

Protecting our ‘emerging bylines’ from plagiarism

This letter is prompted by a recent report¹ in *Current Science* on a workshop on academic ethics where there were discussions on how we should punish cases of plagiarism, or ethical misconduct, by Indian scientists. Discussions on how to ensure that our researchers do not plagiarize are held frequently. Various bodies are being set up for this purpose and regulators actively probe any allegation against a researcher.

In a recent address at SINP², the Prime Minister (PM) said, ‘It is a sad commentary that the number of patents filed by Indians is still very low.... We must encourage original thought.’ While we are preparing to be knowledge superpowers through creation of new ideas, are we planning how to handle plagiarism? India has taken actions to ensure that technical innovations are patented; it is time to worry about staking our claim for original ideas.

I read with interest the September 2004 editorial ‘Credit where it is due’ by Martin Blume, the then Editor-in-Chief of APS journals. He had stated therein, ‘The quality of referencing must be a responsibility primarily of authors, but also of referees, as all should be aware of pertinent previous work. Citations should be as complete and up to date as possible and can be drawn from e-print archives as well as peer-reviewed journals.’ He also noted, ‘Failure to reference can cross the line to plagiarism when a deliberate omission creates the impression that authors of the later paper conducted the research reported in the omitted reference.’

I will state the case of *Physical Review* journals which have the best ‘search’ facilities to indicate how the aforementioned is put into practice. I was involved twice in a complaint to the Editors that some work on which I was a co-author was used (by authors from abroad) without giving us due credit. The issues were not trivial, and on both occasions the Editors speedily agreed to have the authors publish an erratum^{3,4}. In both cases the authors were aware of our publications and had deliberately not referred to them. The failures to refer could be interpreted as errors of judgement. But, even the best of journals allows the error to propagate. When the erring authors are from a

developed country and have impressive bylines, the possibility of the error propagating seems high. Errata are published with a new volume, page and paper number (reminiscent of the days of hard copies when it came in a subsequent issue) and errata listing is often overlooked by the readers. This is because about one in seventy papers publish an erratum, whereas less than one in a thousand papers are asked to publish an erratum because of ‘failure to reference’, I was informed by the Editors. Thus, only about one in fifteen of the published errata papers correspond to giving credit where it is due; these are not even separately categorized. While the original (errant) paper by Zhang *et al.*³ was being cited, the erratum was not. The error was propagating. The Editors of *Physical Review* informed me: ‘We understand and have some sympathy for your assertion that pointing out this type of omission in an Erratum means that it is less likely to be found and cited. That there is an Erratum to a paper is prominently displayed and linked in the wrapper page of the paper. However, this will not be noticed by those who do not come to this page and may be ignored by those who do.’ To this I had responded, ‘In today’s world (2001 onwards) *Phys. Rev. B* has paper numbers and not page numbers. Adding the Erratum to the original paper does not affect any subsequent paper numbering. I suggest very strongly that if such an Erratum has to serve any purpose towards *Physical Review*’s commitment to Ethics, then it must become a part of the .pdf file of the original paper.’

I would like to draw attention to an example of better service to ethics. The e-print archive arXiv.org allows authors to post updated versions of the paper, with the same paper number. Most of these updates (here about one-in-ten submissions are updated) are corrections, information on corresponding journal publication, etc. A small fraction (corresponding to the one-in-thousand of *Physical Review*) would be corrections that give ‘credit where it is due’. The advantages here are two-fold. First, a reader on arXiv.org reads the latest version as the default download. Second, the author who erred can now give credit at

all appropriate places, instead of the sanitized ‘we should have cited a relevant and important reference’ that appears in the Erratum of *Physical Review*. Fortunately the errant authors of ref. 4 had also uploaded the manuscript on arXiv.org⁵. We have written a comment⁶ that awaits a response. When, and if, they upload a properly corrected version (v2), it will be clear by its multiple occurrences how relevant and important the missing reference was.

The above efforts at setting records right might ensure appropriate citations of the work of colleagues⁶ whose papers were ignored while claiming credit for the protocol with acronym CHUF⁵. Other researchers from institutes like IISc, Osmania University and Saurashtra University, who used our experimental facilities, also exploited the CHUF protocol⁷. When the error of an established group usurping credit propagates, the novel work published by these young students will also not be cited. We need to establish bodies that will help protect our young researchers whenever their credit is usurped by established bylines.

1. Malhotra, R., *Curr. Sci.*, 2011, **101**, 476.
2. PM’s address at Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics, 21 August 2011; pib.nic.in
3. Zhang, Y. Q., Zhang, Z. D. and Aarts, J., *Phys. Rev. B*, 2005, **71**, 229902.
4. Sarkar, T., Pralong, V. and Raveau, B., *Phys. Rev. B*, 2011, **84**, 059904.
5. Sarkar, T., Pralong, V. and Raveau, B., arXiv:1106.6253v1.
6. Chaddah, P. and Banerjee, A., arXiv:1107.1942v3, and references therein.
7. Rao, S. S. and Bhat, S. V., *J. Phys. Cond. Mat.*, 2010, **22**, 116004; Lakshmi, Y. K. and Reddy, P. V., *Phys. Lett. A*, 2011, **375**, 1543; Doshi, R. R., Solanki, P. S., Khachar, U., Kuberkar, D. G., Krishna, P. S. R., Banerjee, A. and Chaddah, P., *Physica B*, 2011, **406**, 4031.

P. CHADDAH

UGC–DAE Consortium for Scientific Research,
University Campus,
Khandwa Road,
Indore 452 017, India
e-mail: chaddah@csr.res.in