Incidents of plagiarism are escalating in computer science and engineering. While plagiarism cases were very rare during ACM’s first 40 years in the publishing business, several cases have been uncovered annually in recent years. Most of these cases have been extreme, blatant violations of ethical practice. ACM has dealt with papers published in conference proceedings in which very little change was made in the copyrighted plagiarized article except for a new list of authors. We’ve seen other cases in which two articles differed completely in their wording, but placed side-by-side we discovered that corresponding sentences said exactly the same thing throughout the two articles. In at least one case, a pattern of plagiarism was uncovered that ultimately led to someone losing their job.

Plagiarism—the verbatim copying, near-verbatim copying, or purposely paraphrasing portions of another author’s paper—is a clear violation of ACM’s longstanding Code of Ethics. However, because of the recent rise in the number of incidents, the ACM Publications Board felt the need to further codify ACM’s existing practice in dealing with plagiarism cases, as well as to raise awareness of the issues within the community. As a first step, we issued ACM’s first policy on plagiarism in November 2005. Why are we seeing a rise in plagiarism? Certainly, pressure on young faculty to publish as many articles as possible continues unabated in academia. We now have a generation of youth who widely disregard intellectual property rights, and who may not have been schooled in the ethical issues surrounding plagiarism. Cultural differences also play a factor in our shrinking world. In some places, copying the work of a master in, say, art, is a sincere expression of respect and flattery. At the same time, tools that enable plagiarism are more readily available than ever before. Document processing systems have become easily interoperable. The cutting-and-pasting of text is so natural that it’s easy to simply forget whose text one is actually manipulating.

Of course, plagiarism is not a new phenomenon. Part of the reason we are discovering more cases may also be the same technology that makes plagiarism easier to do also makes it somewhat easier to detect. Nearly all technical articles are now literally at our fingertips and full-text searchable. So, it’s more common today to run into a plagiarized article that previously might have wallowed in the happy obscurity of a minor conference proceeding.

The ACM Plagiarism Policy defines plagiarism, its various levels of offense, specifies an investigation

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1 See www.acm.org/constitution/code.html.

2 See www.acm.org/pubs/plagiarism%20policy.html.
process, sets penalties, as well as a process of appeal. Here, we outline a few major policy provisions. Penalties for plagiarism depend upon the extent of the copying and the stage at which it is discovered. In the case of substantially plagiarized articles discovered in the ACM Digital Library after publication, ACM removes access to the full text of the article from the DL, replacing it with a notice that the article was plagiarized and pointing readers to the original article. A letter is written to the offender’s Department Chair or supervisor informing them of the infraction. The offending author must write a letter of apology to ACM and the original author. If there are subsequent offenses, the author can be barred from further publication with ACM. For copying smaller amounts of text without quotes and a citation, a note may be affixed to the article in the DL clarifying the original source of the text; the author would also be required to write a letter of apology. For plagiarism discovered before publication, say, during the review process, the article can be simply corrected or immediately rejected depending upon the extent of the infraction.

ACM is committed to performing careful and impartial investigations of allegations of plagiarism. For cases discovered after publication, the ACM Director of Publications makes contact with all parties to gather the facts of the case and makes a recommendation on a course of action to the ACM Publications Board. The Board, a group representing your peers, determines the outcome. The Board will strive to take action commensurate with any identified offense, and will seek to protect the interests of innocent parties. Appeals can be made to the ACM President.

ACM’s Plagiarism Policy also deals with the issue of self-plagiarism. This is a much more delicate issue about which there is currently much debate within the community. The ACM Publications Board has focused on one aspect of this phenomenon that it believes most professionals will agree is not acceptable practice—reuse without attribution. Repurposing one’s own words is not in itself a violation of ACM policy. In fact, the ACM Copyright Policy is rather liberal in granting authors the right to reuse any portion of their ACM copyrighted works in other works of their own. However, what is not ethical is the practice of reusing one’s own work in a way that portrays it as new when, in fact, it is not. Thus, reusing significant portions of a previously published work in another work of your own is acceptable, provided you cite the previous work and include a disclaimer stating a portion of the current work was previously published. Of course, self-plagiarism does not apply to reuse of items such as well-known definitions, equations, and so forth.

Respect for intellectual property is a cornerstone of the ACM Code of Ethics. All authors must take responsibility for the integrity of works published under their name. To this end, we urge authors to become familiar with the provisions of the ACM Plagiarism Policy. Educators have a particular responsibility to make their students understand the issues and be aware of the penalties and potential damage to their reputation. Please help us maintain ACM’s high standards.

Ronald F. Boisvert
Mary Jane Irwin
Co-Chairs, ACM Publications Board

Inquiries regarding ACM’s Plagiarism Policy should be sent to ACM’s Director of Publications Mark Mandelbaum (mandelbaum@hq.acm.org).

See Collberg and Kobourov; portal.acm.org/citation.cfm?doid=1053291.1053293.