

## Editorial Policies that Encourage Plagiarism of Non-Peer-Reviewed Publications

John L Williams\*

Department of Biomedical Engineering, Herff College of Engineering, University of Memphis, Memphis, USA

### Letter to the Editor

A recent paper appearing in a highly regarded print journal omitted any citations to relevant conference papers and patent applications that had been published three years prior by other authors. The paper in question lays claim to originating a hypothesis and making new discoveries when in fact, their hypothesis had already been substantiated by prior computational work and design analysis which had been presented in prior conferences and published in 1000-1500 word length abstracts.

The value of the paper in question is that it provides experimental confirmation of previously established concepts. The accepted practice in science and scholarly endeavors would be to properly acknowledge and cite the authors who originated the basis for their study. However, this was not the case and the authors merely thank those who made the original discoveries for “motivating” their study. To be clear, this was not a case of inadvertent plagiarism and since in this case the authors were well aware of the prior ideas and discoveries it is a particularly egregious disregard of accepted standards when these ideas are presented as their own without giving credit to the original contributors through the scholarly use of citation.

Surprisingly, when I submitted a letter to the editor-in-chief of the journal in an attempt to correct the oversight by providing the relevant citations I was further disappointed. The letter to the editor was rejected for lack of space in the journal and the editor rendered the opinion that, upon conferring with another board member my letter was not relevant to a broader audience because (in the words of the editor) ‘your previous studies were either abstracts or patents, and not peer-reviewed journal articles that contain full scientific detail of the study or would be readily available to wide audience of scientists.’ It would appear then that this print journal condones plagiarism of scientific work published in meeting abstracts or patents, and not peer-reviewed journal articles. Many meeting abstracts are 1000-1500 words in length and are more like short papers, in contrast to the 250-word abstracts that are more common in some medical conferences.

In order to preserve scientific integrity and propriety, I believe it is essential that editors, reviewers and readers be told by the authors when any portion of a paper is based heavily on previous published work, whether it be peer-reviewed or not. It is of interest to note that, though some journals may discourage citations to conference papers [1], the very same print journal in question required me on two prior occasions to cite my own conference abstracts upon which my own submitted full journal article was based, apparently in an effort to avoid self-plagiarism. This leads to the absurd conclusion that I should not plagiarize my own conference abstracts, but other authors can freely plagiarize or lay claim to the discoveries and work published in my conference abstracts and patents.

The second point made by the editor was that conference papers are not readily available to a wide audience. This is no longer true because of the internet. Many conference papers are now readily available via the sponsoring organization’s web site. Patents and patent applications are also readily available to the public at large and now play a vital role

in the evolution of scientific thought. A review of the 1996-2000 annual volumes of the CD-Edition of Science Citation Index (SCI) of the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) showed that almost 30,000 US patents were cited by scientific research papers [2]. Thus the comments by the print journal’s editor seem irrelevant in our digital world.

The citation of meeting abstracts in the scientific literature plays an important role in how science should be conducted and therefore most journals do in fact allow meeting abstracts to be cited. [1]. It is an arguable point as to whether scientists need journal editors to protect them from mistakenly accepting ideas appearing in published meeting abstracts before they have been properly vetted. On the other hand, it is quite another matter to condone stealing these ‘unsanctioned’ published ideas and presenting them as if they are one’s own. It is the complete opposite of what we as educators teach in our schools. The editor of the print journal has made light of fundamental intellectual property rights issues by not allowing the aggrieved author to have his objections published as a letter due to lack of space; or because the works which were not cited were, in his mind, merely published conference papers and patent applications.

Most universities have stated policies on plagiarism specifically condemning any form of plagiarism. Publishers, such as the IEEE, have also provided written policies condemning plagiarism: “IEEE defines plagiarism as the reuse of someone else’s prior ideas, processes, results, or words without explicitly acknowledging the original author or source. Plagiarism in any form, at any level, is unacceptable and is considered a serious breach of professional conduct, with potentially severe legal and ethical consequences. IEEE guidelines against plagiarism apply equally to periodical articles and conference proceedings.” [3]. One can only wonder then how some authors, editors, and editorial board members, many of whom are professors at major universities, manage to reconcile what they presumably teach their students, with what they themselves practice and promote.

In the end one has to ask whether plagiarism in the medical and scientific field has become so prevalent [4], that even editors of major journals have become blind to it, or simply disregard the reason for citations in science. Are scientific journal articles evolving into a tabloid form of scientific communication without any need for a traceable lineage of ideas or thought, of knowledge? If so, we are disregarding the very essence of scholarship.

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\*Corresponding author: John L Williams, Department of Biomedical Engineering, Herff College of Engineering, University of Memphis, Memphis, USA, Tel: +1 901 678 5485; Fax: +1 901 678 5281, E-mail: [john.williams@memphis.edu](mailto:john.williams@memphis.edu)

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