

Ever been asked to review your own paper? This economist was - Retraction Watch

Serdar Sayan

“Eerily familiar”: That’s how [Serdar Sayan](#) of TOBB University of Economics and Technology in Turkey says it felt to read a submission to the Scandinavian Journal of Economics, after the journal asked him to review the manuscript. It turns out, it was Sayan’s paper, word for word, equation for equation, down to the last punctuation mark. But this wasn’t a case of authors faking email addresses for reviewers to rubber stamp their own work – instead, the author had plagiarized from a paper Sayan had published a few years earlier. Sayan describes the surreal experience in the Review of Social Economy (vol. 74, no. 1, 2016), in a paper titled: [“Serving as a referee for your own paper: A dream come true or...?”](#)

“I have been asked by a journal to serve as a referee for my own paper. Obviously, this sounds just as unlikely, and probably almost as intriguing, as saying ‘I have attended my own funeral.’” — Serdar Sayan, [Review of Social Economy](#) (vol. 74, no. 1, 2016)

Retraction Watch: When you looked at the paper, how long did it take you to figure out what had happened?

Serdar Sayan: Well, it took me 5 or maybe 10 minutes initially. Then I spent some more time to make sure. When I received the email from the editor asking me to review the attached paper by Dr. xxx (I’d rather not say his name), I decided to take a look right away. Right after seeing the first page of the manuscript, I thought the journal’s editorial office was doing a swell job in picking the referees, as the title matched perfectly with one of my primary areas of research. As a matter of fact, I said to myself, I had a paper with almost exactly the same title myself.

At the end of the abstract, I had already decided that the paper was a nicely written piece on such an interesting research question that it would be a pleasure to read! As I was getting ready to inform the editor of my willingness to review the paper, the manuscript started to strike me as too familiar a piece.

That sense of familiarity wasn’t surprising because the manuscript was plagiarized wholesale from [“Implications of unequal rates of population growth for trade: An overlapping generations-general equilibrium analysis within the Heckscher-Ohlin framework,”](#) a paper I had already published jointly with my then-PhD student Mehdi Jelassi a couple of years earlier.

RW: This must have been a strange experience – did it ever occur to you that something like this might happen?

Sayan: Frankly, no. It didn’t. This kind of risk-taking behavior seems almost completely irrational to me. Even if I were not asked to review the manuscript, the editorial office would probably have

contacted one of a few other colleagues who work on the same issue, and they too would have probably recognized my paper. Even in the unlikely case of the paper being eventually published in the *Scandinavian Journal*, the plagiarism would have sooner or later been spotted and retracted.

RW: How concerned were you about issues of plagiarism in research, or economics research specifically, before this incident? Are you more concerned, as a result?

Sayan: Well, I was always somewhat concerned. As a professor and university administrator who has assumed different editorial responsibilities — from guest editor to editor-in-chief — for different journals, I have come across several instances of plagiarism. I have also served as a member in the Academic Ethics Committee of the Turkish Council of Higher Education in the past, a national post that gave me invaluable insights into the nature and extent of plagiarism going on in academia. Still, I have become somewhat more concerned after seeing the lengths that plagiarizers could go.

RW: You contacted the journal, who obviously rejected the paper and tried to contact the author. Did you ever consider contacting the author directly? Why or why not?

Sayan: Contacting the author directly didn't occur to me. I didn't see a need. After fully assessing the scope of the plagiarism attempt, I sent an email to the editor and said:

"I would have loved to serve as a referee for the *Scandinavian Journal of Economics* as per your request, had the paper been an original paper! I'm afraid we are faced with the most blatant attempt of plagiarism that I have ever seen: The paper you sent me to review is an exact replica of a previously published paper of mine. (I can tell you, therefore, that it's a great paper!)"

Professor Gottfries, the editor, wrote back and said he was shocked. A few weeks later, he emailed me to say the author had not responded to his inquiries, and he planned to notify his department and vice chancellor about the incident.

I didn't see a point in pursuing the matter any further.

RW: In the article, you ask a really interesting question – why do researchers take the risk of plagiarizing? Even if they are not so unfortunate as to have the author they plagiarized from be asked to review the paper, they could very well have a reviewer or reader who recognized the earlier work. After this experience, what is your answer to that question?

Sayan: That's right. It should really be a huge blow to the plagiarizer's academic reputation. It's like playing the Russian Roulette game. You never know when you'll hit the loaded chamber!

So, I've become really curious about the motivation behind this irrational behavior and have been thinking about it since the incident. There are several reasons apparently but the major reason, I believe, is what I call the academic globalization process. Since the 1990s, academic institutions everywhere have come to recognize the merits of academic appointment and promotion standards in other countries, particularly in the USA, and have begun to adopt similar criteria using new metrics like research articles published in peer-reviewed journals. Unfortunately, many journals cannot (or do not) run the peer review process properly and impartially. The editors/reviewers of these journals apply relaxed standards to papers submitted by researchers from their social or professional

networks, and the researchers opt for journals whose editors/reviewers would treat their submissions favorably on account of such connections. The “peers” are there, but there is often no review to be taken seriously.

Administrators of many universities in developing countries thought the solution would be to require that faculty members seeking promotion get their papers accepted to international journals, whose reviewers could not be identified or convinced to personal favors. Yet, many faculty members often lack the language and communication skills needed to write publishable papers in a foreign language (most typically English). Even worse, many academics with Ph.D.s from universities in developing or emerging countries do not even know how to pose interesting and rigorous research questions to write about and publish papers – particularly in social sciences. At the end, such delays translate into strong pressures to violate research ethics, and sometimes, academics bow to those pressures.

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