



JoAnn Grif Alspach

# Editorial

## A Case of Plagiarism: Lessons for Editors, Authors, Reviewers, Readers, and Plagiarists

In early July 2014, a notice of retraction was issued in print and online by a journal named *Nurse Prescribing*<sup>1</sup> for an article that was published in January 2013. The notice explained that the reason for the retraction was because the article contained a substantial amount of content that the author had taken verbatim or nearly verbatim without appropriate attribution from an article published in *Critical Care Nurse (CCN)*.<sup>2</sup> The notice explained that following investigations by both journals, the editors agreed that the nature and extent of this lack of appropriate attribution constitutes plagiarism.

*Plagiarism* is defined as a serious breach of publication ethics and professional conduct:

- “. . . the failure to attribute words, ideas, or findings to their true authors.”<sup>3</sup>
- When an author uses someone else’s words, images, or data as if they were his or her own and without appropriate attribution to that source.<sup>3</sup>
- “. . . the use of others’ published and unpublished ideas or words . . . without attribution or permission, and presenting them as new and original rather than derived from an existing source.”<sup>4</sup>
- “The reproduction or appropriation of someone else’s work without proper attribution; passing off as one’s own the work of someone else.”<sup>5</sup>
- Literary theft<sup>6</sup>

In common usage, a *retraction* is a statement that relates that something previously said or written is not true or correct.<sup>7</sup> In the biomedical literature, a retraction refers to articles that were previously published and later recanted by means of a formal published notice issued by the editor of the journal that published the offending document. The specific term, *retraction*, refers to the entirety of an article being recanted and is only issued with clear evidence of “pervasive error, nonreproducible research, scientific misconduct, or duplicate publication.”<sup>8</sup> A “retraction in part” may be issued when the misconduct involves only a minor portion of the article. The National Library of Medicine indexes retractions upon notification by the journal.<sup>8</sup>

The events that transpired between the initial notification to *CCN* regarding this incident and the final resolution of this misconduct that the retraction notice represents offer sometimes painful and unpleasant, yet necessary and informative object lessons for professional nursing journal editors, authors, reviewers, readers, and plagiarists.

### Lessons for Editors

When the original source of the material plagiarized is another nursing journal, 2 editors can be involved in this situation: (1) the editor of the journal that has either already published the paper containing plagiarism or that is still handling the potentially problematic paper somewhere in the peer review, revision, final

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development, or production phase as a submitted, unpublished manuscript; and (2) the editor of the journal that published the article that was plagiarized. For the sake of simplicity, one might refer to the former as the culpable journal and the latter as the innocent journal.

### Editor of the Culpable Journal

Most instances of publication plagiarism could be avoided if every professional journal acted responsibly on this issue by employing plagiarism-detection software. This type of software identifies and matches relevant keywords and variations in wording between a specific document and the database for that particular software, where chained and indexed locations are examined for matches, and, at times, more subtle matching that might reflect paraphrasing. This type of software has been widely available for many years; is used by high schools, colleges, universities, and innumerable other institutions; is easy to use; can be used by either the author or those who receive the paper, and—in many cases—is free to the user. Different journals use this type of software at different times in the manuscript processing cycle: upon manuscript submission, after preliminary review, and/or at one or more times during the peer review or preproduction process before print or online publication. At minimum, *CCN* subjects all manuscripts to plagiarism-detection software as part of its preliminary consideration of each paper before peer review.

A second mechanism commonly employed by professional journals to reduce the incidence of plagiarism is a requirement that all manuscript authors sign an author disclosure statement, which—in addition to certifying that each meets the criteria for authorship—also certifies that the manuscript is entirely composed of original content that neither copies nor infringes upon the copyright or other proprietary rights of any other party and that the author has provided all necessary written permissions for using or reproducing any parts of the paper owned by others. Although signing an author disclosure statement may not deter those who will plagiarize, some may pause, reconsider, and correct the problem sections to avert the dishonesty their signature would otherwise represent.

Most of the recommended responses to situations of possible plagiarism are directed to the editor of the culpable journal. In either case, thanks to the dedicated efforts of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and its ongoing contributions to the World Conference on Research

Integrity, the editor can follow the COPE guidelines or flowcharts related to dealing with potential cases of publishing misconduct<sup>9</sup> and the International Standards for Editors.<sup>10</sup> These documents clearly emphasize that editors have a duty to act if they suspect misconduct. A synopsis of these documents includes the following order of actions expected of editors of the culpable journal<sup>9,10</sup>:

- Solicit a response to the allegation of possible plagiarism from the author(s) suspected of misconduct.
- If the author's response to the allegation is not satisfactory to the editor, request that an investigation be completed by one of the following institutions: the author's employer, facility, or another appropriate organization (such as a regulatory or research integrity organization).
- Once the investigation has been completed, follow through with appropriate action(s) and explain the findings of the investigation.
- When evidence exists that serious misconduct has occurred, editors can retract a paper to inform all future readers of this misconduct and to preserve the integrity of the literature database. Editors should follow the COPE Retraction Guideline<sup>11</sup> and retain retracted papers online, prominently watermarking each page of the article as "Retracted" in all online and PDF versions.

In a perfect world, the editor of the culpable journal would complete all of these actions for handling potential cases of publishing misconduct. In the real world, the culpable journal editor may acknowledge the correspondence, secure a reply from the author(s) suspected of misconduct, and return a copy of what the author chose to communicate to the inquiring party.

### Editor of the Innocent Journal

When the editor of the innocent journal is not satisfied with the reply from the author suspected of plagiarism and/or with the culpable editor's handling of this situation, additional recourse may include actions such as the following:

- Completing an internal investigation of the situation to more definitively determine the nature, extent, and scope of possible plagiarism
- Securing legal counsel to determine whether evidence of copyright infringement exists

- Communicating the internal investigation findings related to the possible misconduct and the opinion of legal counsel regarding copyright infringement to the editor of the culpable journal
- Suggesting actions that the culpable journal editor needs to complete to effect a more satisfactory disposition of the situation commensurate with the misdeeds
- If evidence of the nature, extent, and scope of misconduct warrants, culminating the series of suggested actions with the culpable journal's issuance of a full retraction of the offending article from the professional literature
- Notifying readers of the innocent journal of the incident, the findings from the investigation, and the final outcome

Although retraction may be the highest form of publication disapproval, it neither undoes nor corrects the personal, professional, and ethical disgrace that plagiarism represents. It merely notes it for the literary record and illuminates it for anyone who searches the literature on this topic in the future.

### Lessons for Authors

Critical care nurses and their colleagues who have made significant investments of effort and time to draft, submit, revise through multiple rounds of peer review, resubmit, and publish their work would do well to add another step to the publication experience: monitoring for misuse of your work. As Jonathan Bailey, who blogs at PlagiarismToday.com so well notes, plagiarists pretty much bet that published authors will not find out about their fraudulently using your ideas and writing and presenting them as their own. Never checking to see if your writing has been used without permission or attribution makes it easy for plagiarists to get away with their behavior and may encourage them to repeat it with your or others' work. Although Bailey's blog focuses on the Internet, many of his useful tips for finding plagiarism apply to print publications as well—for example, using Google's indexing power and Google Alerts on a uniquely worded phrase from your writing to locate other instances where someone else has used that exact phrase.<sup>12</sup> Detection is only the first of Bailey's 12 steps for reducing the prevalence of plagiarism, but represents an essential

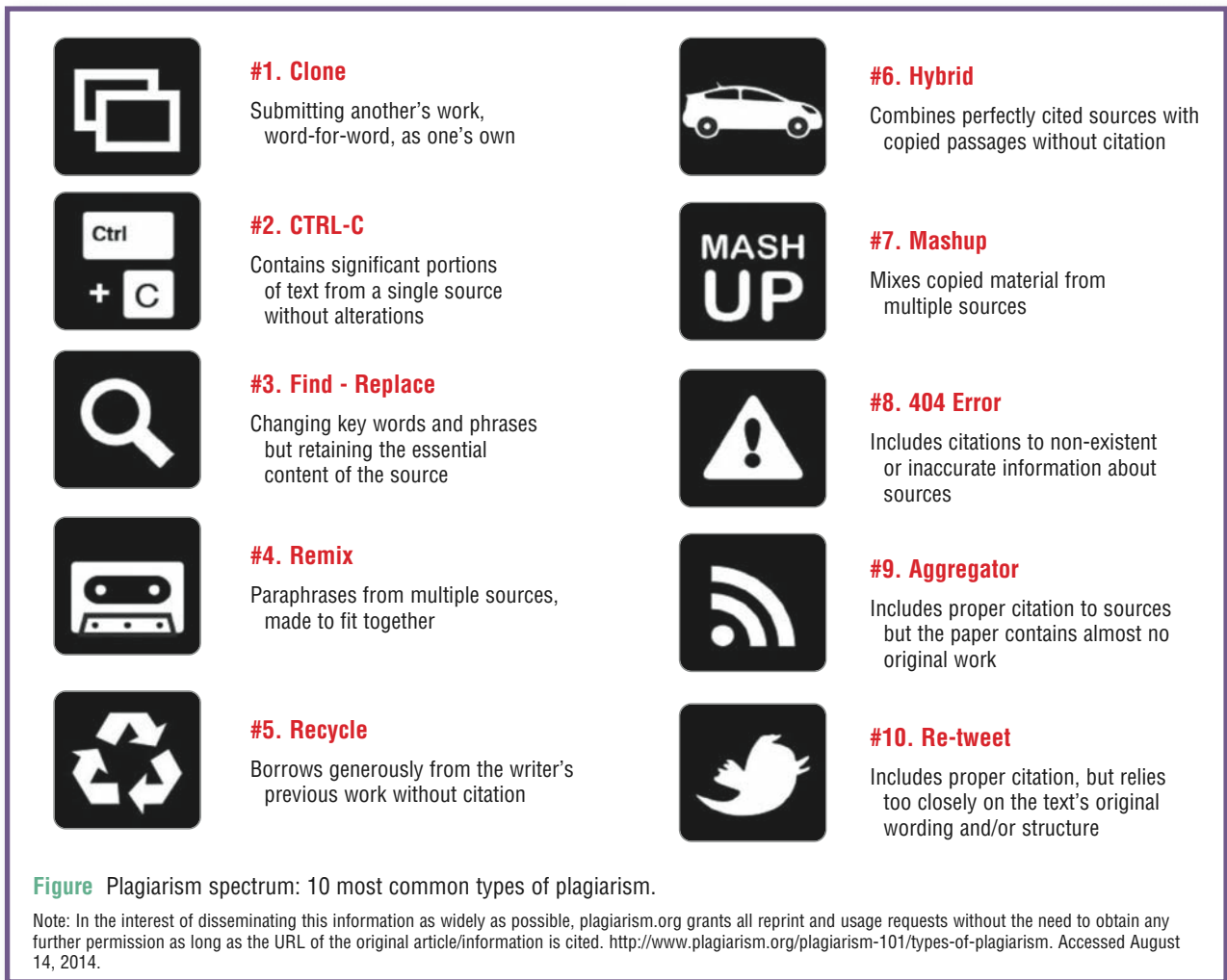
initial action before more definitive measures can be taken to stop it.<sup>13</sup>

One personal example of plagiarism detection that has never failed to disappoint me relates to an editorial I published in 1987 that was the original presentation of "The Preceptor's Bill of Rights."<sup>14</sup> I have never Googled that title without finding numerous instances where the Preceptor's Bill of Rights are listed in their entirety by some other author(s) with no mention or attribution to the source. When authors do not cite the original source of information they use, readers will, by default, assume erroneously that the plagiarizing author is the source.

The only way to know whether your hard work in publication is or has been plagiarized by others is to search for evidence of it. The PlagiarismToday website<sup>13</sup> also provides authors with tools, suggestions, and letter templates that may be used for contacting and stopping misuse of your work. If you become a victim of plagiarism and prefer to act on your own, you may find some guidelines from the Association for Information Systems helpful in your efforts.<sup>15</sup>

### Lessons for Reviewers

The implications of this incident for manuscript reviewers are quite straightforward: whenever possible, always complete at least a spot check of the source(s) of information in manuscripts reviewed, especially when wording strikes a familiar chord that suggests you have seen it before. As is the case for virtually all professional journals that use peer review, *CCN* manuscript reviewers are usually the parties who notify the journal editor when portions of a manuscript sound familiar. *CCN* is fortunate to also have reviewers who not only note the specific line numbers where material has been copied verbatim from another source, but provide both the citation as well as a copy of that source with the matching content highlighted. When exemplary reviewers go that extra mile, it facilitates the journal's investigation of the assertion, enables direct and objective communication of findings back to the author(s) of the manuscript, offers the author an opportunity to right the wrong, and substantially contributes to upholding standards of professional conduct befitting the profession of nursing. *CCN* does not expect its reviewers to be the sole guardians of previously published papers, but



wholeheartedly welcomes all assistance reviewers can lend in thwarting plagiarism.

### Lessons for Readers

As *CCN* readers access any segment of the professional literature (eg, journal articles, supplements, books, brochures, videos, webcasts, blogs, apps), including your own academic papers or columns for the hospital newsletter, read and listen to develop your skills in recognizing plagiarism in any form. Many websites can provide assistance in developing this skill and sharpening your acumen for distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable use of someone else's work. One of the better sites is the Harvard Guide to Using Sources,<sup>16</sup> which provides examples of original source materials followed by a plagiarized version of that work, then multiple acceptable alternative versions of using that source by means of direct quotation or paraphrasing with

appropriate attribution and explanations that clarify why that approach is an acceptable alternative. The Harvard Guide distinguishes among the following forms of plagiarism<sup>16</sup>:

- Verbatim plagiarism: direct, word-for-word copying
- Mosaic plagiarism: using a few words or small segments from one or multiple sources
- Inadequate paraphrasing: when the wording used resembles the original too closely
- Uncited paraphrasing: when the paraphrasing is acceptable, but no citation is included to identify ownership
- Uncited quotation: quotation marks are used, but no citation to the original source
- Use of information from a colleague or fellow student: possibly related to a group project or collaboration

A free reference website called Plagiarism.org, sponsored by the corporate creators of plagiarism-checking and detecting software (Turnitin, WriteCheck, iThenticate), uses digital monikers to distinguish a spectrum of the 10 most frequently encountered types of plagiarism from a 2012 survey of some 900 secondary and higher education teachers.<sup>17</sup> These 10 most common types of academic plagiarism are illustrated in the Figure.

## Lessons for Plagiarists

There is no way to know whether plagiarists ever learn anything instructive when they are caught and exposed. CCN takes plagiarism very seriously and will do everything to prevent, thwart, require retraction, and expose the plagiarist's ethical and professional misconduct to the widest audience possible. Once a plagiarist is unmasked, a few additional lessons might be worthwhile to learn:

- Rather than attempting to defend indefensible behavior, admit to the full extent of your theft.
- Rather than suggesting excuses such as inexperience with publication or not keeping track of references as causes of your behavior, run every one of your previously published papers through plagiarism detection software to determine how widespread your personal incidence of plagiarism is.
- Use plagiarism-detection software to identify and remove plagiarism before you submit or resubmit any paper for publication.
- Most importantly, give some consideration to others who have been subjected to the aftermath of your behavior. Send individual letters of apology to the author of the work you plagiarized, to the editor and readers of the journal whose content you plagiarized, and to the editor and readers of the journal that published your paper for the wrongs you have inflicted upon them as well as for the considerable time and resources they spent investigating and responding to your transgressions. **CCN**



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