

Self-plagiarism and Dual and Redundant Publications: What Is the Problem?

Commentary on 'Seven Ways to Plagiarize: Handling Real Allegations of Research Misconduct' (M. C. Loui)

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As indicated in his paper "Seven Ways to Plagiarize: Handling Real Allegations of Research Misconduct,"¹ former Research Integrity Officer Michael Loui has encountered cases of self-plagiarism. This charge arises periodically and creates controversy within the scientific community. The term "self-plagiarism" is a murky one and merits some in-depth examination both because it is highly charged and because it covers a variety of distinct but related practices/issues.

Self-plagiarism is not possible since "plagiarism" refers to claiming the words or ideas of another as one's own. However, violation of copyright is both possible and problematic since it is a legal concept. Although copyright automatically goes to an author at creation, authors frequently assign their copyright to publishers. The argument in favor of this practice is that it serves the interests of highly mobile academic and research communities to have copyrights assigned to publishers in order to facilitate dissemination of research through the reprinting of a manuscript in an online format or as part of a collection of related articles. Publishers often grant authors the right to use, free of charge, all or part of their articles in other publications with proper attribution.

The approbation associated with the charge of self-plagiarism is actually associated with dual or redundant publication.^a Dual publication is the publication of the same article in more than one journal. Except in translation or as part of a collection (and in either case only with proper attribution) this practice is unacceptable not simply because it is likely to be a copyright violation, but also because it burdens reviewers

a. Except in an educational setting where "self-plagiarism" refers to the practice of submitting the same essay for credit in two different courses (thereby circumventing the expectation that each student will start every writing exercise at the beginning without unfair advantage).

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and editors unnecessarily and wastes limited resources (e.g., time and trees), and because it can be deceptive, implying that the author is more productive than is actually the case.

These latter objections—the overburdening of the publication processes of review and editing, wastefulness, and misrepresentation of one’s scholarly record—are all concerns that are also raised against redundant publication. Yet the primary purpose of scientific publication is to disseminate research findings to the scientific community. Ideally, published research provides accurate data to other researchers, funders, and general consumers of scientific information (including both policy makers and the public) that informs their decisions. This is especially true of colleagues (and competitors) who use the research results of others to determine how most effectively to design and pursue their own investigations. Scientific research is, after all, collaborative: researchers build on the work of others and, given limited resources (whether money, supplies, reagents, research subjects, time, and/or effort) attempt to do so as efficiently as possible. Redundant publication consists of using all or some of the same set of data to produce more than one publication. With the ever-increasing number of scientific journals, it is a common and arguably justifiable practice of researchers to read only a subset of the journals in their field (as determined by time constraints and the journal’s reputation and availability). In order to assure that results from multidisciplinary collaborative research are disseminated to investigators in the appropriate fields, it is not unreasonable for scientists to seek to publish more than one article containing data that, in many respects, are the same. Thus redundant may be an inappropriately derogatory label, trivializing both the value and the challenge of framing data in the context of the literature of a particular area of research that facilitates comprehension of its significance for the field. While multiple publications do indeed add to the overall workload of editors and reviewers, the value of increasing the likelihood that solid research results are available to those who can make the most of them is more consistent with the overall goals of the scientific community and with the interests of society as a whole. In addition, although some may complain that multiple publications from the same study inflate the apparent contribution of the author(s) to the scholarly record, this claim minimizes the challenge of writing about research findings in a manner appropriate for a particular audience. This claim also highlights the tendency to focus on quantity rather than quality in evaluating the contributions of colleagues. While it is easier to count the number of publications on a curriculum vitae than to read and evaluate them and their importance to the field, it is a less reliable method of assessing the merits of a candidate for employment, promotion or tenure. Moreover, it adds to the sense that quantity not quality is what matters.

Labels like self-plagiarism, dual publication and redundant publication identify concerns that may be more apparent than real. It is valuable to examine the issues they raise in the context of the goals of the scientific research in which they are used.

REFERENCES

1. Loui, Michael C. (2002) Seven Ways to Plagiarize: Handling Real Allegations of Research Misconduct, *Science and Engineering Ethics* 8: 529-539.