

PLAGIARISM AND *BLAT* IN THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY: THE CASE STUDY FROM THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND

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ABSTRACT

Plagiarism, data falsification, and fabrication are examples of academic misconduct. Protection of a plagiarist from legal and professional consequences of plagiarism is not possible without the contribution of some senior academics. *Blat* is a Russian term meaning using social networks to get things done informally. Thus, *blat* as an informal practice may play a role in the academic institutions responsible for dealing with allegations of academic misconduct against scholars and researchers. Professor Mariusz Cygnar is a rector of the State School of Higher Vocational Education in Nowy Sacz, Poland, European Union. Professor Cygnar was accused of plagiarism publicly. Inquires made upon the Freedom of Information Act into professor Cygnar's case resulted in documents indicating on *blat*. For the first time, a set of documents translated from the Polish language into English, demonstrating the role of informality and *blat*, in plagiarism was made open for the international community.

Keywords: Informality, *blat*, scientific misconduct, plagiarism.

INTRODUCTION

In the Republic of Poland, a unique academic degree, known as '*habilitation*' (or postdoctoral degree), is granted to the scholars who publish a dissertation and decide to undergo descriptive assessment from peers. Statutory regulations of many Polish universities restrict rectorship for academics with a *habilitation* degree only. Thus, academics awarded with *habilitation* can benefit from additional prestige.

Professor Mariusz Cygnar was awarded a *habilitation* degree in 2013. Currently, professor Cygnar serves, for a second term, as a rector of the State University of Applied Sciences in Nowy Sacz, Poland, European Union. His primary area of expertise is in combustion engines and mechanical engineering. Professor Cygnar is also a member of the Conference of Rectors of the State Schools of Higher Vocational Education in the Republic of Poland. Thus, professor Cygnar plays an exposed role in the national system of higher education. Moreover, allegations against professor Cygnar of artificially enhanced academic achievements by plagiarism were made public in March 2020 by professor Marek Wronski (Wronski 2021).

Professor Wronski is an investigative journalist and columnist, writing systematically about poor academic integrity in the Academic Forum magazine under the heading 'From the Archives of Scientific Misconduct' (Glendinning 2015). According to professor Wronski, Cygnar has plagiarised PhD thesis of Marcin Noga – a former PhD student of the Cracow University of Technology. In addition, professor Wronski claims, rector Cygnar was protected

from legal and professional consequences of plagiarism by senior members of the academic community in the Republic of Poland (including members of the Board of Central Commission to Degrees and Titles) (Wronski 2021).

Moreover, none of Wronski's claims had been supported by any document attached to the article with allegations against professor Cygnar. Thus, it was mandatory to gain access to any piece of evidence supporting claims. As an Internet and social investigator, the author has launched a private investigation with results showing a potent role of *blat* among senior members of an academic community in establishing and promoting the fraudulent curriculum vitae of professor Cygnar.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Networking is a set of highly desired social skills mastered throughout an individual's life. Networking is also a vital ability of a scholar and researcher. Thus, networking has relatively positive connotations. Nonetheless, for example, in Soviet and modern Russia, *blat* describes the usage of social networks to get things done informally, secretly, at the expenses of others (Ledeneva 2014). Hence, networking may also provide some advantages to obtain goods, services and privileges at the expenses of others, creating an economy of favours.

In line with the theory of Elena Ledeneva, a well-known scholar on *blat*, upon permissive conditions, too much *blat* in society can result in the establishment of open secrets, known to members of the public but not articulated directly due to various reasons (Ledeneva 2011). In fact, *blat*, open secrets, and economy of favours are all specific phenomena to the whole spectrum of various types of informal practices.

In Mandarin, *guanxi* has a similar meaning to *blat* (Ledeneva 2008). In the Polish language, a few expressions like e.g. '*mieć chody*', '*mieć plecy*' or '*znajomości*' refer to the situation when networking provides some undeserved privileges and benefits. Hence, unlike networking in Western culture countries, in post-Soviet countries, China, and Poland '*blat*', '*guanxi*', and '*znajomości*', respectively, have rather negative connotations, highly related to nepotism corruption (Ledeneva 1998, and Polese 2015).

Artificially enhanced curriculum vitae of an academic (e.g., as a result of plagiarism) may provide undeserved privileges, e.g., academic titles and degrees received, successful grant applications, academic promotions (Biagioli 2012) and (Penders 2018). In the context of the Biagioli theory of academic plagiarism, three texts, not two, need to be considered. The first one is an original text. The second text, taken from a genuine author, is recycled and republished by a plagiarist. The third text is a resume of a plagiarist (Biagioli 2012).

Successful plagiarism means, therefore, to be hidden, not exposed to the public. From a plagiarist point of view, a reasonable strategy to mitigate the risk of being exposed is to take one work and republish it in a novel place for new audiences. That strategy of plagiarists action was coined for the first time by Pierre Bayle in 1697. With the Internet and easy access to information in the modern world, it might be challenging to hide plagiarism, *however*. *Blat* may help to avoid consequences and keep academic misconduct secret.

METHODOLOGY

Documents referring to the case against professor Cygnar have been collected from selected public institutions in the Republic of Poland in a series of inquiries made under the Freedom of Information Act. Briefly, each quest has been sent via email to a given institution. Next, the original files delivered have been scanned and published in the Polish language on the SlideShare platform as primary raw data. Finally, a sworn translation from the Polish language into English of selected documents was ordered. Each document available in the English language was given an individual Digital Object Identifier number (DOI) and was published on the ResearchGate platform as secondary raw data.

RESULTS

In a first step, careful analysis of professor Marek Wronski's publication with allegations of plagiarism against professor Cygnar allowed the author to take advantage of the Freedom of Information Act and ask various public bodies to provide copies of original documents supporting Wronski's claims. Next, collected documents were published online for the international community; table 1.

Table 1. Key documents available in the Polish and English languages demonstrating the role of informality and *blat* in academic plagiarism

No	Title of the document	Document provided by	DOI on ResearchGate (translated document into the English language)	Link to the website with original documents in the Polish language published on SlideShare
1.	No access to the laboratory for professor Cygnar	The Cracow University of Technology	DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.11474.89282	https://www.slideshare.net/ukaszRKoodziej/oszutswo-habilitacyjne-jm-rektora-pwsz-w-nowym-szczu?qid=ceb54fc3-b39f-4b9b-9dce-8b8078c1ac2e&v=&b=&from_search=3
2.	Handwritten resignation of professor Cygnar	The Cracow University of Technology	DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.18605.20969	https://www.slideshare.net/ukaszRKoodziej/rektor-pwsz-rezygnuje-z-habilitacji-w-politechnice-krakowskiej
3.	Resolutions awarding the degree of habilitated doctor to Mariusz Cygnar PhD Eng	The Rzeszow University of Technology	DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.28671.53923	https://www.slideshare.net/ukaszRKoodziej/uchway-o-nadaniu-cygnarowi-habilitacji
4.	Agreement to republish materials from one dissertation to another	The Cracow University of Technology	DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.19863.50086	https://www.slideshare.net/ukaszRKoodziej/pismo-dr-cygnar
5.	Opinion on postdoctoral dissertation of Cygnar by professor Mikielewicz	The Central Commission to Degrees and Titles	DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.16508.05768	https://www.slideshare.net/ukaszRKoodziej/recenzja-rozprawy-habilitacyjnej-mariusza-cygnara-wg-profesora-mikielewicza
6.	Opinion of professor Wacław Kollek on allegation against professor Cygnar	The Central Commission to Degrees and Titles	DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.29929.83040	https://www.slideshare.net/ukaszRKoodziej/cba-bada-rozpraw-habilitacyjn
7.	The decision of the Central Commission for Degrees and Titles protecting professor Cygnar	The Central Commission to Degrees and Titles	DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.13152.61449	https://www.slideshare.net/ukaszRKoodziej/centralna-komisja-broni-nienadanej-habilitacji

Having documents available and knowing critical actions taken by professor Cygnar to strengthen his academic resume artificially, it was possible to link academic misconduct with *blat* in chronological order; figure 1.

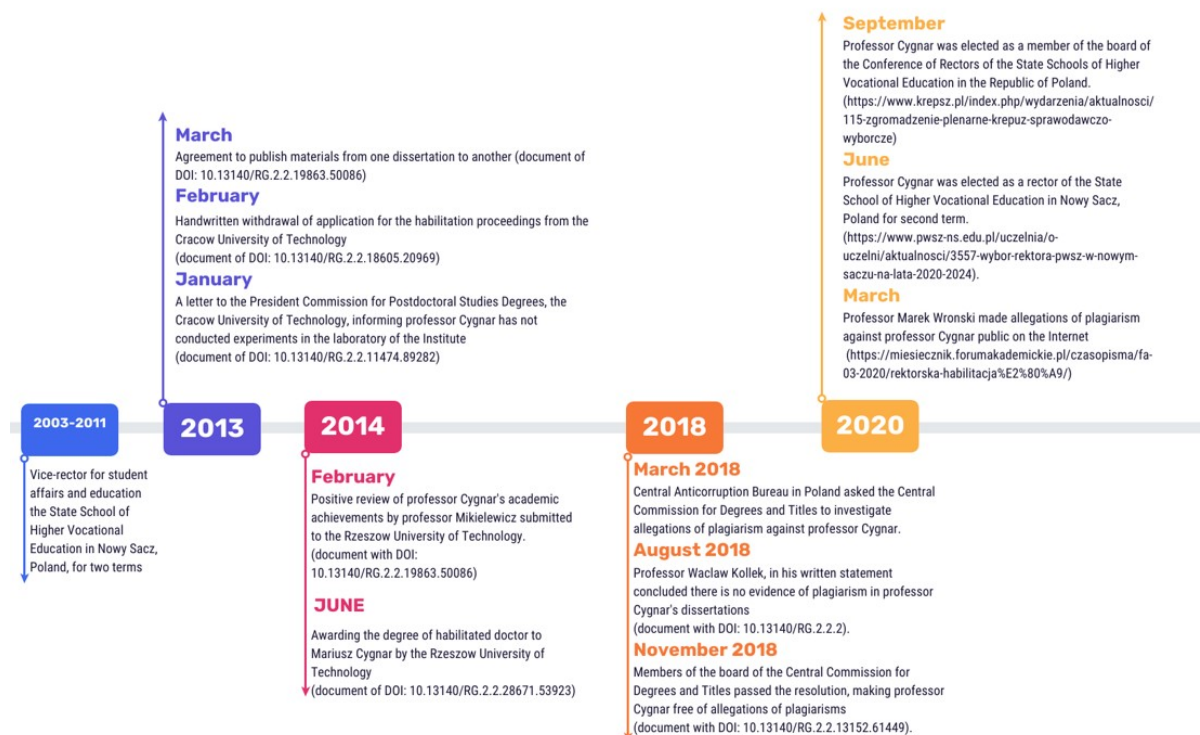


Figure 1. The role of *blat* in the career development of professor Cygnar in a chronological order

Foremost, once professor Cygnar gained PhD Eng. degree from the Cracow University of Technology, he had not been provided with further access to the experimental infrastructure of the University; table 1, document 1. Moreover, in an attempt to be awarded a *habilitation* degree, professor Cygnar has submitted to the Cracow University of Technology a dissertation with experimental results. In fact, the dissertation title is *The analysis of the operation of an internal combustion engine with two thermodynamic cycles*. Thus, in the context of the document issued by representatives of the Cracow University of Technology, professor Cygnar could not have conducted any experimental work since not been provided with access to the University's laboratories; table 1, document 1.

Interestingly, submission of a handwritten resignation from the procedure of gaining a *habilitation* degree from the Cracow University of Technology; table 1, document 2, coincided with the academics' statement the Cracow University of Technology against professor Cygnar; table 1, document 1. Hence, professor Cygnar resignation from gaining *habilitation* might be due to the detection of plagiarism in his work by other academics from the University in Cracow.

Moreover, professor Cygnar has gained a *habilitation* degree from the Rzeszow University of Technology; table 1, document 3. To be awarded that degree, professor Cygnar has submitted to the Scientific Publisher of the National Research Institute of Sustainable Technologies in Radom, Poland dissertation under the title *The use of a spark and automatic system in an internal combustion engine*. Thus, it is clear, to be granted a *habilitation* degree, professor Cygnar has drafted and submitted two distinct dissertations for consideration.

However, the content and figures shown in these two dissertations refer to the experiments conducted on the combustion engine, localised in the Cracow University of Technology laboratory. Using the Freedom of Information Act, the author has established that professor Cygnar was granted permission to republish figures from one dissertation to another; table 1, document 4. In other words, the dissertation under the title '*Analysis of the operation of an internal combustion engine with two thermodynamic cycles*' was republished under the title '*The use of a spark and automatic system in an internal combustion engine*'. Moreover, it is clear; professor Cygnar could not have been the author of the experimental results described in his two academic dissertations.

Nevertheless, professor Jaroslaw Mikielewicz, one out of four reviewers on the evaluation committee at the Rzeszow University of Technology, has written the dissertation under the title '*The use of a spark and automatic system in an internal combustion engine*' was novel, and professor Cygnar conducted experiments personally; table 1, document 4. That statement of professor Mikielewicz was enough to pass the resolution granting professor Cygnar a *habilitation* degree by faculty members; table 1, document 3.

In 2018, allegations of plagiarism against professor Cygnar were submitted to the Central Counter Corruption Office, one of a few law enforcement agencies in Poland. Next, the case was forwarded to the dedicated governmental body known as the Central Commission to Degrees and Titles in Poland. In response to allegations, the Commission selected emeritus professor Wacław Kollek to write a report on claims against professor Cygnar.

As it can be learnt from the work of professor Wronski on Cygnar's case and available documents, professor Cygnar was accused of plagiarism from PhD dissertation submitted to the Cracow University of Technology by Mr Marcin Noga, table 1, document 6. Nonetheless, professor Kollek has concluded that both the PhD thesis of Mr Noga and the dissertation of professor Cygnar have been similar, not identical, however; table 1, document 6. In response to the professor Kollek report, senior members of the academic committee of the Central Commission have declared professor Cygnar free of allegations of plagiarism; table 1, document 7.

Information about an allegation of plagiarism against professor Cygnar was available in the public domain from March 2020. A few months later, in June 2020, professor Cygnar was elected as a rector of the High School of Applied Sciences in Nowy Sącz, Poland, for the second term. Senior members of the School voted anonymously, supporting professor Cygnar overwhelmingly. In September 2020, professor Cygnar was also elected as a member of the board of the Conference of Rectors of the State Schools of Higher Education in the Republic of Poland, figure 1.

Taken together, documents provided in that paper make it possible to follow the conversion of plagiarism into an open secret known to the Polish academic community, highlighting the role of *blat*'s role in the process; figure 2.

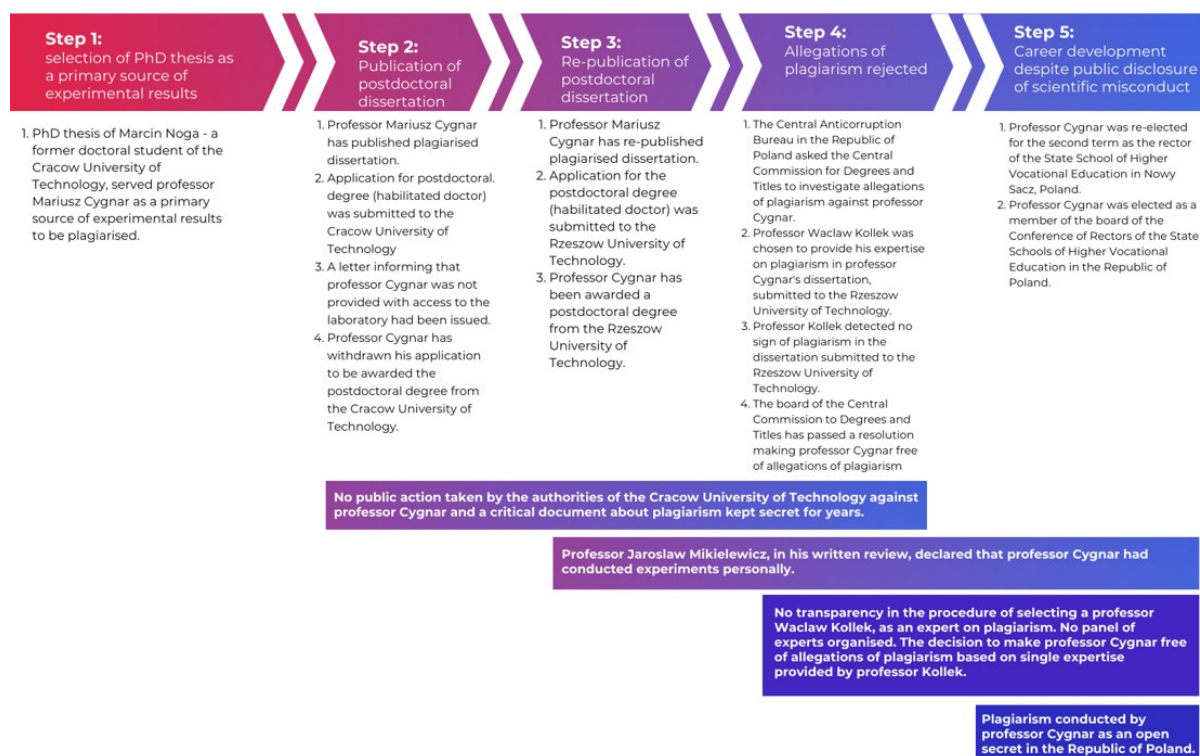


Figure 2. Key steps and mechanisms responsible for the conversion of plagiarism of a professor Cygnar into an open secret known to the academic community in the Republic of Poland.

DISCUSSION

Allegations of plagiarism against a rector of a public university located at the European Union member state might be of interest to the general public and some activists promoting scientific integrity in the EU and worldwide. Hence, it was essential to verify allegations made by professor Marek Wronski against rector Mariusz Cygnar and discuss findings in the context of academic misconduct.

As a result of an independent investigation, the author has confirmed allegations of plagiarism against professor Cygnar. Findings also provide some evidence of informal practices playing a role in the proceedings of allegations of plagiarism against an acting rector of the public University in the Republic of Poland, a member state of the European Union. In fact, it was possible to demonstrate the conversion of academic misconduct (plagiarism) into an open secret known to the academic community with *blat* as a critical facilitating factor.

Original documents written in the Polish language and translated into English are available for the international community for further research in *blat*, *guanxi*, and other informal practices associated with concealing academic misconduct by academic community members. Moreover, copies of the documents sent by the authorities upon the Freedom of Information Act have been provided without a legal-bounding notion that certifies copies and original texts

are the same, and none of the vital information was omitted. Thus, some important aspects of the case against professor Cygnar may still be hidden from public opinion.

Traditionally, plagiarism has been viewed as a solo action taken by an evil individual against the interests of an original author (Biagioli 2012). In the case of professor Cygnar, his temptation to artificially enhance his resume may result from internal regulation of the High State School of Applied Sciences in Nowy Sacz, Poland. In line with statutory law of the School to be elected as a rector, the person needs to hold a *habilitation* degree. Between 2003 and 2011, professor Cygnar served as a vice-rector of the School. Hence, to run the School as a rector, Cygnar had to be awarded *habilitation*. As a busy lecturer and vice-rector, professor Cygnar might be, therefore, much less interested in the experimental work than in the final effect of being granted with *habilitation*. Thus, he had decided to play the game with academic institutions in the Republic of Poland.

The Pierre Bayle model of plagiarism predicts that a plagiarist tries to republish somebody's else works in a novel place and for new audiences to mitigate the risk of being exposed (Biagioli 2012). Professor Cygnar could not have benefited from an artificially enhanced resume by plagiarism and avoid any consequences of academic misconduct without evident support from academic and governmental bodies at the same time.

Senior academics who act as gatekeepers to a junior researcher may play an essential role in deviant behaviour, creating *possibilities* (Haven et al. 2019). For example, it can be speculated that professor Mikielewicz and professor Kollek, both retired professors, were selected as reviewers of Cygnar's dissertations on purpose. Retired professors may have simply less to lose if misconduct was discovered and open to public scrutiny. Hence, the retired professors may play a crucial role as brokers in *blat* driven social interactions among members of the academic community (Ledeneva 2011) and (Ledeneva 2014). Similarly, it is unclear whether a reciprocal relation between *blat* in academia and a *laissez-faire* approach towards academic misconduct in a given academic community may exist. Hence, further research into the informal practices, including *blat*, in academia is much needed.

CONCLUSIONS

For the first time, various types of documents highlighting the role of informality, *blat*, particularly in academic misconduct, have been presented to the international academic community. Hence, the concept of informality may help to explain some aspects of questionable research practices and issues associated with the integrity of academic information.

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