

International Plagiarism — Does Authorship Stop at the Border?

Chair:

Drummond Rennie

Journal of the American Medical Association
San Francisco, California

Panelists:

CK Gunsalus

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Champaign, Illinois

Marek Wronski

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Staten Island, New York

Reporter:

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National Radio Astronomy Observatory
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This session was provocative. “Plagiarism is unlikely to be detected except by the authors who are plagiarized”, Drummond Rennie said. “We are very familiar with our own words and cadences”, he added, and no one else has that familiarity; that is why editors and reviewers often do not discover plagiarism.

Rennie said that in the United States, all a journal can do is report suspected culprits to their home institutions and act as a witness, providing evidence. “Only the institution has the power to investigate and impose sanctions.”

Marek Wronski, who is researching and writing a book on scientific misconduct,

related a fascinating and chilling tale of one scientist who has been caught plagiarizing 38 articles. The scientists took the articles from at least 12 journals, including *The Lancet* and the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, and submitted them under his own name to Polish-language journals. He initially received no punishment because after 3 years his institution said the statute of limitations had expired.

Wronski spoke with dozens of journal editors in the course of his investigation.

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He wrote to more than 30 journals, and only 7 editors “replied in a timely manner.” Only half the editors ever responded to the information he provided about plagiarism in their publications, and 2 editors refused to print retractions after plagiarized articles were printed in their journals. “The action of a number of editors amounts to covering up plagiarism”, Wronski concluded.

CK Gunsalus spoke about how the scientific community itself appears to be reluctant to deal with the issue. She quoted a scientist as saying that “everyone knows that only mediocre people are involved in this sort of stuff”, which implies that

good scientists never stoop to scientific misconduct.

Part of the problem is that plagiarism-whistle-blowing seems to have a “taint of small-mindedness”, Gunsalus said. In the book *Words for the Taking: The Hunt for a Plagiarist*, poet Neal Bower said that persons who make accusations of plagiarism are often treated as pariahs by editors.

Gunsalus said that one of the most difficult questions to answer in a plagiarism case is whether the incident was a one-time mistake or accident by the author or the author is a pattern plagiarist. In her experience, suspected authors who are found to have committed plagiarism are often pattern plagiarists, and their acts become more blatant if they are not caught. The only way to establish the presence or absence of plagiarism is to use some kind of software, she said; “the human brain is a very feeble tool for this endeavor.” Gunsalus described “text-overlap detection software” that can be used to discover identical passages in bodies of work.

Gunsalus gave journal editors 5 pieces of advice regarding cases of suspected plagiarism: Get the facts, think about the editor’s role and responsibilities, don’t make things worse by publishing, take the initiative in your obligations, and create a plagiarism policy so that you will be prepared for these cases before they come up. 🗣️