

feature story

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The Plagiarism Problem: Now You Can Help

BY ANNA BOGDANOWICZ

Plagiarism is a growing concern for many organizations, including the IEEE. The number of instances reported in IEEE publications has been rising steadily, with 14 in 2004, 26 in 2005, and 47 in 2006.

The Internet is largely to blame for the increase, according to Bill Hagen, the IEEE's intellectual property rights (IPR) manager, in Piscataway, N.J. Digital search engines have made plagiarizing easier because finding information is simpler, and it takes only the swipe of a mouse and a couple of keystrokes to highlight text and paste it into a new document.

AUTHORS TAKE NOTE Plagiarism is defined by the IEEE as the “reuse of someone else’s prior ideas, processes, results, or words without explicitly acknowledging the original author and source.” To deal with the problem, the IEEE is encouraging members, authors, and publication editors to report cases of plagiarism when they find them. And the IEEE has developed two new online tools that make identifying and reporting plagiarism easier. “Plagiarism can be a bit daunting, so we tried with the new tools to explain it in an engaging way,” Hagen says.

The first tool is an animated PowerPoint tutorial that explains the fundamentals of plagiarism, why it is a serious offense, how to avoid it, and how to report it. The second is a flowchart that illustrates the process used to investigate a plagiarism complaint [below].

So why is plagiarism so serious? Besides being a form of copyright infringement and therefore illegal, it constitutes, according to the PowerPoint presentation, a “serious breach of professional and ethical conduct” by denying original authors credit for their contributions. Plagiarism also can apply to materials besides publications, including conference proceedings, photographs, and charts.

Cases of plagiarism vary in severity. Accordingly, the IEEE has established five levels. The most extreme, Level 1, is the “uncredited [to the original author] verbatim copying of a full paper” or at least half of an article. The least severe, Level 5, is the “credited verbatim copying of a major portion of a paper without clear delineation,” such as quotes or indents.

Punishment varies according to severity. Authors guilty of the most severe plagiarism can be prohibited from contributing work to IEEE-copyrighted publications for up to five years. Those guilty of the least severe level are required merely to write a letter of apology to the original author.

If you suspect plagiarism, or if you’re an author who finds your work plagiarized, send your complaint to the IEEE IPR Office (visit the URL at the end of the article for contact information), along with copies of the original work and the work of the alleged plagiarist, much as a lawyer would submit evidence in a case. The IPR Office records the complaint and sends it to the editor in chief of the publication where the suspected plagiarism appeared.

The second tool is the flowchart. “The motivation behind putting up the flowchart is that authors, members, and editors will now know how the process of investigating plagiarism works,” says Saifur Rahman, former chair of the IEEE Publication Services & Products Board (PSPB), and the person instrumental in developing the flowchart.

The IPR Office is important to the process because it can provide a journal editor with advice on the IEEE’s plagiarism policies and procedures, Hagen says. The editor also forms an ad hoc committee of experts from the technical field of the material allegedly plagiarized. Experts can identify what might simply be wording commonly used to describe a technical concept—which is not plagiarism. The committee’s job is to decide

whether plagiarism occurred and to recommend the appropriate corrective action, if necessary.

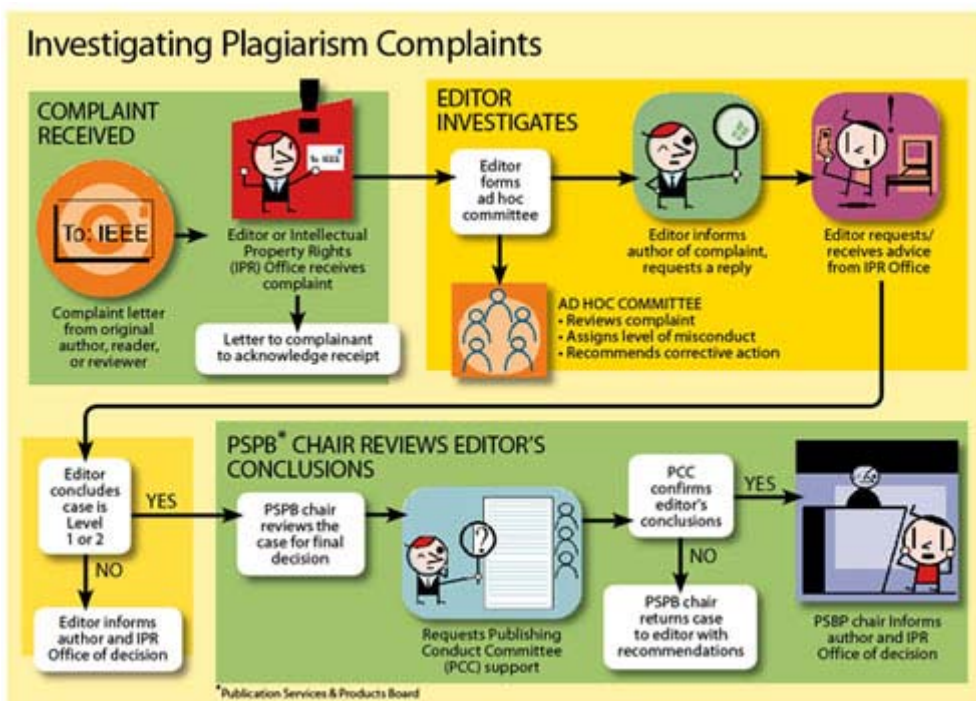
SEVERITY LEVEL From that point it's up to the editor to decide just how severe the plagiarism is. If it's serious—Level 1 or 2—the editor sends the ad hoc committee's recommendations to the PSPB chair for action. If it's less severe, the IPR Office and the plagiarizing author are notified of the decision and the corrective action to be taken.

If the process does move to the PSPB chair, the chair reviews the editor's decision and gets advice from the newly established Publishing Conduct Committee. Rahman appointed the committee in June to assist in handling misconduct cases involving publishing, including plagiarism.

If the conduct committee agrees with the editor's decision on punishment, the PSPB chair notifies the author and Hagen's IPR Office. But if the committee disagrees, the editor receives its recommendations and the cycle repeats until a course of action is agreed upon.

Besides informing members of how to avoid and report plagiarism, the IEEE is considering steps for detecting it more easily, Hagen notes. For example, the institute is considering using plagiarism-detection software that would check submitted manuscripts against those in the IEEE Xplore digital library. And it might also engage a plagiarism-detection service to check submissions against a large database of manuscripts from other science and technology publishers.

The two plagiarism tools developed by the IEEE's IPR Office can be found on the recently developed plagiarism guidelines page, at http://www.ieee.org/web/publications/rights/Plagiarism_Guidelines_Intro.html.



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