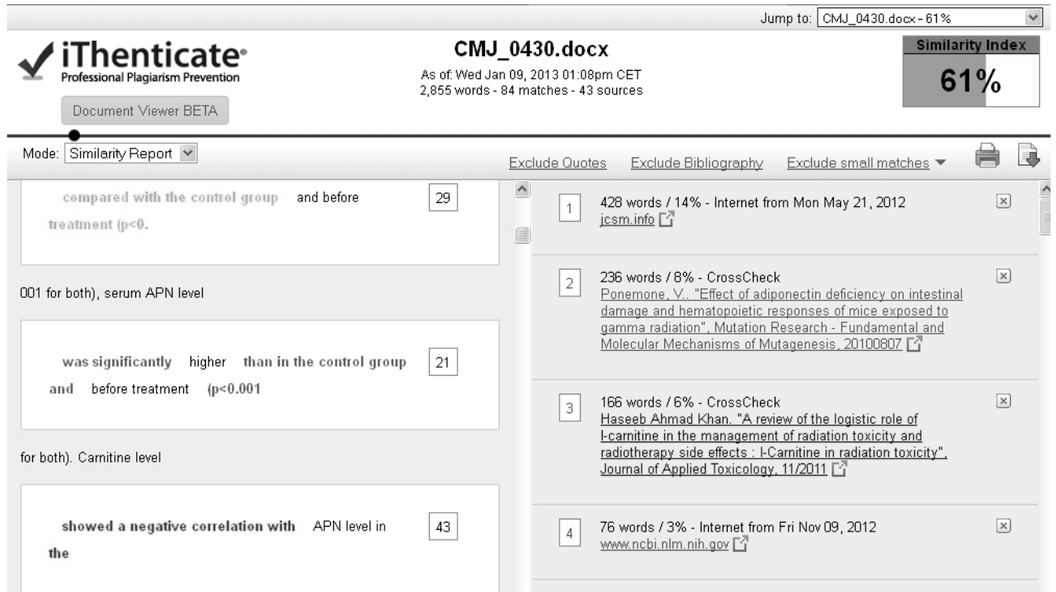

Figure 1. Similarity report by CrossCheck®: on the top - name of the file, overall similarity with found sources; on the left - examined text (similar parts are coloured); on the right - list of found possible sources (similar texts) with text similarity rate and number of similar words.