

POSSIBLE SELF-PLAGIARISM AND REDUNDANCY: A NEED TO REDEFINE JOURNAL POLICIES IN THIS DIGITAL AGE OF CLOUD STORAGE AND FILE SHARING SITES

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Dear Editor,

Recently an article was rejected for publication on account of possible self-plagiarism and duplicate submission. The article had not been previously published by any journal as such, rather it was found online on a file sharing website Scribd as "open access". When requested by the editor for an explanation, the author maintained that the article had not been "published" by any journal as such and the online upload was from author's personal account on that file sharing website. When investigated further, the copyrights of the online document were also found exclusively with the author rather than being transferred to the website. The editor was not satisfied by this explanation and rejected the manuscript accusing the authors of possible self-plagiarism and redundant publication. Who was wrong - although the editor may well be correct in rejecting the article but can he/she accuse the author of self-plagiarism in this case?

Self-plagiarism involves reusing one's own work, ideas or data and republishing it without proper citation.¹ Duplicate submission is one of the most common types of self-plagiarism² which results mostly from authors submitting an article to more than one journal simultaneously. As a result, two or even more journals might end up publishing the paper which leads to duplicate

publication. There may appear to be little harm in authors submitting similar or identical manuscripts to two journals but the problem with duplicate publication is that it adds to and distorts the literature and may affect the meta-analysis by being counted more than once. Moreover it often results in the violation of copyright since most journals require authors to sign a transfer of copyright at the time of submission.³

Most of the journals have a policy that the manuscript must not have been "submitted to any other Journal". There was no clear cut instruction prohibiting the authors from keeping the article online on their personal website, ResearchGate or a file sharing site like Scribd as in this case. If the article is even found on any of these platforms, the copyright of the article still remain with the author himself. The Committee on Publication Ethics regarding a similar case⁴ pointed out that "It is crucial that every journal discusses this at the editorial level and decide what they consider to be prior publication and then puts this information on their website and on the online submission system. There is no general guidance on what is considered prior publication it has to be an individual journal decision. In some areas prepublication posting is encouraged, and may be required e.g. for clinical trials. This is a rapidly changing area and journals should be prepared to modify their policies over

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time, with the increasing number of prior publication options becoming available (e.g. blogs, preprint servers)". Who is wrong after all? "If the journal has not been explicit about what it considers prior publication, it may be difficult to accuse the author of self-plagiarism or duplicate publication"⁴ concluded the COPE committee.

In light of the above argument, I appeal to all the editors to explicitly declare their publication policies regarding duplicate publication mentioning all those potential prepublication sites (ResearchGate, Scribd, Docstoc etc) if they consider them to be a hindrance in the publication process after all they are not "journals as such".

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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