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Self-plagiarism

Perspectives for librarians

As librarians it has often come to our attention that a major source of confusion to many authors seems to be misunderstanding the ownership or the copyright of the published article. Because librarians are becoming more involved as resources for authors concerning the issues of copyright, they are playing a pivotal role in addressing the issue of self-plagiarism.

Plagiarism by authors writing in biomedical publications is a concept that has been well defined for many years and consequently is well understood. It is acknowledged to be a pervasive problem as well as a significant ethical issue that plagues scientific writing and even erodes confidence in peer-reviewed publications.

Self-plagiarism, on the other hand, is still a murky area that remains subject to confusion and misunderstanding; thus, the way we see it, librarians can play a part in providing a clearer understanding of the topic.

Duplicate publication, sometimes called self-plagiarism, occurs when an author reuses substantial parts of his or her own published work without providing the appropriate references. This can range from getting an identical paper published in multiple journals, to *salami-slicing*, where authors add small amounts of new data to a previously published paper.

The authors have become aware that there has been, and continues to be, considerable controversy about self-plagiarism. In fact, there are some observers who do not even see any particular issue with it. Others divide the various instances of self-plagiarism ac-

ording to their propensity to do harm. Still other observers focus on exactly where the information was published.

'Self-plagiarism' is a conceptual oxymoron from both the literal and legal perspectives and has not been defined sufficiently in the case of secondary review/opinion/commentary /proceedings papers. For instance, an academic physician could face the accusation of self-plagiarism in a secondary proceedings paper summarizing and referring to his/her own original research that was previously published in prestigious Journals. He/she was invited to present his/her data in many scientific meetings and to summarize them in print in a lesser number of secondary articles.¹

We believe that the crux of the controversy about self-plagiarism is well expressed in the following blog in *The Scientist*: "When Robert Barbato of the E. Philip Saunders College of Business at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) heard he was being accused of plagiarizing his own work, he was a bit surprised. 'I can't plagiarize myself—those are my own words,' he said." And he is not alone in his views.² Some scientists and publishers argue that it's unavoidable for scientists to re-use

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portions of their own text (not images or data, of course) from previous papers, and that doing so may even be good practice. However, others disagree, including many journal editors—who have retracted published papers in response.

Because scientists tend to study the same topic over many years or even their entire careers, some aspects of their research papers, particularly the literature review and methodology, will be repeated. Once they've figured out how to word it succinctly and accurately, some argue, it's best left unchanged.

There have been differing opinions proffered in the biomedical literature about how to address issues of self-plagiarism. For example, Ivan Oransky, the creator and editor of "Retraction Watch," a multi-authored blog established to facilitate transparency and bring attention to the issue of retracted articles, has indicated that possibly publications that repeat an author's previous work should not be considered scientific misconduct but merely labeled as a "notice of redundant publication" rather than being retracted, because such a situation may be the result of a conflict between publishers and researchers, particularly when duplication of Materials and Methods may be involved.³

Yet another perspective on the issue of self-plagiarism is given in "Self-plagiarism in academic publishing: the anatomy of a misnomer," an article published by Liviu Andreescu in *Science and Engineering Ethics*, in which the author distinguishes among the various discussions of the subject and also raises the question of possible legitimate reasons to self-plagiarize. The author writes: ". . . some of the animus frequently reserved for self-plagiarism may be the result of, among others, poor choice of a label, unwarranted generalizations as to its ill effects based on the specific experience (and goals) of particular disciplines, and widespread but not necessarily beneficial publishing practices."⁴

The American Psychological Association's manual states: "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)." Although some limited duplication without attribution, such as "describing the details of an instrument" in the methods section, is permissible to avoid extensive self-referencing, the manual warns that "the core of the new document must constitute an original contribution to knowledge."⁵

The pressure to publish in the scientific arena for the purposes of advancing one's career and/or for obtaining tenure is one of the factors that has the potential to lead to self-plagiarism. Obviously, it takes creativity, time, and considerable effort to produce and publish a brand-new perspective on a topic that the author has been immersed in during a lengthy portion of his or her career. However, repeating one's previous publications without appropriate attribution can cause very serious repercussions. Focusing on an egregious example of a dire consequence of self-plagiarism, Bruce Chabner, editor-in-chief of *The Oncologist*, a publication of the Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center Harvard Medical School, explains:

Our journal and all other peer-reviewed medical publications expressly prohibit submission of material that has been submitted to or published by another journal. There are both ethical and legal reasons for this prohibition. It is clearly unethical to misrepresent a manuscript as original work when it is being published, or has been published, elsewhere, even if that work is one's own or from a book one has edited.⁶

When a work is accepted for publication, the author is presented with a copyright agreement, which, when signed, prohibits the author from subsequently using this material, despite the fact that he or she wrote it, in other publications without receiving appropriate permission from the publisher, which is now the new owner of the mate-

rial own work. Apart from being illegal, it is also unethical to represent such work as original in a second publication, and from an academic standpoint, to expand one's bibliography with multiple versions of the same material. The proliferation of journals that publish review articles, often ghostwritten and often under sponsorship by commercial interests, has markedly increased the potential for self-plagiarism, and abuses have become widespread.

Careers have suffered because of unawareness, inattention, or lack of understanding of the potential impact of self-plagiarism, on the part of researchers. However, there are guidelines, mechanisms, and services now in place to address the need for monitoring articles and detecting self-plagiarism. Furthermore, if an author follows the accepted protocol for citing published works, whether his or her own or another author's, then the author must cite the source completely and appropriately, paying close attention to copyright regulations.

Now that researchers are turning more and more to librarians for assistance with copyright issues, librarians are now also in a position to prevent self-plagiarism. We also believe that in order to make researchers more aware of the issue, librarians themselves must become more familiar with the ramifications and implications of self-plagiarism, as well as its impact on scientific publishing. We believe that if such a process were accomplished in every case, self-plagiarism would not be an issue.

Notes

1. George P. Chrousos, Sophia N. Kallantiridou, Andrew N. Margioris, Achille Gravanis, "The 'self-plagiarism' oxymoron: Can one steal from oneself?" *European Journal of Clinical Investigation*, 42 (2012): 231–2.

2. Jef Akst, "When is self-plagiarism ok?" *The Scientist*, September 9, 2010, www.the-scientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/29245/title/When-is-self-plagiarism-ok-/, accessed September 11, 2013.

3. Miguel Roig, "Avoiding plagiarism, self-plagiarism, and other questionable writing practices: A guide to ethical writing," http://ori.hhs.gov/education/products/roig_st_johns/Introduction.html, accessed September 11, 2013.

4. Liviu Andreescu, "Self-Plagiarism in Academic Publishing: The Anatomy of a Misnomer," *Science and Engineering Ethics*, November 21, 2012 (Epub ahead of print).

5. American Psychological Association, *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th ed. (Washington, D.C., American Psychological Association, 2010), 1.10, p. 15–16.

6. Ivan Oransky, "A different tack: A notice of redundant publication, rather than a retraction, for duplication," "Retraction Watch," <http://retractionwatch.wordpress.com/2012/12/21/a-different-tack-a-notice-of-redundant-publication-rather-than-a-retraction-for-duplication>, accessed September 11, 2013. *z*

(“Assessing library instruction sessions,” cont. from page 479)

appropriate librarian and distribute results. Each librarian is responsible for keeping track of his or her survey results and making changes to his or her instruction sessions when necessary.

The survey provides another tool for instruction librarians to use in evaluating their sessions and improving the overall quality of the library instruction program.

Note

1. Lawrie H. Merz and Beth L. Mark, *Assessment in College Library Instruction Programs* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2002); Diana D. Shonrock, *Evaluating Library Instruction: Sample Questions, Forms, and Strategies for Practical Use* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1996). *z*