Ethics and Text Recycling

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Introduction

Recently, as I was working on a proceedings for a professional conference, I read a very interesting paper, but there was one catch: the authors had already published it in a different venue. Although there were some minor cosmetic changes, it was essentially the same paper. I raised the issue with the general editor, and we decided to contact the authors, indicating that we could not publish the piece unless it were thoroughly revised. Given the topic, this would be a challenge. We have not, to date, heard from the authors.

Many of us who serve professional journals in review or editorial capacities have probably discovered similar papers. In academia, the pressure to publish is high, and sometimes authors take shortcuts by including blocks of information from their other published works. While building upon prior work is a time-honored tradition, can the same be said about re-using the exact verbiage? Or what about authors who mistakenly assume that they "own" their work, even after signing a copyright transfer?

This paper examines the issue of "self-plagiarism," or, perhaps more accurately, recycling old text. Specifically, the paper focuses on definitions, common trends and policies, cases, and ethical considerations. Solutions are beyond the scope of this paper.

Definitions

Defining plagiarism is fairly easy; for the past two decades, the Office of Research Integrity has used the following as an operational definition: "the theft or misappropriation of intellectual property and the substantial unattributed textual copying of another's work."[1] But when it comes to defining "self-plagiarism," things are more opaque. The phrase itself is almost meaningless, as Stephanie Bird, among others, points out: "Self-plagiarism is not possible, since 'plagiarism' refers to claiming the words and ideas of another as one's own."[2]

The concept is not, as some suggest, "a relatively new evil."[3] As Callahan notes, it can be traced back more than a century, to an 1893 letter submitted to the *Atlantic Monthly*.[4] Current times have seen a renewed interest, perhaps due to the emergence of detection software used by many journals to identify plagiarized material.

A review of the rather substantial literature shows that self-plagiarism, or text recycling, assumes several guises:

- *Redundant/piecemeal*: Using sections of previously published text in a "new" article; may involve both data and narrative recycling[5, 6, 7]
- *Dual/duplicate*: Publishing the same article in multiple journals[2, 8]
- *Salami-slicing*: Fragmenting data from a single study to produce several articles that typically repeat sections, such as the literature review and methodology; also referred to as "least publishable units"[5, 7, 9]

- *Meat-extending*: Taking old material and expanding it by adding new information; also referred to as "data augmentation"[5, 7]
- *Cryptomnesia*: Unconsciously repeating information from previous publications [5]

Miguel Roig, who has written extensively on the topic, notes the difficulty of agreeing on a definition after examining editorials written about plagiarism: "Some editors find it acceptable to re-use some material while others discourage any form of re-use. The latter finding is troublesome because a type of text recycling acceptable to one editor may constitute an instance of self-plagiarism to another one." Roig also notes the difficulty of paraphrasing highly technical language or stock phrasing.[10] After all, suggests Catriona Fennell, who is affiliated with Elsevier (Amsterdam), "there are only so many ways you can describe how to run a gel."[11] Re-using language or equations standard in a specific field constitute legitimate exceptions to strictures against text recycling.

A problematic area involves translations: while some may view translating an article from one language to another as intellectually suspect and perhaps a case of duplicate publication, Wen and Gao offer a compelling argument that this practice actually "maximize[s] the effectiveness of academic communication and equalize[s] the rights of creating, distributing and accessing knowledge."[12] Furthermore, they note, that moving from one language to another involves more than simply translating the words. It may include adding extra background information, completely revising the scope of the literature review, and, in general "reposition[ing] the research in an international context."[12]

Trends and Policies

According to Atwood, the practice of text recycling is growing at an alarming rate: Bretag and Carapiet's study "found that 60 per cent of authors in a random sample of 269 papers from the Web of Science social science and humanities database had self-plagiarised at least once in the period 2003-06."[13] More recently, Martin has indicated a significant increase in articles written about text recycling, from 170, in 2000, to 820 in 2012. The number of editorials on the issue is also increasing.[8]

Reuse of text occurs in virtually all academic fields, although it tends to be more prominent in technical areas, particularly science fields. An examination of the literature reveals a number of studies conducted on the issue, most revealing disturbing trends. Davis, for example, looked at articles published between 1989 and 2003 in 67 journals in the library and information science fields affiliated with Emerald University Presses; he discovered 409 cases of duplicate publication, some appearing simultaneously in different Emerald journals, and 5 cases of triplicate publication.[14]

A similar study by Larivière and Gingras, involving articles published over a 27-year period (1980-2007) using Reuter's Web of Science database, reveals comparable results, identifying nearly 10,000 duplicate papers out of more than 18 million, for a rate of .05%. About 2,500 duplicates dealt with engineering and technology, and physics-related papers accounted for another 1,679; together these fields represent about one-third of the duplicate papers. Furthermore, the number of duplicate papers has been steadily rising since the mid-1990s.[15] The

true number of duplications may be higher because the study only looks at exact matches and does not account for variations in titles, authors, and minor changes in content.

In a fervent 2008 editorial published in *Nature*, authors Errami and Garner describe their examination of the MedLine database: by extrapolating data from a limited sample of 67,000, they conclude that approximately 117,000 articles in the entire database are duplicates, and the number has been increasing since 1975 in the biomedical field. They further note that duplicate publication is "a global activity," although the US accounts for the highest number.[16]

While in the past, entities associated with scholarly publication have only mentioned "regular" plagiarism, commentary regarding self-plagiarism now seems to be the norm.

Style Manuals

Within the past few years, several of the major style manuals have added information regarding plagiarism and, most significantly, self-plagiarism. For the first time in its 123-year history, the American Psychological Association has included a statement on self-plagiarism in its publications manual, a resource widely used in business, the social sciences, and medical fields: "Just as researchers do not present the work of others as their own (plagiarism), they do not present their own previously published work as new scholarship (self-plagiarism)."[17] Likewise, the *Chicago Manual of Style* has added comments regarding plagiarism in its most recent edition. A quick glance through the 15th edition reveals no information related to plagiarism, whereas the 16th edition has two sections that mention plagiarism and citation, both located in the chapter on author responsibilities: section 4.68 discusses contractual agreements with publishers, and 4.85 details "the importance of attribution."[18]

Professional Organizations

Most of the major engineering societies include material relating to plagiarism and self-plagiarism in their publication policies. IEEE, which has a very clear and fully developed policy on plagiarism, has added sections dealing with text recycling: "The verbatim copying or reuse of one's own research . . . is considered another form of plagiarism or self-plagiarism; it is unacceptable."[19] The ACM now includes self-plagiarism in its "Policy and Procedures on Plagiarism," focusing on the author's need to cite the original article.[20]

The ASCE and ASME have recently included statements regarding salami-slicing. Both use identical language, with ASCE's policy as the source document: "Fragmentation of research papers shall be avoided. An engineer or scientist who has done extensive work on a system or group of related systems shall organize publication so that each paper gives a complete account of a particular aspect of the general study."[21, 22]

ATSM's Committee on Publications (COP) offers similar advice: "In order to protect the integrity of the publishing process, the policy of ASTM and COP forbids the publication of previously published material."[23]

Individual Journals

Some individual technical journals specifically address text recycling, in addition to their professional organizations' guidelines. The "author information" for the *Journal of Nano Systems & Technology,* for example, mentions at least three times that submitted manuscripts must be original and specifically indicates that "[s]elf-plagiarism is also unethical." The guidelines stipulate that authors who draw on prior works must "briefly indicate how the new submission offers substantively novel contributions" from their other publications on the topic.[24]

Guidelines for the *Journal of the National Academy of Forensic Engineers* detail similar procedures: "it is unacceptable for an author to include significant verbatim or near-verbatim portions of his/her own work, or to depict his/her previously published results or methodology as new, without acknowledging the source."[25]

Publishing Ethics

The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), based in the United Kingdom, is perhaps one of the most authoritative advice-giving organizations for journal editors, publishers, and interested others. COPE provides "best practices" guidelines, flowcharts for action, and a whole host of other resources related to publishing ethics. A position paper, "How to Deal with Text Recycling," includes a definition and details several levels of severity; indicates the different actions journal editors can take, ranging from author revision to retraction; and offers guidance for dealing with older, published duplicate manuscripts.[26]

Cases

"The new focus on self-plagiarism within the publishing industry," notes journal editor Tristram Horrom, "does not represent a change in policy; rather, we now simply have better tools to catch behavior that was never acceptable but was hard to identify in the past."[27] Furthermore, he explains that out of 38 "conditionally accepted" articles in 2010, 35 involved self-plagiarism in the journal he oversees.

The following cases offer snapshots of three text recyclers, one in general interest journals and two in academia:

In 2012, Jonah Lehrer was a contributing editor to *Wired* magazine; in addition, he also wrote for several other prestigious publications: *The New Yorker*, *Wall Street Journal*, and two newspapers, the *Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*.[28] He was a prolific writer, partly because he had been filching from his prior writings on a regular basis. In early June, for example, he posted a column, "Why Smart People Are Stupid," in *The New Yorker,* and in October, a similar piece appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, entitled "The Science of Irrationality":

The New Yorker opening: "Here's a simple arithmetic question: A bat and ball cost a dollar and ten cents. The bat costs a dollar more than the ball. How much does the ball cost?"

Wall Street Journal opening: "Here's a simple arithmetic question: 'A bat and ball cost $1.10. The bat costs $1 more than the ball. How much does the ball cost?'"[29]

To date, at least 13 instances of similar recycling have been identified, much to the consternation of readers. As McBride notes, "This cheating is a form of infidelity, a minor one. If he'd done it once, we his audience could simply give him the benefit of the doubt. But his pattern suggests a deliberate disrespect or even contempt for the reader's desire to experience something unique and genuine." [30] Ironically, Lehrer is known for his contributions to the literature about creativity and innovation, as in his 2012 *Imagine: How Creativity Works*.[28]

While a moderately famous writer who has reproduced material causes a social media flurry of comments, most university professors who engage in text recycling do so in the solitude of their offices, with only their consciences as companions.

Reginald Smith was a professor of mechanical and materials engineering at Queen's University, located in Kingston, Canada. Like most researchers, he conducted his explorations, some of which were funded by the Canadian National Sciences and Engineering Research Council, and he wrote up his results and submitted them for publication. Unlike most researchers, he duplicated the information from previous publications—over 20 instances according to colleague Chris Pickles.[31]

In the ensuing investigation, the university uncovered "minor amendments to title or abstract, and wholesale reproduction of previously published boilerplate, grammatical warts and all."[32] As a result, Smith had several articles retracted: three from the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* and one from the *Journal of Materials Processing Technology*.[31] Although he is retired, his unfortunate legacy lives on.

The intrepid Jeff Beall, controversial librarian at the University of Colorado, Denver, frequently reports cases of academic misconduct in his blog, *Scholarly Open Access*. In 2013, he discussed two articles by Stephen Krashen, a well-known linguist from the University of Southern California who specializes in language acquisition. But he also recycles text, as indicated by the underscored sections:

From a 2012 article in *Language and Language Teaching*:

Sometimes we have to write long papers, but most of the time, it is unnecessary: the papers often contain long introductions more suitable for doctoral dissertations or review "state of the art" papers apparently designed to provide evidence that the author is well-read. They also have long conclusions, with a repetition of the findings and the author's detailed and lengthy speculations about what the results might mean for theory and application.

From a 2013 article in the *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*:

Sometimes we have to write long papers to treat a topic adequately, but much of the time, it's unnecessary: Papers often contain long introductions more suitable for doctoral dissertations, apparently intended to provide evidence that the author is well-read, and long conclusions, with a

repetition of the findings and the author's detailed and lengthy speculations about what the results might mean for theory and application.

Beall wryly concludes, "It's ironic that Krashen's second article is about scholarly communication, yet he appears to be violating the rules of scholarly discourse by re-using/ copying his own work without attribution."[33]

Although some may view text recycling as a rather innocent act compared to "real" plagiarism, impact may be far-reaching because it can appear in so many different types of publications. As Elbeck notes, text recycling has been discovered in the following documents, in addition to journal articles:

- Book and software reviews
- Conferences presentations
- Dissertation extracts
- Editorials
- Invited papers
- Published conference addresses
- Reprints
- Textbooks[7]

Replication, whether wholesale or piecemeal, has an appreciable impact on scholarly publication in all fields. Noé and Batten, in *Paleontology*, explain that the practice "lowers the quality and endangers the good standing of journals, reduces the intellectual impact of scientific publishing, distorts reward systems, breaches copyright, and transgresses accepted ethical standards."[34] Chrousos et al., writing in the *European Journal of Clinical Investigation*, argue for more transparency in the publishing process and declare that the practice of salami-slicing is "unacceptable . . . and distort[s] the research record."[35]

Ethical Considerations

A consideration of impact leads directly into an examination of ethics: whether or not text recycling is unethical remains a bone of contention. Miguel Roig summarizes the main arguments: (1) the material was already written by the author and cannot be "self-plagiarism," as one cannot steal from oneself; the exception would be presenting the original set of data as something new, (2) rewriting the methods section of a study may mislead readers and prevent them from replicating the study, and (3) requiring revision may be unfair to non-native speakers of English, who may have had a difficult time writing the original.[36] Noé and Batten are less charitable: "Quoting oneself without citation is self plagiarism and is as unethical as quoting from the publications of others without due acknowledgement. It is a form of deceit and unacceptable at any level of study or research."[34]

Semantic quibbling aside, the issue of recycling text raises a number of ethical red flags, as detailed below.

Deception

Text recycling is deceitful in at least three different ways: misleading the audience (readers, reviewers, and editors), signing journal agreements indicating originality, and padding resumes.

Misleading the audience. The goal of scholarly publishing, as H. Joel Trussell, IEEE proceedings editor, puts it, is "advancing knowledge in the technical field."[37] Republishing the same material or, worse yet, trying to disguise the repetition by making superficial changes to the text, changing paragraphs breaks, and other typographical alterations[38] breaches the trust that should exist between writer and audience. As many articles indicate, not citing a prior article as a source for a newly submitted manuscript implies that the second manuscript is original material. An editorial in *The Lancet* describes it well:

> Deception is the key issue in all forms of self-plagiarism, including in reviews. Few editors will knowingly republish a paper that contains large parts of previously published material. Few readers will happily read the same material several times in different journals. An attempt to deceive amounts to fraud and should not be tolerated by the academic community.[39]

Signing journal agreements. Deception also occurs when authors sign copyright agreements, which typically ask authors to affirm that the submitted work is original, has not been submitted to another journal, and has not been previously published, as in this example from the American Chemical Society:

- The Submitted Work is original.
- The Submitted Work does not contain any statements or information that is intentionally misleading or inaccurate.
- All Authors have been informed of the full content of the Submitted Work at, or prior to, the time of submission.
- The Submitted Work has not been previously published in any form (except as permitted in Section II: Permitted Uses by Author(s)).
- The Submitted Work is not being considered for publication elsewhere in any form and will not be submitted for such consideration while under review by ACS.
- Nothing in the Submitted Work . . . infringes any intellectual property rights. . . .[40]

Authors who sign such a form knowing that their work is recycled are going beyond the realm of ethics and broaching copyright infringement, if they have signed a copyright transfer agreement. In addition, they are patently lying by affirming that the work is original when, in fact, it is not.

Padding resumes. At many universities, the pressure to publish is high; many committees also focus on quantity, rather than quality, in examining such crucial documents as promotion and tenure portfolios.[41] A remarkable, and hopefully isolated, example is Nelson Tansu, who holds an endowed chair in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at Lehigh University. In his exposé of Tansu's excesses in duplicate publications and extensive self-citations, Gola Dem offers convincing evidence that Tansu is plagued by a kind of paranoia "that there are other scientists out there who are close to success in the same experiment, which puts extra pressure on being the first one."[42] One wonders whether other academics are plagued by the same type of pressures, whether internally or externally imposed. Recycling old papers is an easy fix to the quantity issue.

Even for those who do not suffer from Tansu's preoccupations, multiple articles containing recycled text indicate that the researcher is "much more productive than is actually the case,"[2]

which could conceivably affect external funding sources by giving a false sense of activity in a particular field.

Wasting Time and Resources

Dealing with recycled articles costs a journal space and time. The manuscript editor must read it to decide whether or not to send it out for review, peer reviewers must read it to make a recommendation regarding publication status, and the article will take up journal space, which can be precious, especially in the more prestigious publications. All of these "inflate the communication process."[43]

Coercive citation, a practice that is ethically slimy, also wastes time—the writer's time. Coercive citation is a relatively new development; it consists of journal self-citations that are not necessary but requested by journal editors or associate editors to artificially bloat the journal's impact factor, sometimes as high as 1,381%.[44]

On occasion, editors can blackmail authors, refusing to publish an article until the author adds what amounts to superfluous citations. John Drake, a postdoctoral researcher at an ecological center affiliated with the University of California's Santa Barbara campus, reports that he received this email from a journal editor in response to a recent submission: "I should like you to look at some recent issues of the *Journal of Applied Ecology* and add citations to any relevant papers you might find. This helps our authors by drawing attention to their work, and also adds internal integrity to the Journal's themes."[45] Queried by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the editor replied, "That's kind of a generic line we use. We understand most authors don't actually do that." Drake, however, interpreted it as a type of "extortion," and the journal's 200% growth in self-citations and 2-point impact factor increase between 1997 and 2004 seem to indicate that authors are compliant and spending precious time adding gratuitous citations.[45]

From an ethics perspective, the practice seems to border on dishonesty. In fact, states Romano, "the practice of editorial coercive journal self-citation violates the very spirit of scientific integrity and ethics on which the purpose of citations was founded."[44]

Intellectual Laziness

Writing is hard work. Producing a quality paper is a lengthy process: the author must come up with an idea, conduct experiments (depending on the field), sift through a small mountain of information or data, develop a coherent plan, and, finally, write and revise until the author is satisfied that s/he has produced an original, perhaps even significant, contribution to the field. It is especially daunting for those who have spent their careers focusing on a narrow area. As Rosenweig and Schnitzer explain, "it takes creativity, time, and considerable effort to produce and publish a brand-new perspective," especially when the author has already written about the topic.[46] It's much easier to take something off the shelf, spruce it up a bit, and submit it to a different journal.

But this smacks of "intellectual laziness."[10] The scholarly life is replete with thinking, not avoiding it. Those who desire scholarly publication have an ethical obligation to be active

thinkers, not "cognitive misers"[47] who circumvent deep thinking by taking shortcuts. Those who actively recycle text are avoiding the intellectual activity of idea creation.

Republishing Conference Papers

"Double-dipping" refers to the practice of republishing a conference proceedings paper in a journal, a controversial issue. In 2013, COPE researchers Zhang and Jia conducted a survey of editors of 323 journals in computer science and electrical engineering to gauge editorial response to four questions about recycled papers. While the practice used to be common, since conferences are a major outlet for reporting new research in technical fields, after 1990 there was a change in opinion. According to survey responses, editors who consider republishing conference papers require that new material be added, in some cases up to 75%, and that overall quality be improved. Several cited copyright issues and noted the IEEE policy on self-plagiarism. Overall, journal editors indicated that they would only publish conference proceedings papers that had undergone a radical transformation.[48]

Chaddah presents the thorny issue of encouraging graduate students to submit papers to a conference, only to learn later than such a submission, when revised as a journal paper, may result in charges of self-plagiarism. He suggests a discussion of "what constitutes self-plagiarism, and how to handle submissions to our national conferences."[49]

A 2007 study conducted in the field of political science indicates that republishing conference papers as a common practice has relatively recent roots. In examining 114 CVs from job applications submitted to seven regional colleges, Nelson Dometrius, Texas Tech University, notes that the trend of republication emerged in the mid-1990s.[50] The most prevalent reason is that the conference paper, or even double presentations, gives preliminary or "in progress" information, and authors may receive feedback that will improve the overall quality of the paper. However, the practice "may make some professors hypocrites," since they do not allow their students to submit the same paper in multiple classes.[50]

Copyright Infringement

Some authors mistakenly assume that they retain ownership of their intellectual work even after signing copyright transfer agreements to publish in a journal or conference proceedings.[51] Thus, they feel free to republish at will. However, a copyright transfer cedes publication rights to the publisher (now the copyright owner) unless specifically stipulated in the agreement. An author who submits a conference paper to a journal may therefore be guilty of copyright infringement, defined as "the unauthorized or unlicensed copying of a work subject to copyright."[52] If an organization, such as ASEE, has authors sign copyright transfer agreements that grant "exclusive rights" for publication, any reproduction of a conference proceedings paper would require permissions from the organization, as well as a notice in the journal indicating the original publication venue.[46]

Attorney Pamela Samuelson explains that copyright infringement lawsuits usually involve economic damage incurred by the copyright holder; if the amount is slight, it is probably not

worth filing the suit. However, copyright is also an ethical issue, and "the prudent thing to do . . . is not to reuse any of it," whether it be language or computer code.[53]

Conclusions

From the information presented in this paper, it should be clear that text recycling is a significant issue that threatens the integrity of scholarly publication. In fact, Roig notes, the prevalence of republished articles has resulted in a certain loss of "luster,"[36] lowering ethical standards and resulting in a breach of trust between authors, editors, and readers. Passing off old scholarship as new harms individual reputations and affects the status of a journal, as authors have an ethical imperative of disclosure.

Editors can guard against inadvertently publishing recycled articles by using detection software,[54] coupled with visual examination and editorial judgment. Although use of software would indicate a certain suspicion and lack of trust, given the trend toward text recycling as well as rising instances of actual plagiarism, it is inevitable. Gone are the days when we can accept scholarship at face value. "The assumption of trust," note Hummel and Roosendaal, "implies that we need not be constantly on the watch since trust provides us with a feeling that our values, rights and interests are in good hands."[55] Are we at the point where we are "constantly on the watch" in regards to scholarly publication? Sadly, yes. But there is hope for a brighter future in our students, if we can instill in them a sense of creativity, a respect for the past, and a curiosity that results in the promotion of new knowledge, not just a rerun of old ideas.

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