Journal editorials on plagiarism: what is the message?

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Abstract A sample of 63 recent editorials on plagiarism, identified through PubMed, was examined for common themes. The sample ranged in length from approximately a single page to several pages. Forty one percent of the editorials included definitions of plagiarism and of self-plagiarism. But, these definitions varied widely in detail and in scope. For example, with respect to recycling authors’ own previously published text, what might be perfectly acceptable to one editor may constitute an instance of self-plagiarism to another. Fourteen percent of the editorials acknowledged that plagiarism had occurred in the journal. Two major themes seemed to emerge from the present analysis: 1) Concern regarding the frequency with which plagiarism and self-plagiarism occur in the sciences or in the journal itself, along with possible negative consequences for those who commit infractions; 2) A cautionary warning about the existence of technology designed to detect plagiarism (and image manipulation) and/or the adoption of such technology by the journal for the purpose of screening submissions.

Keywords: Plagiarism; self-plagiarism; text re-use; publication ethics; research misconduct; journal editorials.

Introduction
In an editorial in the International Journal of Cardiology its editor lamented that “Hardly a week now goes by as editor of a major medical journal without I and my colleague associate editors being confronted with an allegation or evidence of plagiarism, duplicate publication, multiple submissions, authorship disputes, scientific fraud, article retraction or salami slicing of research findings into an excessive number of publications.” (p149). Plagiarism has been a source of concern for many journal editors and authors who have covered the issue in numerous papers in the scholarly and popular literature. For example, in an essay published in 2011 in European Science Editing its authors noted that there were a greater number of biomedical publications with ‘plagiarism’ as keyword in their titles since 2005 than ever before.

Issues related to plagiarism and self-plagiarism (ie redundant or overlapping publication) are common topics for discussion in the forum hosted by the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME). A recently published survey of international science journal editors, carried out by Elizabeth Wager and her colleagues, has revealed that although their sample of editors believed that these issues were not a major problem for their journals, they did acknowledge that plagiarism and redundancy were some of the most frequent ethical lapses that they had confronted. Perhaps the most glaring evidence that these ethical issues are of great concern to the science publishing community is the widespread adoption of software tools, such as CrossCheck, to detect these types of misconduct in journal submissions.

Recent evidence indicates that some journal editors lack familiarity with scientific publication issues despite relevant training and regular exposure. Many other editors are not concerned with publication ethics and are uninformed about existing guidance offered by the Committee On Publication Ethics (COPE) and the International Committee for Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). Because in the past I had noticed that a significant proportion of papers on plagiarism are journal editorials, I wondered what type of message is conveyed in these editorials. To address this question, a sample of recently published editorials on the subject was retrieved and analyzed for their content.

Methods
The term ‘plagiarism’ was used to search through PubMed. The search as of 30 April 2013 resulted in 1,086 items containing the term. Items with abstracts or titles published from 2008 to 2012 (n=475) were further analyzed to pick journal editorials. A large proportion of these papers were topical articles, letters, or empirical studies on plagiarism and/or other forms of research misconduct. Some papers were editorials or guest editorials, but they were neither labeled as such nor written by editors and were, therefore, not analyzed further. Because of these peculiarities and due to unavailability of full-texts of some items, it was impossible to calculate the proportion of editorials among the initially retrieved 475 items. The final sample consisted of 63 journal editorials that were available to me in full-texts. I analyzed each editorial for coverage of plagiarism, self-plagiarism, and related issues.

Results & Discussion
The sample ranged in length from 0.25 to 8.25 print pages. The average length was 1.8 pages, with a median of one page. Given that journals use different combinations of fonts and margins, these numbers should be considered as rough estimates of the editorials’ length.

The extent of coverage of plagiarism in the 63 editorials varied widely, ranging from a mere mentioning about it to a detailed examination of the malpractice. Fourteen percent of the editorials acknowledged that a case had occurred in the journal, and 16% of them identified or described specific cases, though not necessarily cases that occurred in their journal. Forty one percent of the editorials defined plagiarism, but some of the definitions were narrow in scope. For example, one editorial defined plagiarism as “… the use of text from another author and the representation of it as one’s own original work” (p1757). Another editorial stated that: “Two kinds of plagiarism are recognized in scientific writing — plagiarism of data and plagiarism of text”. Yet another editorial excluded all other forms of plagiarism except plagiarism of ideas: “Plagiarism is the appropriation
of ideas of another author, without giving due credit ...” (p101). A couple of editorials seemed to lump plagiarism with self-plagiarism. For example, one editor wrote: “When an author duplicates his or her or another’s written words or ideas from an independent body of text without reference to the original source, the author has committed plagiarism” (p1). The inconsistencies in the definitions are in line with previous surveys.3,4

Sixty nine percent of the editorials covered the issue of self-plagiarism, with 25% of these providing definitions and some discussions. The recycling one’s own previously published text was the issue with the widest range of opinions. For example, one editorial found it acceptable to re-use texts in literature reviews and in method sections of papers; “ADA journals will allow authors to reuse concise and well-written literature reviews and methodology descriptions from their own previously published work, assuming such text is properly cited and noted to the editors at the time of submission ...” (p189). Other editorials considered ethical re-cycling in methods section only. The editor of Anesthesia & Analgesia “ ...explicitly accepts self-plagiarism in the Methods section of a manuscript, but discourages it elsewhere” (p492). Another editor discouraged the practice: “Please note that verbatim copying of entire paragraphs (even in the “Methods” section) whether from other authors’ or one’s own prior work is never tolerated” (p1757).5 At least one editorial, while not committing to any specific quantity or section, conveyed the following sensible advice: “While there are sometimes good reasons for reusing certain textual elements (particularly in the Methods and literature review), authors should be cautious and thoughtful in doing so” (p1).11

In addition to the frequency with which editors encounter unethical writing practices, two other major themes were common across most of the editorials. Editors informed readers about negative consequences of these trespasses. The other emerging theme was about existing technology to detect misconduct such as plagiarism and image manipulation, and/or adoption of such technology by the journal for screening purposes. Sixty seven percent of the editorials mentioned the use of software or services to detect plagiarism. In addition, 37% of the editorials provided details of the procedure the journal operates for handling instances of misconduct. Various sources of guidance were cited to support the editors’ positions on these important matters, with the COPE guidance being the most frequently cited (37%), followed by the United States’ Office of Research Integrity (14%), WAME (8%), and ICMJE instructions (2%).

Conclusion

Perhaps the most surprising finding of this study was the lack of agreement in plagiarism definitions and in the threshold of acceptable text re-cycling. Some editors find it acceptable to re-use some material while others discourage any form of re-use. The latter finding is troublesome because a type of text recycling acceptable to one editor may constitute an instance of self-plagiarism to another one. A case involving such difference of opinions, albeit involving a more complex degree of overlap that included text and data, has been described by Elizabeth Wager and Richard Green.12 The case also illustrates the importance of communication between authors and editors when it comes to disclosing overlaps between articles, and also the need for a universal guidance on this subject. Such guidance is especially important for non-native English-speaking researchers and for collaborating teams across national and academic boundaries.

Despite inevitable shortcomings of the current analysis of editorials, there is an unambiguous message that comes across: these journal editors are greatly concerned with plagiarism, self-plagiarism, and other forms of research misconduct, as well as with the need to protect the integrity of science.

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