Abstract

Objective: Self-plagiarism, the unattributed reuse of one’s own work (comprising text-recycling and duplicate or redundant publication), can have serious ethical and legal implications and is recognized as scientific misconduct. The number of publications discussing and characterizing self-plagiarism has increased in recent years (based on a search of PubMed and Web of Science), but authors may remain unaware of the issue. We reviewed author guidelines from top-tier journals to assess current guidance on self-plagiarism.

Research design and methods: Author guidelines for the top 100 (by impact factor) biomedical journals were reviewed for explicit guidance on self-plagiarism, identified by the key words “self-plagiarism,” “text-recycling,” “duplicate,” “redundant,” or “[author’s/one’s] own,” in the context of reuse of work. Guidelines were also reviewed for stated use of search tools (eg, CrossCheck/iThenticate) to identify plagiarism/self-plagiarism in submitted manuscripts.

Results: Across the top 100 journals, 44 unique author guidelines (accounting for shared guidelines among journals with the same publisher) were identified and reviewed. Of these, 16 (36.4%) had explicit guidance on an aspect of self-plagiarism (56/100 individual journals). However, only 3/44 (6.8%) guidelines mentioned “self-plagiarism” by name (28/100 individual journals). 15/44 (34.1%) had explicit guidance on an aspect of self-plagiarism, identified by the key words “self-plagiarism,” “text-recycling,” or “redundant,” or the term “[author’s/one’s] own” in the context of reusing published work.

Conclusions: Many top-tier journals do not have explicit guidance for authors on self-plagiarism. Given the ethical and legal implications of self-plagiarism, more comprehensive guidance from journals could be beneficial to increase author awareness and understanding of the issue.

Introduction

• Self-plagiarism is defined as the “reuse of [an author’s] own previously written work as a new work without attributing the previous work to the reader” (7). The practice is unethical and is recognized as scientific misconduct. The number of publications discussing and characterizing self-plagiarism has increased in recent years (based on a search of PubMed and Web of Science), but authors may remain unaware of the issue. We reviewed author guidelines from top-tier journals to assess current guidance on self-plagiarism.

• In practice, self-plagiarism can take several forms, including duplicate/redundant publication, salami slicing (or fragmentation), and text recycling (Table). The common feature is an overlap with previously published material without appropriate attribution.

• In extreme cases, self-plagiarism may be a deliberate attempt to deceive or distort the literature by presenting existing data as new data; however, in many cases, self-plagiarism arises from author errors in writing or editing the manuscript, rather than intentional deception.

• Lack of awareness may be compounded by some authors questioning whether text recycling should be considered inappropriate (4) despite clear guidance from professional associations, such as the Office of Research Integrity (5) and the Committee on Publication Ethics (6).

• The number of publications discussing and characterizing self-plagiarism has increased in recent years; in a search of PubMed and Web of Science, 58 publications on self-plagiarism were identified in total, with 43 (74.1%) of these published from 2009-2014.

• Nevertherless, Retraction Watch (http://retractionwatch.com/), which monitors retractions issued by journals, indicates that self-plagiarism is still a frequent reason for retractions, suggesting that many authors remain unaware of the seriousness of the issue.

Table. Forms of Self-Plagiarism

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of Self-Plagiarism</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duplicate/Redundant Publication</td>
<td>• Extreme cases of duplicate publication may involve reproduction of all the same data and text with only superficial changes.</td>
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<td>• A redundant publication may reproduce much of the same data but with a slightly different focus and is therefore suitable for shorter communications.</td>
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<td>• Would also encompass inclusion of any part of previously published material without attribution</td>
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<td>Salami Slicing</td>
<td>• The practice of unnecessarily splitting a single data set across multiple publications (fragmentation).</td>
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<td>• May include data augmentation, where new data are collected and added to existing published materials and submitted as an entirely new study</td>
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<tr>
<td>Text Recycling</td>
<td>• The reuse of portions of the author’s own previously published text</td>
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References


