Acquiring Minds Want To Know: Smart Systems, Smart Books

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No abstract

Ogburn, Joyce L. (1994) "Acquiring Minds Want To Know: Smart Systems, smart books" *Against the Grain*, 6(5), 33, 64-5. Version of Record Available from http://content.lib.utah.edu

Acquiring Minds Want To Know

Plagiarism: A Victim Speaks Out

by **Joyce L. Ogburn** (Yale University Library)

[This is the first of a new column to be edited by Joyce Ogburn. Welcome, Joyce. -Ed.]

With all the talk of plagiarism lately, I thought it was time to hear the story of an author who was a victim of plagiarism, a viewpoint that has yet to be presented in ***ATG.***

Imagine finally getting a copy of a book whose publication you have been anticipating for a long time, a book which you think will be valuable to an area of your expertise and service, opening it and finding your own words there in print - without your name attached. How would you feel?

If you were me, you would feel sick to your stomach. That is exactly how I felt last January when I received my personal copy of a work which I anticipated would make a solid contribution to a relatively under-represented area of library literature. Since it is a small literature, I looked to see whether a work of mine was cited and how. It was there; a tiny point in my work was cited along with the work of several other authors. I thought — okay, but what an insignificant point to attribute to five different authors.

Reading on, I found that I began to anticipate words and phrasings, and eventually recognized them as my own. A copy of my work was handy at home, so I pulled it out and started comparing. Sure enough, there in front of me were my words, my organization, my struggles to compose, my attempts at originality. And no citation. No mention. Thud — my heart and stomach collided somewhere in my gut.

I started underlining as I matched the words. Some sentences were verbatim, some were darn close, and even the organization of paragraphs was similar. I also soon discovered that, not only had the primary author copied me, another author who contributed one chapter had done the same thing. Oh swell, what could all this mean?

Gathering my thoughts, I knew I had to contact my editor. Since this occurred on a Saturday, I had to wait until Monday to call my editor to break the news and to find out what to do. My first thoughts were: how much copying constitutes plagiarism? did my words have to be copied verbatim or did substituting a few words constitute plagiarism? And then I thought, what would be the result of this mess?

My editor, needless to say, was aghast. I immediately sent him copies of everything for his review. After consultation with the firm's attorneys, it was determined that my work had been plagiarized and that action should be taken.

Action took the form of a letter from my editor to the other publisher, requesting a response on the matter. Phone calls followed. After a relatively short time, I received a call that matters were being resolved. The other publisher admitted that there seemed to be a problem and that it should be rectified. They agreed to address the matter with the author and to get back to us.

Imagine the conversation between the other publisher and the other author. Both of them probably felt sick, too. Plagiarism is not a petty or light accusation.

The publisher in question offered to withdraw the book from sale until it is reissued either with my words duly cited or stricken. In addition they suggested that the author pay me $100 of the royalties from the sale of 400 copies. I agreed and also asked to receive three copies of the new edition when published (I will donate two to Yale).

The author has apologized and has declared that the copying was not intentional. He immediately agreed to the suggested terms and sent me a check.

No publicity has surrounded this matter. Although my publisher owns the copyright to my work, it has received nothing except an apology from the other publisher. It is a quiet case in the larger world of publishing scandals.

Since this whole matter has been settled rather discreetly, I have started to wonder whether I will see citations to words that are mine but attributed to another. Copies in circulation have no indication that part of the work is incorrectly represented as the work of the author.

Should I have demanded more? Who will ever know the whole story who reads or consults this work? How many times might I see reviews and think of what it represents to me? Should I have asked that all copies be returned to the publisher, purged from libraries, errata sheets issued, or other steps taken to indicate CAUTION: SOME OF THESE WORDS MAY NOT BE THOSE OF THE AUTHOR?

During this ordeal I thought a lot, and I do mean A LOT, about the case of the recalled book [by Oxford University Press] which achieved fame on Acqnet and in ***ATG.*** Given the tenor of the discussions, I doubted whether a request for a recall of the book, or for any other action on the part of purchasers, would be honored. In the recent discussions (and the opinion published in an earlier issue) there is little focus on the welfare, rights and perspective of the original author - the victim. [See ***ATG*** for April, 1992.]

My publisher has assured me that I can talk about this event, but I still hesitate to broadcast the author and title in question. If I told you, and the book was in your collection, would it have any effect? Would you withdraw and discard the original and purchase the new edition? Or would you keep the book for posterity?

Publisher, vendor and library relations, and a library's collection policy notwithstanding, let me tell you that I do not care particularly to become a case study for some future scholar. I want my words returned to me. But they can NEVER really be recovered once stolen and published by another. Believe me, having ownership of your words is much better than having a few measly bucks.

How do we as professionals value intellectual property and work to support the rights of authors? Are we only willing to go as far as honoring copyright obligations, or are we also willing to fight for the integrity of scholarship

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and the values which form the backbone of the copyright laws?

At ALA I talked about the specifics of the case to a small number of people who are involved with selection in this subject. They all felt that librarians should know about what happened and that they collectively should demand that the publisher replace their copies of the original book with the new edition.

Do librarians have a right to know that they have in their collections [is] a plagiarized work? If so, how are they to be informed? What further action should then be taken by librarians?

As a footnote, let me mention that I am acquainted with the other author only through telephone conversations which occurred during the composition of his book; we have never met face to face. What an interesting encounter that would be now. It's a small world — it's bound to happen some day. I wonder whose heart and stomach will go plunging into the gut on that occasion. . .