



Correcting the Record I: Plagiarism

Last month's editorial ("Tools of the Plague") discussed the means that the editors and SPIE's journals staff use to prevent plagiarism and other violations of professional ethics in archival publishing. But what if a plagiarized paper slips through our defenses and then is identified after publication? When papers only existed in printed form, a correction or other notice was placed in the journal. While this provided a notice that the paper contained duplicated or copied material, there was no way to retrieve the paper or expunge the work. Another author that found the paper might still reference it, unaware that the paper was fraudulent. With the advent of electronic publication, this has changed.

I have no hard evidence that most authors rely on internet search to find relevant papers and obtain electronic copies through their libraries or the publisher. But consider the time saved and more complete coverage that modern journal searches provide compared to the days when we trudged through the stacks seeking potentially interesting papers. Few of us have the inclination or time to regress to those earlier days. I would venture to say that most papers are now acquired electronically. And because the publisher's digital library represents the primary source of the papers these days (in some cases, the only source), an ethics violation can be effectively revealed and redressed on the citation page for the paper.

But how should the violation be redressed? Should the paper remain posted online with a notice of violation or retraction, but still allow downloading, which is how some publishers handle these circumstances? Or should a notification be posted and the paper removed and replaced instead with an explanation and references to the original

sources? My colleague, Karolyn Labes, *Optical Engineering's* Managing Editor, asked the staff of a publisher of scientific journals how they handled such a publication violation. They responded: "In cases where we've identified plagiarism in published articles, we have generally either published an erratum (if the extent of plagiarism is small) or a retraction (if the plagiarism is extensive and includes the main points of the paper)... In general, though, even if a retraction has been published the original article has been left intact online, but with clear links in the Tables of Content entry and abstract to the retraction." The publisher indicated that they would remove a published article only if legally compelled to do so (e.g., by a court). Their view is that although these articles are flawed, they "have become part of the literature and are important at least as examples of what not to do."

Eric Pepper, SPIE's Director of Publications, posed the same question to an engineering publisher and was told that they, like the scientific publisher, do not remove the offending paper. "We feel strongly that the paper must remain online..., not only because we don't want to alter the official archive but mostly because we want the paper to be marked as illicit.... We place a Notice of Violation that points the user to the original paper that was plagiarized so the user may examine the nature of the misconduct."

After considerable deliberation, we decided to take a different approach. We took the corrective actions of removing the published paper from the online version of *Optical Engineering* and inserting a notice stating the reason for its removal. For the print version we will publish a note with the same information. This modifies the record of SPIE publications, not as a matter of tidying up the record, but rather to direct the reader and researcher to the actual source of the work. In addition, it keeps faith with those who published the original work. In the case of the publishers we queried, a disclaimer may have been added to the record of a plagiarized paper, but the paper is still available to be quoted, referenced, and linked by those who are not diligent in their work. To my mind, that approach seems to be more punitive than helpful. The very fact that the paper is pulled and the citation replaced by references to the original sources serves both to keep faith with the authors of the original work and to publicly reprimand the plagiarizer.

What do you think?

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