Does Cloned Template Text Compromise the Information Integrity of a Paper, and is it a New Form of Text Plagiarism?

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ABSTRACT

Word templates exist for select journals, and their primary objective is to facilitate submissions to those journals, thereby optimizing editors' and publishers' time and resources by ensuring that the desired style (e.g., of sections, references, etc.) is followed. However, if multiple unrelated authors use the exact same template, a risk exists that some text might be erroneously cloned if template-based papers are not carefully screened by authors, journal editors or proof copyeditors. Elsevier Procedia® was used as an example. Select cloned text, presumably derived from MS Word templates used for submissions to Elsevier Procedia® journals, was assessed using Science Direct. Typically, in academic publishing, identical text is screened using text similarity software during the submission process, and if detected, may be flagged as plagiarism. After searching for "heading should be left justified, bold, with the first letter capitalized", 44 Elsevier Procedia® papers were found to be positive for vestigial template text. The integrity of the information in these papers has been compromised, so these errors should be corrected with an erratum, or in the case of extensive errors and vast tracts (e.g., pages long) of template text, papers should be retracted and republished.

1. Introduction

Templates, such as those created in software programs like Microsoft (MS) Word or LaTex, can be useful for authors seeking to satisfy a journal's formatting requirements related to style and structure. They are also helpful for editors and publishers because if authors can stylistically format the paper using such templates, then it saves editors time and publishers money. MS Word-based templates can sometimes be found on journals' websites, and these may be linked to or associated with the journal's instructions for authors. As one example, this is a popular strategy used by MDPI journals, such as Publications (MDPI, 2021). Using that template, authors then replace text (title, abstract, etc.) in a downloaded Word file with their own manuscript's text. If a paper is finally accepted for publication, the use of such a template serves the authors, the journal and publisher well because it saves all parties involved time, energy and money. However, if such

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templates are mandatory to complete the submission process, and the paper is desk rejected, such formatting requirements (template-based or otherwise) waste authors' precious time, energy and patience (Teixeira da Silva, 2020). There is a sector of the academic community, the author included, that is looking at fine-scale issues in the published literature sensu lato, aspects that may be related to the integrity of that literature, or that might in some way undermine its validity. This commentary discusses one such issue, namely cloned text and author, editorial and publisher oversight related to templates. Initial cues/clues were drawn from September 2021 comments by Guillaume Cabanac at PubPeer related to an Elsevier title, Procedia Engineering.

2. Methodology

2.1 Examination of Elsevier's Procedia® MS Word-based templates for Cloned Text

Initial cues and clues were drawn from September 2021 comments by Guillaume Cabanac at PubPeer related to an Elsevier title, Procedia Engineering.

Elsevier's Procedia®, which is described as "an online collection of high quality conference proceedings in varied subject categories, offering authors and conference organizers a fast and cost effective way to provide maximum exposure for their papers" (ELSEVIER, 2021), tend to offer a Word template for authors to use. As one example from the list of Elsevier Procedia®, on the website for Procedia CIRP, even though the MS Word template that is alluded to in the journal's instructions for authors is not available at the journal's Elsevier website (ELSEVIER, 2021), it can be downloaded from individual CIRP conference websites, such as CIRP CMS (2021), whose proceedings are then published in Elsevier's Procedia CIRP.

This case study forms part of a wider independent investigation, involving multiple associated elements of published papers, so only one aspect is highlighted here, namely the acknowledgements in a template. The text of the acknowledgements of the CIRP CMS 2021 Procedia CIRP MS Word template file states: "Acknowledgements and Reference heading should be left justified, bold, with the first letter capitalized but have no numbers. Text below continues as normal."

2.2 Examination of Elsevier's Procedia® MS Word-based templates for cloned text

When the entire text was added into the keywords search function of Elsevier's Science Direct (https://www.sciencedirect.com/) on December 13-15, 2021, 60 results were found, including possible false positives. However, when only part of that text ("heading should be left justified, bold, with the first letter capitalized") was searched, 119 results were revealed, including possible false positives.

A more in-depth analysis was conducted to try and separate true from false positives from the sample of 60. In the latter search, book chapters, instructions for authors, and unrelated papers that were not proceedings papers, i.e., published in regular journals that did likely not use a template, were removed. This gave a sample size of 55 proceedings papers, 47 of which were open access (OA) while eight were non-OA (**Table 1**).

3. Findings

3.1 Examining OA and non-OA cases for clues

Of the 47 OA proceedings papers, 44 in **Table 1** carried the searched-for template text, but three of these were false positives (i.e., they had similar template text). Finally 41/55 OA and 3/55 non-OA (i.e., 44) proceedings papers carried cloned template acknowledgment text. OA papers allows for free and open content to be verified. The three most frequent cases among the 44 papers included 13 from Procedia Engineering, nine from Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, and seven from Energy Procedia.

In Afolalu et al. (2019), for example, the acknowledgements of that paper indicate the wording to be 100% identical to the CIRP CMS 2021 Procedia CIRP MS Word template, even though that 2019 paper was published in Procedia Manufacturing. The same applied to the other OA papers in the search in Science Direct (**Table 1**).

A separate example was Bołtuć (2020), in Procedia Computer Science, which did not have the cloned acknowledgement template text, although the text of section 4.1. (p. 369) was cloned from the template. There were also a few astonishing − and serious − examples. Namely, in addition to the cloned acknowledgement template text, Moura (2017) also had pages 903-906 with cloned template text, figures and tables. Similar mass cloning of template text, tables and figures was observed in pages 1356-1360 of Balamane-Zizi and Ait-Amara (2012), pages 1745-1747 of Uluç (2013), and pages 221-226 of DeWitt, et al. (2015).

3.2 Google Search for Attempted Identification of the Source

How is it possible for a several papers, spanning from 2012-2020, to have identical text as a 2021 proceedings template? Searching Google for possible sources of the Procedia Manufacturing template Word file, one popular template service, typeset.io, offers a template for this journal, but this service requires authors to input text into an online template, with AI completing the conversion, so this is likely not a source of the cloned text (Typeset, 2021). A Google and Google Scholar search (December 13-15) for the full text of the acknowledgements in the Procedia Manufacturing paper (Afolalu, et al., 2019) revealed identical or almost identical text in templates, and even papers, dating back several years. For example, the hint provided indicated an MS Word template by another Elsevier title, Solid State Electronics Letters (KeAi, 2021), with identical wording. The earliest time stamp on that document revealed a 2016 date. Consequently, it is unclear what is the original source document of this text that has been cloned across papers and found in multiple templates.

If such text, even if identical, is not published, there are no actual ethical issues. However, if such text is published in an academic paper, usually, the detection of identical text in an earlier published paper, without citing that source, constitutes a classic case of plagiarism, i.e., “[p]assing off as one's own the work of another without credit” (NCBI, 2021). The acknowledgements in the Procedia papers (**Table 1**) do not cite any source and yet, if that text is run through free open-source similarity / plagiarism detection software (Plagiarism Detector, 2021), the result indicates “100%

plagiarism", with the source indicated as an unrelated 2021 proceedings, deepening the egg-and-chicken conundrum. Plagiarism Detector (2021) is one of a few free online plagiarism detection tools (Ahmed & Anirvan, 2020).

4. Discussion

In this paper, limited evidence is provided of a potentially new class or type of "plagiarism", namely cloned text that is derived from a Word (or other) source template, but whose source is not indicated or cited. Several unanswered queries related to this template-derived "plagiarism" remain while a few questions pertaining to possible publishing-related ethics issues arise.

Should identical (or almost identical) template-based text, whose source has not been attributed, but which appears in a paper that is not considered to be "original research", be classified as a form of plagiarism? Typically, to avoid plagiarism in an academic paper, there is a need to attribute a source to each statement of fact, as reflected by a citation or reference, while text that is used directly, needs to be placed in quotation marks (Bielska & Rutkowski, 2021). Based on that definition alone, template-derived unattributed text is a form of plagiarism. Does the failure to detect this template-derived "plagiarism" reflect poor quality control by the editor or publisher (copyeditor), lack of verification by the author(s), or both? If one considers that this template-derived text was not supposed to be in the text of the published paper, then it certainly reflects poor verification by the author and the journal or publisher's copyeditor. If text is from a copyrighted paper, is copied text from that paper, even if it is only text from the acknowledgement, copyright infringement? Possibly yes, but this depends on the volume of text that is copied, the clear identification of the source, the ability of a defendant to "satisfy the burden of persuasion", as well as a host of other considerations (Loren & Reese, 2019). The Procedia CIRP (CIRP CMS, 2021) indicates on the first page of the template "© 2021 The Authors. Published by Elsevier B.V.", so is the Elsevier template a copyrighted document? If the "recycled" text remains within Elsevier's Procedia®, i.e., the same copyright holder (Elsevier), then this suggests that it might not be considered as copyright infringement, but would still be textual duplication and/or plagiarism *sensu stricto*.

Considering that the existence of cloned template-derived text is clearly an error, how should such errors be corrected (Teixeira da Silva, 2016)? One simple way to deal with this would be to issue an erratum, indicating to readers that the "template" text is not an integral part of the paper. In several cases (Balamane-Zizi & Ait-Amara, 2012; Uluç, 2013; DeWitt et al., 2015; Moura, 2017), the cloned template text is extensive, even pages long, so an erratum should be sine qua non. Ideally, in those cases, the paper should be retracted, the entirely cloned template text should be retracted, and the paper should then be republished. One possible problem with this solution is where page numbers might change as a result of cut or adjusted text, since adjusted page numbers will also affect the accuracy of papers that cited these papers. Moreover, there are additional errors (see footnotes of **Table 1**) with Moura (2017) and Sorkin et al. (2017) that also need to be addressed by an erratum, or through retraction and republication. Retraction and republication is one of the more recent forms of correcting the academic literature (Teixeira da Silva, 2022).

It is worth considering if this is a new type of plagiarism that has not yet been considered or classified (Dougherty, 2020). Dougherty (2020) classified plagiarism into seven categories: translatio n plagiarism, which is "the conversion of text from one language to another with the intention of hiding its origin" (p. 14); compression plagiarism, in converts a lengthy original text into a compacted form; dispersal plagiarism, in which ideas are taken from a larger body of text, and republished as smaller units; magisterial plagiarism, which limits plagiarism to Catholic theology texts; exposition plagiarism, in which texts of historical precedent are ignored or are not represented in a balanced manner; template plagiarism, in which "a plagiarist uses a previously published passage on one subject and reworks it to produce a seemingly new passage on a different subject by changing a key term". Even though Dougherty (2020) used the term "template" in the last classification, it is unrelated to the copying of template text, as is discussed in this paper, nor does it fall into the seven categories of plagiarism listed by Ahmed and Anirvan (2020). There are some gray areas of plagiarism, such as the reuse of text, even if with appropriate citation to the source, of optimized research protocols, in systematic reviews (Pieper et al., 2021). Consequently, a new class of plagiarism is suggested in this paper, 'template-derived plagiarism', defined as follows: text derived from a template that has, typically through oversight, remained in a derivative work or paper. Academics in the art and science of publishing ethics would do well to examine the various currently available classes of plagiarism to better differentiate them, and to substantiate each one with clear cases and examples, as has been done in this paper.

In the case of Elsevier's Procedia® papers indicated in **Table 1**, it would be important for Elsevier to address these queries. This paper has one limitation, namely the exclusive reliance on Elsevier's Procedia® papers. Additional and more detailed bibliometric analyses need to be conducted using Word template texts, not only in Elsevier journals, but also in journals by other publishers that also employ templates.

As one step to addressing this gap, additional informal searches for template-related "plagiarism" in non-Elsevier journals were made. A Google Scholar search for the text "In this section, you can acknowledge any support given which is not covered by the author contribution or funding sections" from the acknowledgement section of the MDPI Publications template (MDPI, 2021) revealed no papers with vestigial or residual text, only 119 hits related to actual MDPI journal Word templates. Even though Springer Nature (2021) indicates that some of its journals have Word templates, there is no list of such journals, although screening Google (December 13-15, 2021) revealed one such case of a Springer Nature journal, Scientific Data (2021). When the second sentence of the acknowledge ments ("Acknowledgements should be brief, and should not include thanks to anonymous referees and editors or effusive comments") was searched in Google Scholar, two 2012 templates were detected with basically the exact same wording, absent two words from the original, one of which is summarized next: "Acknowledgements should be brief, and should not include thanks to anonymous referees and editors, inessential words, or effusive comments" (Canadian Research & Development Center of Sciences and Cultures, 2012: p. II). Although a search for this sentence at Springer Nature's SpringerLink revealed 15 search results, none of them carried that sentence in the published papers.

Most of the studied papers in **Table 1** carried a notice on their first pages, along the line of "Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of the", followed by the name of the congress or proceeding, suggesting that failure to detect the inclusion of cloned template text in final papers was also the responsibility of the proceedings organizers and overseeing editors, in addition to the authors and publisher (Elsevier). As a result, "clusters" of erroneous or error-filled papers can be found, for example, the "13th Global Congress on Manufacturing and Management, GCMM 2016", a 2017 volume of Procedia Engineering encompassing seven papers, as can be gleaned from **Table 1**. Other quality- and integrity-related aspects of the of the content of these papers, such as statistical robustness or language, were not assessed. However, if such papers are candidates for errata or retraction and republication, it might be worthwhile conducting a fresh and independent peer review to affirm their scientific validity prior to any corrective measures.

Separately, there is the issue of benefits and rewards. Authors of Elsevier's Procedia® papers are privileged because these papers are indexed in Scopus. Scopus is widely considered to be an elite status symbol in academic publishing (Pranckutė, 2021). Consequently, if erroneous or poorly vetted error-ridden literature is given this unique indexing opportunity, this might be perceived by some academics as unfair. Another angle to this issue is the perceived unfair benefit by the proceedings organizers and publisher. In the case of papers in **Table 1**, Elsevier might be deriving benefit (fees, reputation, etc.) from erroneous papers (Teixeira da Silva & Vuong, 2021). If such errors remain uncorrected, then these benefits might be perceived as unfair.

5. Conclusion

Ultimately, papers with degraded information integrity and oversight, as shown in **Table 1**, have been unfairly indexed in Scopus. Those errors range between careless oversight to pure editorial or copy editing incompetence, given that the function of editors and copy editors is precisely to detect such errors prior to publication. It is unclear to the author if OA was part of a "deal" (inclusive package) when participating in such congresses, and if the publication of proceedings is a guarantee. It is also unclear to the author if a separate article processing charge was paid by the authors in order for their papers to appear OA, or if this was part of the cost of the proceedings paid for by meeting organizers to Elsevier. Either way, the publisher offers a professional service, but the product that has resulted from that service is neither perfect nor professionally copy edited.

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[About the author]

Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva is a botanist and molecular biologist by training, but with broader experience in plant breeding, horticulture, agronomy, and forestry, soil and environmental sciences. He has developed a keen interest in issues related to academic publishing, and has worked as an independent researcher over the past decade.

[Appendix 1]

Table 1 A search (December 13-15, 2021) in Elsevier's Science Direct for "heading should be left justified, bold, with the first letter capitalized" to detect cloned acknowledgements-related template text in open access and non-open access papers

Authors (listed chronologically, then alphabetically)	Elsevier Procedia® or other Scopus-indexed journal title	Location in text	Additional residual template text[1)]
Open access			
Balamane-Zizi & Ait-Amara (2012)	Energy Procedia	-[2)]	pp. 1356-1360
Uluç (2013)	Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences	-	pp. 1745-1747
Buayai, et al. (2014)	Energy Procedia	p. 509	
Florek, et al. (2014)	Procedia Materials Science	p. 327	
Pagliuca & Scarpato (2014)	Procedia Economics and Finance	p. 230	
Paresashvili (2014)	Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences	p. 172	
Remeikienė, Startienė, & Stundžienė (2014)	Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences	p. 272	
DeWitt, et al. (2015)	Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences	p. 224	pp. 221-226
Garcia Laborda (2015)	Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences	p. 549	
Gavora, Jakešová, & Kalenda (2015)	Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences	p. 230	
Huang, et al. (2015)	Procedia IUTAM	p. 89	
Pai & Shenoy (2015)	Aquatic Procedia	p. 1412	
Kang, et al. (2015)	Procedia Engineering	p. 1453	
Kuo, Yu, & Hsiao (2015)	Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences	-	p. 231
Pehoiu & Moacă (2015)	Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences	p. 1310	
Pekkarinen (2015)	Physics Procedia	p. 294	
Song, Liu, & Wang (2015)	Procedia Engineering	p. 588	
Vinogradov, Zhuravlev, & Fundaev (2015)	Procedia Engineering	p. 22	
Ataei, Bradford, & Valipour (2016)	Procedia Engineering	p. 1160	
Jiao, et al. (2016)	Physics Procedia	p. 46	
Juklová & Průšová (2016)	Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences	p. 8	
Anwar, Al-Jumaily, & Watsford (2017)	Procedia Computer Science	p. 202	
Moura (2017)[3)]	Procedia Engineering	p. 905	pp. 903-906
Feng (2017)	Procedia Engineering	p. 1335	
Friman (2017)	Energy Procedia	p. 27	p. 27

Gao, Liu, & Guo (2017)	Procedia Engineering	p. 1399	
Grillo, Einloft, & Seferin (2017)	Energy Procedia	p. 94	
Guo, et al. (2017)	Procedia Engineering	p. 1385	p. 1385
Huang (2017)	Procedia Engineering	p. 1328	
Ma (2017)	Procedia Engineering	p. 1378	
Sorkin, Tan, & Wang (2017)[4]	Procedia Engineering	p. 56	p. 56
Wang (2017)	Procedia Engineering	p. 1355	
Yu & Yang (2017)	Procedia Engineering	p. 1370	
Hsu, Wang, & Chu (2018)	Procedia Manufacturing	p. 434	
Lei, Tan, & Li (2018)	Energy Procedia	p. 1078	p. 1078
Wu, et al. (2018)	Energy Procedia	p. 108	
Yan, et al. (2018)	Energy Procedia	p. 623	
Zeilmann, Ivaninski, & Webber (2018)	Procedia CIRP	p. 476	
Afolalu, et al. (2019)	Procedia Manufacturing	p. 1072	
Butenkov, Krivsha, & Krivsha (2019)	Procedia Computer Science	p. 198	p. 194
Colasante, et al. (2019)	Procedia Manufacturing	p. 1641	
Reynoso & Diván (2019)	Procedia Computer Science	p. 303	
Xiao & Zheng (2019)	Procedia Computer Science	p. 35	p. 35
Wang, et al. (2020)	Procedia CIRP	p. 797	
Non-open access			
Raza, et al. (2015)	Materials Today: Proceedings	p. 5453	
Gangadharappa, et al. (2018)	Materials Today: Proceedings	p. 22389	
Mahdi, Azra, & Azam (2018)	Materials Today: Proceedings	p. 20640	

1) To identify this text, papers were screened manually from first to last page to identify any possible template text. Given the manual nature of this screening stage, it is possible that some pages with template text might not have been detected.

2) The template text that was originally searched for was not found in the acknowledgements section, but since some words of template text were the same (e.g., “justified”), this likely resulted in their inclusion in the search results

3) There are additional problems with this paper, or errors: In the HTML text, author’s affiliation listed as: “a) First affiliation, Address, City and Postcode, Country b) Second affiliation, Address, City and Postcode, Country”; in the PDF version, the same problem as the HTML version, and the author’s name (Newton Célio Becker Moura) is missing completely; yellow highlighted references appear throughout the PDF; Portuguese text (seemingly untranslated text) appears on p. 899; truncated text and chunks of text with little or no sense, spacing and setting errors in abundance (p. 899-902).

4) There are additional problems with this paper, or errors: In the HTML text, authors are listed as: Sorkin, A., Tan, J.L., Wong, C.H. In the PDF version, however, authors listed as: Tan, J.L., Wong, C.H., Sorkin, A.