Iranian Academia: Evolution after Revolution and Plagiarism as a Disorder

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Abstract Recently, a few of scientific journals raise serious questions about scientific ethics and moral judgment of some of the Iranian government’s senior executives in their papers. Plagiarism, under any circumstances is not justified, and we do not intend to justify it in this note. However, we find it useful in understanding why otherwise respected, responsible individuals may engage in plagiarism by terse review of the history Iranian academia.

Keywords Iran · Plagiarism

Although culture and civilization have a long history in Iran and even Persian Empire has been regarded as a major competitor of Greek and Roman civilizations for about 1000 years, Iran’s current portion of global power sources (such as population, GDP, geography, technology and tourism) doesn’t justify this amount of international news which is on the air every day about Iran.

Among the related news broadcasts everyday in abundance, it is not easy to find something consistent with the Iranian’s national pride. Though, Nature’s editorial (2005) which had admired scientific development can be considered as an important exception.

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However, another Nature’s editorial (Butler 2009) raises serious questions about scientific ethics and moral judgment of some of the Iranian government’s senior executives. Plagiarism, under any circumstances is not justified, and we do not intend to justify it in this note. However, we find it useful in understanding why otherwise respected, responsible individuals may engage in plagiarism by terse review of the history Iranian academia.

When Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980, many leading western countries supported his war efforts against Iran. The Western support of Saddam Hussein war of aggression against Iran created intense anti-West sentiments among many Iranians. One of the manifestations of these negative feelings was a breakdown of communications between Iranian universities and the universities of many western countries. Under the difficult circumstances of the war and the academic isolation of Iran, free flow of information between Iran and the West was severely limited: Even access to scientific journals had been restricted. The scientific isolation trend continued until years after the end of hostility in 1988. Consequently, little by little for the new generation of academicians and students, international academic norms became unfamiliar. Many of them, using references are not aware of international accepted practice and intellectual property rights in this regard.

On the one hand, Islamic tradition in the past entailed different idea in regard to intellectual property; Since Islam appreciate science diffusion as a value, many Islamic theologians used to believe that when something scientific is created, it belongs to the society, no limitation should be placed on its publication, because it can be more useful when it is in the public domain and according to their beliefs their own scientific efforts were mostly aimed at helping mankind instead of financial gain,\(^1\) (see for e.g. *Tahrir al-Wasilah* by Ayatollah Khomeini) though It doesn’t mean that they think plagiarism is justifiable. It’s not surprising that gradually Iran’s academicians began to pay less attention to the intellectual property rights.

On the other hand, rapid growth in the number of universities in Iran necessitated training professors inside the country, so universities began to develop postgraduates rapidly and this rapid growth involved some inevitable troubles, for instance most of the graduated students don’t have a reasonable proficiency in English, so they may commit plagiarism by copying and pasting a whole paragraph without knowing that it is an example of academic dishonesty because they just cite the source at the end of the paragraph but they don’t put the paragraph in quotation marks, of course they haven’t been trained about academic ethics. And some others struggling to understand a passage in a foreign language publication, found it convenient to plagiarize and their faculty research advisor were too busy to truly control for such impropriety. As a result, no serious control was imposed on the scholarly works so that these works meet the Western academic standards.

It should be noted that education is universally considered crucially important by many Iranians, irrespective of their socio-economic origin and status. Actually many Iranians believe that one’s social status and prestige are based on having

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\(^1\) After 1979 revolution that many of these Islamic clerics engaged directly in ruling the country little by little they noticed the importance of intellectual property rights.
obtained a high quality college education and a university degree. Also being a faculty member is considered having a prestigious, permanent employment. The importance of education is a cultural trait that is a widely held belief among the Iranians who live abroad also.

Some other factors that might contribute to such plagiarism are:

- Weakness of National Innovation System and poor interaction between the various actors in science, including universities, and society which leads to identifying publication as the major indicator of scientific eminence, instead of genuine attempts to tackle real problems in the country.
- Publication in ISI journals is a precondition for promotion of faculty members in the vast majority of universities in Iran and universities place excessive emphasis on Impact factor of journals.
- Having at least one paper accepted in an ISI journal, is prerequisite for PhD completion in most of the disciplines.
- Creating a regional citation index (www.isc.gov.ir) has caused other journals which are not included to be neglected by researches and nobody is interested in publishing in them.
- Some professors put heavy pressure on their students to publish some papers and leave them without strong support; however, they expect them to write the professor’s name on the paper as the first author! It might impel these students to plagiarism.

In aftermath of all these policies on the one hand, the number of Iranian papers cited in ISI journals has noticeably increased (a 20-fold increase in 11 years) (Ghazinoory 2009) on the other hand some cases involving alleged plagiarism have been seen and has got bad publicity.

To sum up, despite all the problems, a promising trend is taking shape in Iranian academia. Three and half million Iranian students, who are the new generation (about 65 percent girls), are much more familiar with English, have access to the Internet, and international scientific publications.

Incidents like Kordan’s case (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kordan) and AMC journal, which jolted scientific community and provoked controversy, made Iranian researchers vigilant toward plagiarism, some other notifications like Nature’s editor and Iranian website named “Professors against Plagiarism” (http://profs-against-plagiarism.blogspot.com) have been effective as well. As a direct result of these conditions, Iranian cabinet passed a law that requires checking the validity of university certifications that are hold by government officials.

Also Iranian Parliament is passing a law to penalize who uses “doctor” and “engineer” as a title while not having a valid relevant academic certificate

2 A humorous belief in Iranian culture says: your university degree is like your cloth, having it doesn’t make you important but if you don’t have it, others make fun of you!

3 According to the Iranian Studies Group’s research, Iranian Americans rank first among 67 immigrant groups in regards to educational attainment (http://www.niacouncil.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5782).

4 Applied Mathematics Computation journal which used to publish papers without referee. Some Iranian professors got promotion using this opportunity. Of course, the editor in chief compelled to retire.
Another drastic measure is being taken to devise a database called “national research information system” which is bound to record all information related to research contracts and academic thesis so that unwitting repetitive works and deliberate plagiarism be prevented (http://www.semat.ir).

Also significant increase in financial resources allocated to priority technologies like nanotechnology (Ghazinoory et al. 2009) has led to broadening and deepening related genuine scientific research.

Many communication difficulties still exist between Iranian universities and the universities world wide. Foreign universities through cooperative research programs and academic exchanges with Iranian universities can create opportunities for mutual benefits, enhance global understanding, and promote peace.

References


