

On difficulty in handling text recycling

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Introduction

Checking for text duplication in submitted manuscripts by using softwares such as iThenticate is becoming a general practice in editing science and engineering journals. This increases the awareness of the problems of duplicate publication, i.e., plagiarism and text recycling. Although the number of the papers with duplicated text has been reported to stop increasing in last decade [1], the status in recent years is not known. It might have increased considering the recent world-wide trend of ‘publish or perish’ paradigm which reflects an increase in the pressure of paper publication. Meanwhile, the practice of duplication checking in manuscripts has not likely become a global routine yet. Regardless of the current situation, text recycling has been one of the most annoying problems for editors, and complaints about it can easily be heard from editorial offices and in editors’ web-fora [2]. In this essay, difficulties and problems related to text recycling are listed, and some effort and actions necessary to solve or loosen the problem are sought.

Difficulties in Handling Text Recycling

Text recycling, also called self-plagiarism, is defined by BioMed Central (BMC) as the one “occurs when sections of the same text appear in more than one of an author’s own publications” [3]. It differs from redundant or duplication publication which “denotes a larger problem of repeated publication of data or ideas” [3] and can be serious violation of research ethics [4] and even copy-right. Meanwhile, the definition of text recycling, quite differently from the simplicity, has ambiguities. Quite differently from the simplicity, has ambiguities which generate debates among editors and authors. The extent of overlap that is acceptable and the nature of the recycled text, either introduction, materials and methods, results, or discussion are frequent subject of debate. These are viewed differently not only in different research fields but also by different individuals. Some large conglomerate publishers posted guidelines to help their editors and authors on these issues [3,5]. However, still there are confusions and complaints on the difficulties in judging from the points of view both of editors and authors. There are also issues on the efficiency versus ethics in using one’s own information, e.g., in ‘introduction’ section of a paper. Here is an example.

I’d be interested to know what the justification might be for demanding a new and original

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introduction every time. If a lab is pursuing a drawn-out project, it's likely to publish several papers on the topic before it's through (at least in chemistry, my field). The justification for pursuing the research isn't likely to change over the course of the project, and the state of the art may not change significantly either (with the exception of the papers previously published, which ought to be cited, obviously). Given that, why should an author bother finding new ways to explain why their research has merit every time they submit a new paper? Why not develop a cogent, concise explanation of the relevant background, and use it every time, updating as necessary? [6].

How should authors and editors handle text recycling? For authors, a recommendable guide can be found in the guidelines from Nature journal's policy [5].

If part of a contribution that an author wishes to submit to a journal has appeared elsewhere, the author must specify the details in the covering letter accompanying the submission. Consideration by the journal is possible if the main result, conclusion, or implications are not apparent from the other work.

This states that authors should disclose text recycling to editors. By doing so, authors toss the ball to editors. And, this makes journals decide what is acceptable and what is not in their own field of research, and thereby, lets the research community establish a consensus. Meanwhile, editors have quite diverse opinions or points of view themselves in handling text recycling. An example of this diversity can be found in a survey on text recycling carried out on member editors of Korean council of science editors [7]. In this survey, editors of different fields were asked the extent of acceptable overlap in texts. Half the editors answered that they would accept reuse of a paragraph or less than 5 sentences if the original source was cited. A quarter of the editors replied that they would consider the practice 'self plagiarism' regardless of the citation of the original. Interestingly, they were from the field of life science. And, 6% of the editors answered that reproduction of a large fraction of text even without citation is acceptable as far as the reproduced is of the authors. This diversity might originate from the lack of a consensus on this matter or reflect simply a low-level understanding on values of integrity research among Korean editors. In Korea, an editor position has generally been short-lasting (one year of two in many cases), and is not always taken by a scholar with high level standard in research ethics. Anyhow, again, a good guidance (and presumed the best so far) could be found in the guide of BMC [3].

Editors should consider each case of text recycling on an individual basis as the 'significance' of the overlap, and therefore the most appropriate course of action, will depend on a number of factors. These factors include:

- How much text is recycled
- Where in the article the text recycling occurs
- Whether the source of the recycled text has been acknowledged
- Whether the article is a research or non-research article
- Whether there is a breach of copyright
- In some circumstances, cultural norms at the time and place of publication

And, it recommends that the papers redundancy can be handled according to COPE flowchart, where it is noted as following.

Where overlap is considered to be minor, authors may be asked to re-write overlapping sections, and cite their previous article(s). More significant overlap may result in rejection of the manuscript. If text recycling is discovered in a published article, it may be necessary to publish a correction to, or retraction of, the original article [8].

Still, there may be some fundamental issues that are not easily answered. Is text recycling really bad? Duplication is accepted or excused if the original source was cited? Nature made a note regarding the first issue [1].

(It is) violation of the premise that each scientific paper should be an original contribution. And it can also serve to falsely inflate a researcher's CV by suggesting a higher level of productivity. And "we would expect that results, discussion and the abstract present novel results" (by Harold Garner at Virginia Tech, USA).

This is persuasive, but may not be viewed rational enough to be compulsive. To someone, what Garner noted may be read as that we do not expect introduction or method present novel results. And, the second issue, what if one copies whole introduction section and makes citation of the original? Citing does not justify the act of duplication because it does not change the fact that "higher level productivity" and "false inflation one's CV" can be achieved by the act of duplication. Still, it sounds and is misused as a safeguard for duplication. Of all, disclosing of 'recycling a text' should not as important as 'not falsely inflating one's CV'.

There are other difficult problems. The definition of text recycling by BMC (and others) is in general too narrow to reflect all the possible situations in reality. In 2017 meeting of

Council of Science Editors, Cary Moskovitz at Thompson Writing Program of Duke University, pointed out shortcomings of the definition in BMC's guidance [9]. "Text recycling occurs when sections of the same text appear in more than one of an author's own publications." Here, how large duplication the 'section' means, he asked. Furthermore, does it matter where and what in a paper is the 'section'? More difficult issues exist in regard to 'an author' and 'publication.' A paper in the fields of science and engineering is generally authored by more than one. What if one duplicates text of a paper in which he was only one of multiple authors? In this case, it can more likely be 'plagiarism' not 'text recycling.' It indeed is committing plagiarism if the two papers were written by two different persons. Should it be handled so? Finally, 'publication' can also cause confusion. Recently, conference proceedings are published by many conferences especially in the field of engineering. In some of them, submitted materials are peer reviewed and considered as research papers. In certain societies such as IEEE which declares that an article in a proceeding book is research paper [10]. It is found that a proceeding paper can be partly reproduced in a full paper and published in their own official journals [11]. Here, a partial recycling is an allowed act. However, what if the proceeding paper is recycled in a paper submitted to a different journal? It may not be acceptable if there had been mutual agreement (or at least understanding on this matter). Even, it may be committing a copy-right violation. There may be justifiable reasons for publishing the proceeding papers and for accepting the full papers that contain what was recycled from the proceeding paper. However, it can cause a trouble to innocent researchers. If the policy of IEEE on the justification of reuse is considered OK, then, our current consensus on text recycling as Nature stated [1] may lose ground and researcher may fall into confusion on the righteous act of research.

Conclusion

Overall, text recycling is an example which brings about our attention and caution on defining what are desirable acts in research and publication and how we practice and enforce it. Current confusion asks us to make stronger and wider discussion and efforts to generate consensus on the need to conform the rule of 'not recycle texts' and further what is good research practice. Meantime, consensus needs to be made at least in a society or a discipline of science before a global consensus is made.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was re-

ported.

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