

Redundant Publication

The Editorial Policy Committee of the
Council of Science Editors

Summary

The Committee on Editorial Policy has considered the matter of redundant (or duplicate or repetitive) publication and recommends that each journal have a clear policy regarding sole submission and the definition of redundant publication. Procedures should be developed to evaluate potential violations of such a policy; actions should be prescribed for cases in which a violation has been established. All of this information should be incorporated into the journal's instructions for authors.

Introduction

Journals that view their purpose as including the reporting of original work generally insist that papers be submitted to them solely, not having been published before or not under consideration by another journal. Violating this requirement by reporting substantially the same work more than once, without attribution of the original source(s), has been variously called duplicate, repetitive, or redundant publication. Of these terms, duplicate and, to a lesser extent, repetitive, connote identity, and 2 papers need not be identical to be substantially the same. Thus, "redundant publication" is probably the favored term to describe this practice, and the term applies whether or not publication has actually occurred (that is, it includes submission in hopes of redundant publication).

Redundant publication is a matter of great concern to journal editors and editorial boards, mainly because it wastes a journal's most precious resources—its editorial pages and the time and talents of its reviewers and staff. And it displaces other meritorious reports. It can also distort the importance of an observation or treatment by artificially inflating its frequency, confound subsequent tabulations such as meta-analyses, subvert an academic reward system based on publication of scholarly work, and violate copyright laws.

Recognition

A working definition of redundant publication might be "publishing or attempting to publish substantially the same work more than once", but this raises the issue of how to recognize when 2 (or more) written reports are substantially the same. An all-inclusive, legalistic definition is probably not possible, although certain aspects or characteristics are usually evident on careful examination. At least 1 of the authors must be common to all reports (if there are no common authors, it is more likely plagiarism than redundant publication). The subject or study populations are often the same or similar, the methodology is typically identical or nearly so, and the results and their interpretation generally vary little, if at all. The papers may differ in form but not in substance; a useful general test is to ask if the reader of 1 paper would gain any new insights or perspectives from reading the other, at least with respect to those elements common to both papers. If the answer to this question is "Probably not", there is a strong likelihood that redundant publication exists. Nevertheless, the ultimate decision about whether 2 specific papers represent redundant publication has to be made on an individual basis, typically as a judgment by the editor(s) but guided by a journal policy established previously, and reached as fairly and objectively as possible.

A common circumstance in which concern about redundant publication should be raised is the one in which 1 of the papers clearly reports a subset of the other. The more comprehensive report may have been published 1st and the more focused later, or vice versa. In such instances, the components common to each publication should be examined and compared, 1st to verify their commonality, and then to make a judgment as to how much of the totality of the work they represent. If the common elements are clearly minor and secondary to the major "message" of the comprehensive report, it is probably not redundant publication (although the value of the secondary paper may be so low as to preclude acceptance). However, if the common elements represent the essence of the work, then redundant publication may well exist. No hard-and-fast rules govern the determination of what is "essence" or "major part", and judgment can only be based on a case-by-case determination. Again, it is often helpful to ask, "Would the reader of 1 gain anything from reading the other?"

Implicit in any definition is the caveat that any possibility of redundant publication is undeclared, in that there is no indication, in the letter or other materials accompanying a submission of the existence of other related manuscripts. Most journals state in their instructions that any potential overlap with other manuscripts, published, submitted, or in preparation, should be identified specifically to the editor and a copy of any relevant paper(s) provided. This provides the opportunity to use the peer-review process to define "substantially the same work" in a specific case. Failure to give this information strongly suggests some intent to deceive, although it may simply reflect the failure of authors to read the instructions of journals to which they submit their work. However, failure to mention, in the text of a paper, one's own work that is, at the very least, closely related is more worrisome and, given authors' penchant to self-citation, omitting it from the bibliography is probably *prima facie* evidence of redundant publication.

There are circumstances that might appear initially to fit the definition of redundant publication, but which clearly do not constitute the practice. A journal might want to publish, in part or even word-for-word, something that has appeared previously or will appear nearly simultaneously, because it is judged so important, or it possesses historic interest, or because the journal wants to be certain it is available to its readers. There is no redundant publication in this case as long as 1) the editors of both journals approve, preferably in writing, 2) the secondary version is printed with a clear statement of previous publication including the primary reference, and 3) appropriate permissions and copyright releases are secured. A similar circumstance is that in which there is a desire to publish something in a language other than that in which it appeared originally. Again, as long as all concerned are fully informed, give consent, and the steps listed above are followed, redundant publication is not at issue.

Other situations that are not usually considered to constitute redundant publication include publication of an abstract and presentation at a scientific meeting. However, a journal would be well advised to define the maximum length (for example, 300 words) that can appear in print, without being considered redundant. Problems can arise with news media, both the lay or popular media, and "controlled circulation" publications. If a journal wishes to prevent dissemination of major or essential portions of an article by these means, it should caution its authors specifically against making available full text, tables, and figures, before publication in the journal.

Electronic dissemination of a manuscript is a relatively new phenomenon, and firm guidelines have not been developed. Sending a paper to a small number of selected colleagues, for information or advice, is probably permissible. However, widespread dissemination in advance

of publication would probably be regarded by most journals as violation of a "sole submission" requirement and therefore would constitute redundant publication.

Determination

Questions of redundant publication may be raised at any of several points: 1) both papers may have already appeared in print; 2) 1 paper may have been published and the other (the one of specific interest) may be under consideration or in press; 3) both papers may be under consideration at the same time. The last situation arises fairly frequently, because 1 expert reviewer may have been asked to evaluate both.

When such a question is raised, the editor needs to obtain a copy of the "other" paper and, by some process, compare it with the "index" paper so as to make a determination regarding redundant publication. When the "other" paper has already been published, there is no problem. However, when it is under consideration, the reviewer who called the editor's attention to possible redundant publication should not provide his or her review copy because that would violate the privileged nature of the peer review process. What can be done, however, is that the editor can ask the author to provide copies of all manuscripts related in any way to the "index" paper.

With copies of the 2 (or more) manuscripts in hand, the editor can institute a process to determine whether redundant publication exists. It is preferable for this process to include others who have not participated directly in the evaluation of the specific manuscript; other editors or members of an editorial or advisory board would be good candidates to constitute such a panel, along with perhaps an outside expert in the field. If feasible, identification of authors and institutions should be removed from the manuscripts examined by a review panel, which can give its judgment by either discussion to reach consensus or vote of individual members.

What should be communicated to the author(s) during the time a potential redundant publication is being evaluated? There are no clear guidelines in this regard, but the authors should be informed at some point in the evaluation process and permitted the opportunity to submit a written statement of their position, to be considered by the editor and/or the review panel. Whatever procedure is followed, it needs to be guided by the goal of maintaining the journal's integrity, but at the same time acknowledging the author's rights to due process.

Sanctions and Penalties

What should a journal do when it finds an author or authors in violation of its policies on redundant publication? If it involves a manuscript under consideration, at the very least the paper should be rejected. If it involves a report that has already appeared in print, then the journal should consider publishing a "notice of redundant publication" so that readers will be informed of the situation. If such a notice is listed in the journal's table of contents, appears on a numbered page of the journal, and is signed by the editor, it will be entered into the database of the National Library of Medicine and incorporated into its database, making the information available in literature searches. Additionally, some journals invoke specific sanctions against authors found in violation of redundant publication policies by refusing to accept any submissions from them for a specified length of time. In a few instances, groups of journals of a particular specialty or subspecialty have agreed to share information about cases of redundant publication. The journal may wish to notify the department or institution if an author

is found guilty of redundant publication.

Recommendations

1. Journals that publish original work should develop policies, using their particular policy-making mechanisms, regarding requirements of sole submission. Abstracts or longer articles representing presentations at scientific meetings and electronic publications should be specified as part of such policies.
2. Once a journal has a policy about redundant publication, it should develop procedures to evaluate potential violations at any point at which they may come to light. Such procedures should be as fair as possible to all concerned, involving blinded review and an author's right to respond or explain.
3. Once a journal has a policy about redundant publication, it should identify action(s) to be taken when a violation of the policy is determined to have taken place.
4. All of the above policies and procedures should be announced prominently in the journal and should be incorporated into the journal's instructions to authors.

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