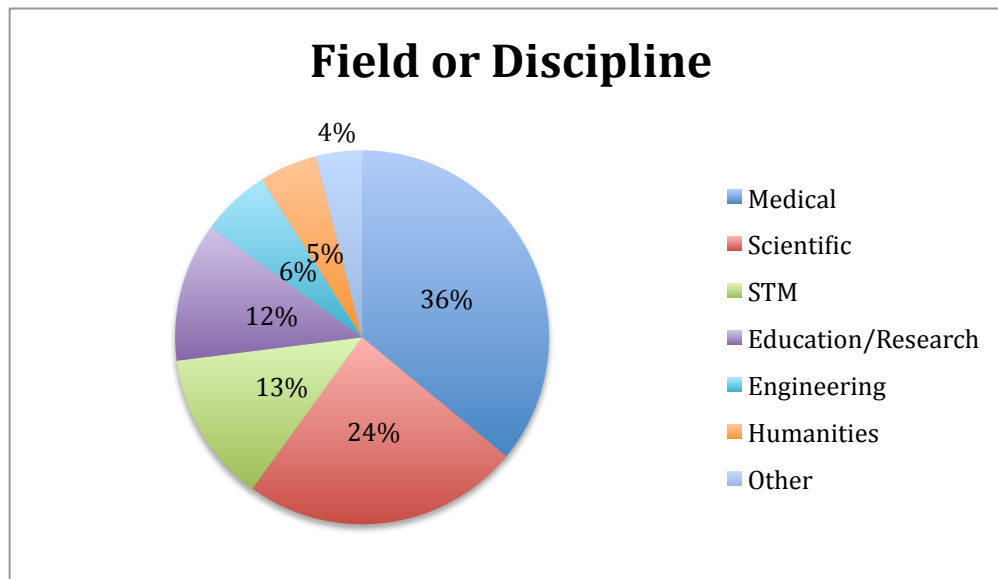


## Editors and Ethics: A Survey on the Frontlines of Scholarly Publishing

In March 2013, [iThenticate](#) surveyed 120 people in an “editorial role” (editors or editorial staff) at scholarly publications to learn more about their attitudes and experiences with ethical conflicts and other pressing issues.

The respondents represented the following fields:



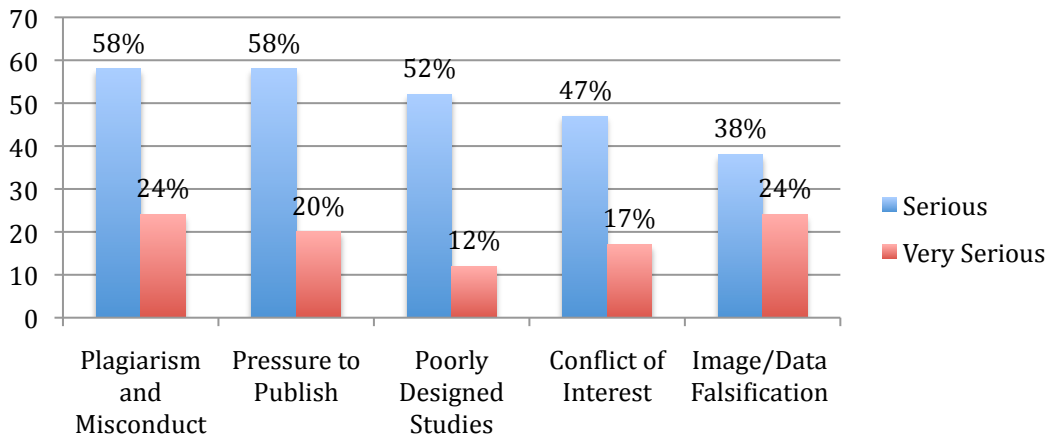
### Leading Concerns

Respondents were queried about what they believed to be the top challenges facing scholarly publishing as a whole, as well as what they perceived as the greatest threats to the integrity of the field.

Responses reflect a high level of concern on a series of issues that surfaced repeatedly throughout the survey. Five major topics dominated the response field: **Plagiarism, pressure to publish, poorly designed studies, technological advances that simplify image or data falsification and conflicts of interest between researchers and industry.**

Among the general challenges presented to respondents, “plagiarism and misconduct” ranked the highest, with 82 percent of editors deeming it “serious” or “very serious.” It was followed closely by “pressure to publish”, which 58 percent of those surveyed found “serious” and 20 percent deemed “very serious.” Close to half of editors believed that “poorly designed studies” and “conflicts of interest” were serious challenges, and “image/data falsification” was deemed serious by more than a third of respondents.

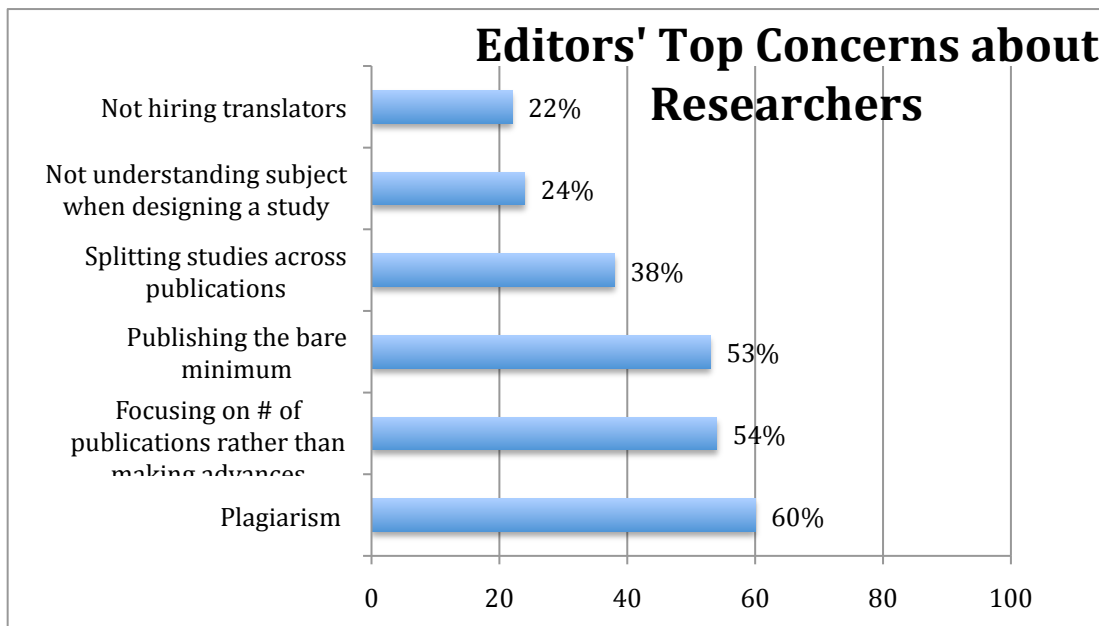
## Top 5 Threats to Integrity of Scholarly Publishing



Respondents were largely impartial on the topic of ghostwriting, with 44 percent stating their position as “neutral.” The peer review process was another mostly neutral issue in the minds of respondents; with a majority reporting they were “neutral” (36 percent), believed it was “somewhat serious” (21 percent) or “not serious” (17 percent).

### Specific Concerns

Respondents were asked to select their **top 3** concerns about researchers’ practices from a list of 10 issues. The issues topping the list share a connection with the five major ethical challenges previously identified—most directly, the ripple effects of the pressure to publish seem to be reflected in the research practices scholarly editors identified as most concerning.

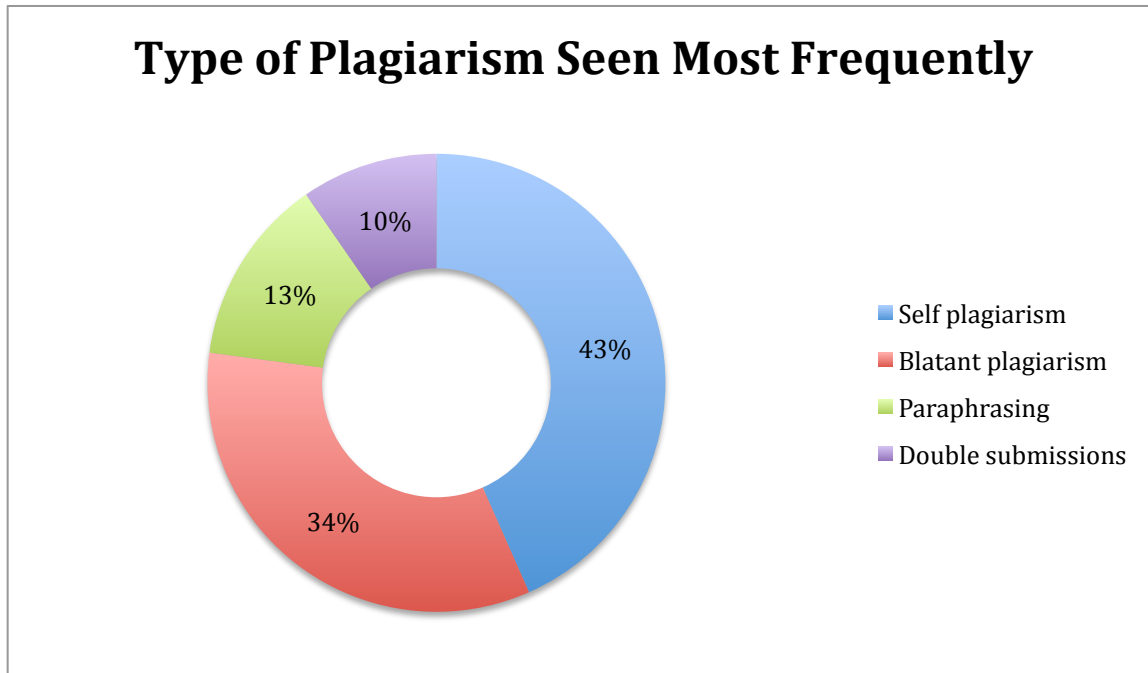


### Trends in Plagiarism

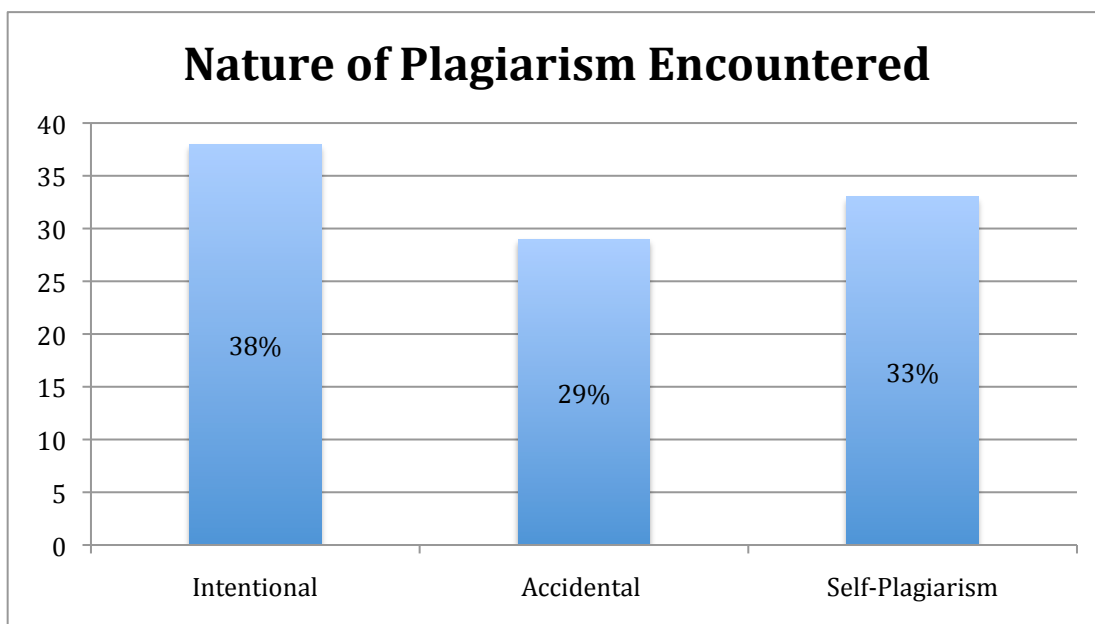
Diving deeper into the survey’s lead ethical issue, plagiarism, editors answered questions about the types of the plagiarism they encounter, how it’s most often detected, and what they believed was the most effective way to deter plagiarized submissions.

Their responses indicate a surprising amount of blatant plagiarism with intent to deceive, and a firm belief in the efficacy of plagiarism detection software both to prevent and identify instances of plagiarism.

While the most frequent type of plagiarism encountered by editors and editorial staff was self-plagiarism (36 percent), nearly 29 percent claimed that the plagiarism they encounter most often is blatant plagiarism involving large portions of unattributed text. Further, 38 percent of editors believe the plagiarism they see is intentional, while 29 percent believe it's accidental. The remaining respondents categorized it as self-plagiarism.



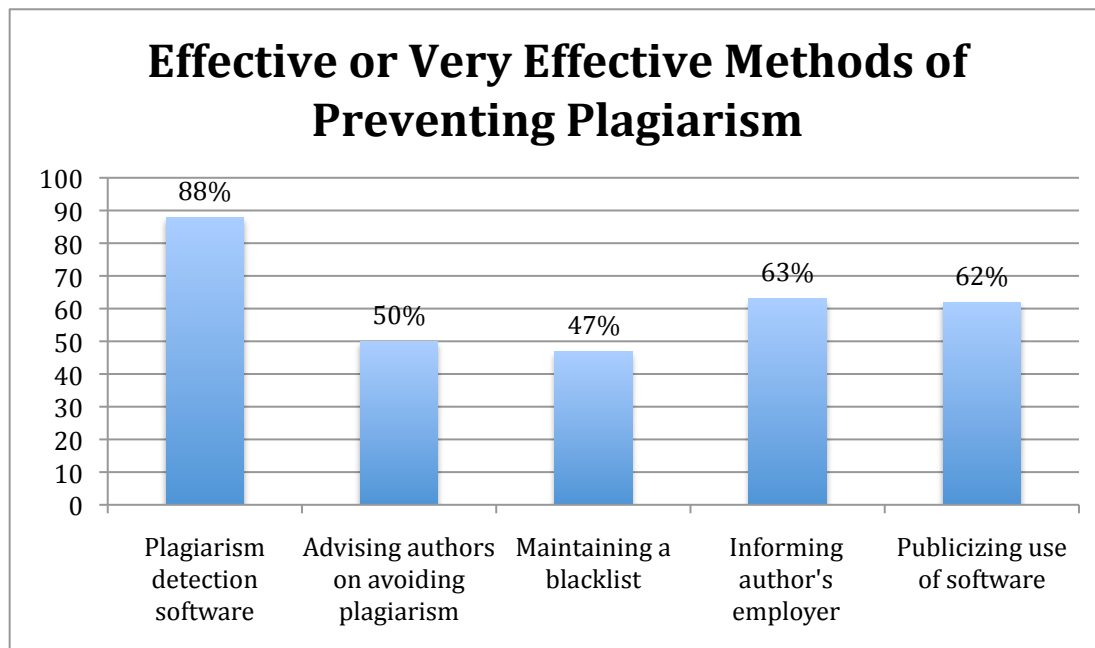
Respondents were also asked a series of specific questions about the nature and perceived intention of the ethical issues they confronted most regularly.



Respondents were asked to rank the efficacy of several tactics for preventing ethical issues. In the leading recommendation, 88 percent stated that use of plagiarism detection software was an

“effective” or “very effective” way to prevent ethical issues. Half believe that directly advising submitting authors on how to avoid plagiarism is effective or very effective, and 62 percent found publicizing their journal’s use of plagiarism detection software effective.

The respondents weren’t shy about identifying the potential deterrent effects of punitive measures—47 percent of those surveyed believe maintaining a blacklist of authors who have been associated with plagiarism and 63 percent believe informing an author’s employer when plagiarism is found are effective prevention methods.



Plagiarism detection software emerged as the clear, leading method for identifying duplication, with 55 percent of editors relying on it for most detections. The peer-review process also turned up a significant number of plagiarism cases, with 22 percent of editors crediting it for finding most instances.

In what is perhaps an indication of longtime reliance on plagiarism detection software, 75 percent of respondents say their journal is issuing the same number of retractions per year over the past two years. Nearly 20 percent say they’re issuing more retractions, perhaps as a result of increased screening.

Respondents also weighed in on a statistic found by iThenticate in a prior survey, indicating that more than half of researchers have never used plagiarism detection software. Overwhelmingly, the editors attributed that to a lack of awareness about what constitutes plagiarism (37 percent), or an underestimation of the consequences of plagiarism (21 percent).

## **Conclusions**

Among the many issues and challenges scholarly editors and editorial staff face, plagiarism, misconduct and the pressure to publish are highly pervasive, and the ripple effects of these problems can be seen throughout the survey results.

Editors and editorial staff cited repeated concerns about researchers churning out publications at the expense of designing studies well and, in a larger sense, at the cost of doing good, innovative science.

Instances of plagiarism faced by this group of editors and editorial staff is often perceived as intentional or self-plagiarism, and in all cases they reported that researchers may well be ignorant of the reputation, costs and career consequences of being caught in a plagiarism case.

Plagiarism detection software plays a prominent role in both prevention and detection in the eyes of editors, but as the survey results indicate, there's a perceptible fraction of editors who lean toward more punitive measures for deterring authors from submitting unoriginal work.

**CORRECTION:** July 1, 2013: Top 5 Threats to Integrity of Scholarly Publishing chart, changed "Plagiarism" to "Plagiarism and Misconduct" to more accurately reflect the text.