

Copycat trap

Plagiarists should beware. The next time they submit a paper to a journal, a red flag may pop up on the editors' screen warning them that the article's word patterns are suspiciously similar to those of a published paper. A pilot of this computer cop, called CrossCheck, was launched on 1 August by CrossRef, a group of 2,046 scholarly publishers.

Commercial software of this kind has been available for some time, but until now subscription firewalls have prevented its use with online literature. CrossCheck is able to access the databases of its member publishers.

Six publishers are taking part in the pilot: the Association for Computing Machinery, BMJ Publishing Group, Elsevier, the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Taylor & Francis, and Wiley-Blackwell.

Like a search engine on the web, the program computes the similarity of word strings to yield an originality score. Suspect scores are flagged-up, and it displays similar excerpts of text from different sources. But an editor will need to examine the flagged up papers to confirm plagiarism.

If all goes well, the service could be available as soon as November and other

software providers could request access in the future, says Geoffrey Bilder, director of strategic initiatives at CrossRef. Publishers could also get authors to test their papers before submission, which would spread out the work and allow honest authors to check they hadn't inadvertently 'cut and paste' verbatim, says Bilder.

The downside, he notes, is that the program would let hardened plagiarists play the system, by rewording detected passages. "It might just force people to become more sophisticated plagiarists."

Declan Butler

nature of Gottinger's work, unusual in the social sciences, may have been tough on referees. "It's frightening — it suggests plagiarism may be much more common than we previously thought," says Martin. "It undermines the basis of trust we have — and must continue to have — in our academic literature and our research community."

Most scientists who had contact with Gottinger refer to him as a lone operator — only occasionally did he have a co-author. One of these was Peter Weimann, now a professor at the University of Applied Sciences in Berlin. (None of his co-authored papers is suspected of having plagiarized work.) Weimann says that Gottinger was "hard to work with because he was not very communicative".

In a final twist, Martin has found that one of Gottinger's papers (in 1992) may itself have been plagiarized — in 2005, by an academic from Zimbabwe. ■

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