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Journal Self-Citation VI: Forced Journal Self-Citation – Common, Appropriate, Ethical?

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Abstract:

Forced journal self-citation, as defined in this paper, has serious implications for the IS field. We introduce a statistical perspective on how common the practice is, discuss whether it is appropriate or not, and evaluate its ethicality. We find that journal self-citations do influence journal impact factors, a measure of journal quality and a tool for many schools in their promotion and tenure process. We suggest that forced self-citations are not considered appropriate by community standards nor are they ethical in terms of the greatest good. We therefore propose that impact factors be disseminated both with and without self-citations to make the practice of forced self-citation more transparent to the IS community. An example of the proposal is shown.

Keywords: journal self-citation, forced self-citation, impact factors

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I. INTRODUCTION

Publication is both professionally and personally important to academics and scholars. Therefore anything that suggests that the process of publication is biased can be expected to generate an impassioned response from the community. This type of response is exactly what happened when Dr. Paul Gray ran a survey in February 2009 of the AISWorld community regarding the practice of journal editors and/or publishers requiring a minimum number of journal self-citations as a condition for publication in their journals. The question stemmed from an email from a Springer journal on whose editorial board he serves. It stated, "The EICs are requesting that henceforth all articles that are accepted for publication to <journal x> should cite at least five <journal x> articles. This is common practice for all top journals." The survey asked the AISWorld community three questions regarding this statement; (1) Is this really a common practice?, (2) Is it appropriate to reference the publishing journal repeatedly whether it is necessary to the paper or not?, and (3) Is it ethical? The general consensus in response to the survey was that the practice was neither common, appropriate, nor ethical. However, the range of the detailed responses made it clear that this survey dealt with a much deeper issue than a simple tally of responses suggests.

In Section II we discuss each question in turn. However, before proceeding it is imperative to define terms.

Critical Definitions

Self-citation usually applies to individuals who reference their own works. Since scholars typically build on their own research as well as that of others, it is a judgment call as to when this practice becomes excessive. In the context of this debate, we use the term *journal self-citation* to refer to the practice of referencing works in the journal to which an article is published (or is under review).

We use the term *forced self-citation* to refer to the editorial practice to which the survey alludes. This is technically when an editor either requires or strongly requests that an author cite articles that have appeared in the editor's journal. Additionally, this request occurs specifically immediately before or after the paper has been accepted (or conditionally accepted) for publication. That is, at a point when authors would be least able to resist the request because of their strong desire to have the paper become part of the scholarly record.

In using the term *common*, we take a statistical approach. We analyze the commonality of the journal self-citation practice from the perspective of the behavior of business journals over the last several years. In our analysis, we consider the actual number of journal self-citations as well as the change in impact factor scores that occurs when journal self-citations are removed from the equation. While we do not have data on whether the practice of "forced" self-citation is common, it is instructive to know the rate at which journals are citing themselves as a basis for arguing whether forced self-citation is an appropriate and/or ethical practice.

A number of survey respondents suggested that forced self-citation is an attempt by editors to boost their journal's impact factor. *Journal impact factors* (JIF) are journal influence scores published through Thomson Reuters ISI Web of Knowledge. JIF are based on citations in a given year from articles in Thomson Reuters basket of journals. The score is calculated by dividing the number of all citations to a journal's articles published in the previous two years by the number of "citable items" published in the previous two years.¹ Figure 1 provides an example formula for a JIF for *MIS Quarterly* (*MISQ*).

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{2007} \\ \text{MISQ} \\ \text{JIF} \end{array} = \frac{\text{Citations from all 2007 articles in Thomson Reuters journal basket to MISQ articles published in 2005 \& 2006}}{\text{Number of "citable items" published in MISQ in 2005 \& 2006}}$$

Figure 1. Journal Impact Factor Calculation

¹ "Citable items" in the denominator of the JIF equation include original research and review articles and exclude editorials, letters to the editors, news items, meeting notes, etc.

We will be using Thomson Reuters JIF values in our statistical analysis. However, they are not the only measure of journal influence. In Truex et al., [2009, forthcoming] the influence of a given journal was determined through a set of metrics called the H-indices which arrive at a journal influence score in a different way than the Thomson Reuters JIF. In addition, the source of citations used in the Truex et al., study was Google Scholar rather than the Thomson Reuters journal basket.

Whereas it might be useful to define the terms “appropriate” and “ethical” before beginning our argumentation, we will refrain from doing so until our discussion of the ethics of forced self-citation in Section III. For the moment, suffice to say that we view “appropriateness” as a social norm and “ethical” as being more abstract, and adopting either a utilitarian or deontological interpretation.

II. JOURNAL SELF-CITATION AND WHAT IT MEANS

In this section, we consider each of the three questions in the survey in turn.

RQ1: Is it common?

The question of whether forced self-citation is common can be evaluated through multiple approaches. Crews et al., [2009] assessed this practice by querying members of the Association of Information Systems on their experiences with forced self-citation. Respondents were asked if, as an author, they were ever requested to add citations by journal “representatives”². Additionally, those who indicated they were journal representatives were asked whether they had ever asked authors to include a minimum number of journal self-citations. Crews et al., found that 29.5 percent of the responding authors had been asked by journal representatives to add a minimum number of citations to their manuscript, while 13.6 percent of the responding journal representatives indicated engaging in this practice. These results indicate that the practice of forced self-citation is not an isolated one.

Another approach to understanding the underlying issues in forced self citations is to assess the objective results of journal self-citation practices by observing their actual number in journal articles. Such an analysis does not tell us directly whether forced self-citation is a common practice. It does, however, provide an objective assessment of how many journal self-citations actually end up in journal articles and therefore whether we are talking about a minor or major issue. Springer suggests that five self-citations per article is common practice for all top journals. It may prove instructive to determine if this claim has any validity. To do so, we first need to define what constitutes a top journal.

Journal impact factors are one way to measure the relative quality of journals. Mangematin and Baden-Fuller [2008] used Thomson Reuters 2005 JIF values to produce a ranking of business journals that we will use as the basis for a list of top journals on which to evaluate self-citation averages. Another method used to determine journal quality is to ask senior scholars or domain experts for their professional assessment. Dennis Galletta’s [2007] AIS president’s message lists the top six journals in IS as generated by the “Senior Scholars Forum” on April 23, 2007. Using a combination of these two sources, we took the top 25 business journals from Mangematin and Baden-Fuller’s list and added five IS journals from the Senior Scholar’s list that did not appear in Mangematin and Baden-Fuller’s top 25 to produce a list of 30 business journals. These 30, arguably, could fit Springer’s definition of top business journals. *JAIS* was also on the “Senior Scholars” list, but was not included in this set because it is not yet in the Thomson Reuters basket of journals from which our data is derived.

It turns out that the average number of journal self-citations per article for this group of journals has been relatively stable, between five and six for 2004-2007; specifically, 5.59, 5.47, 5.69, and 5.79 respectively. Table 1 provides the yearly average journal self-citations for all 30 journals from 2004-2007 ordered by 2007 JIF. Whether or not Springer used this sort of calculation to arrive at their count of five self-citations is unknown to us. However, these results do seem to indicate a consistent trend across this set of journals, even though the averages for any one journal may not be as consistent from year to year.

The problem with trends and averages is that they can only tell us what and not why. Springer’s mechanistic approach to self-citations described in Section I may simply be a misinterpretation of facts. Unfortunately, these kinds of decisions can have far reaching and long lasting effects. Therefore, we suggest that our research community would benefit greatly from studies that can provide useful insights into patterns of self-citations and other aspects of the publication process.

² Crews et al., use the term “representatives” to refer to journal editors, reviewers, and publishers.

Table 1. Journal Self-Citation Counts for Top Business Journals from 2004-2007

	2007	2006	2005	2004
Average for All 30 Journals	5.79	5.69	5.47	5.59
MIS Quarterly	10.37	5.27	6.68	7.00
Academy of Management Journal	9.85	6.77	6.52	5.09
Academy of Management Review	8.07	6.80	6.05	4.76
Marketing Science	9.64	16.34	8.22	9.53
Journal of Marketing	9.66	7.81	9.91	9.78
Journal of Finance	7.74	9.74	7.91	7.57
Organization Science	6.41	3.94	4.23	3.29
Journal of Accounting & Economics	5.82	4.79	9.88	12.00
Journal of Financial Economics	5.64	5.55	6.08	6.17
Administrative Science Quarterly	12.92	14.15	16.23	15.75
Strategic Management Journal	12.91	9.90	9.98	11.88
Information Systems Research	2.78	3.43	2.38	1.55
Research Policy	5.42	5.68	4.65	5.09
Review of Financial Studies	2.66	3.05	3.40	3.30
Journal of Accounting Research	5.74	5.10	4.70	7.17
Journal of Management	3.59	3.24	2.59	3.26
Management Science	4.01	3.18	3.22	9.32
Journal of Business Venturing	6.08	7.05	7.15	5.00
Journal of Management Information Systems	4.80	5.85	5.16	3.57
Leadership Quarterly	7.86	7.66	9.16	5.78
Journal of Marketing Research	4.02	3.66	4.83	5.84
Journal of Consumer Research	6.84	7.97	8.27	6.84
Accounting Review	5.34	5.70	4.36	5.09
Journal of Information Technology	0.54	0.83	1.58	0.30
Information Systems Journal	3.33	2.43	0.61	0.71
Journal of Environmental Economics and Management	2.39	2.98	2.76	2.83
Journal of Risk Uncertainty	4.04	4.38	4.64	3.56
European Journal of Information Systems	2.35	2.00	1.51	1.35
Journal of Strategic Information Systems	1.59	1.00	0.47	1.55
Human Resource Management	1.35	4.32	1.10	2.91

Note: This Table is based on data published by Thomson Reuters. It is used with permission.

It is possible that editors are requiring journal self-citations to boost their JIF and artificially improve the perceived quality of their journal. However, it is important to note that the practice of forced self-citations would have a limited effect on a Thomson Reuters JIF unless the editors specifically required authors to cite articles published in the two years prior to the year the article in question would appear in print. (Citations outside this two year window are not counted in the standard JIF score.) In fact, the average number of journal self-citations per article for this group of journals that would have been included in the JIF for the years 2004-2007 were; .75, .72, .80, and .80 respectively. In other words, on average, less than one self-citation per article is contributing to the JIF calculations for this set of journals. This result does not rule out the possibility that some editors are attempting to artificially inflate their JIF. It does, however, appear to corroborate the general consensus in answer to the first question in the survey that the practice of forced self-citation for the purpose of boosting impact factors is not yet common, at least for this set of top business journals.

That said, the combined set of journal self-citations contributing to the JIF calculation may have a significant effect on JIF scores and their distribution. To test this, we examined the JIF data for 2007 for our set of top 30 business journals. Specifically, we examined JIF values both with and without self-citations for the 30 journals (Table 2). We

ran a Wilcoxon signed-rank test to see if the two samples could possibly come from the same distribution. The non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test was chosen because we wanted to work with the ranks, and the samples are not independent. The Wilcoxon's statistic was 465, with a p-value <.0001. At a .05 alpha protection level, we can confidently reject the null hypothesis that the samples are equivalent. Therefore, we can say that, collectively, journal self-citations do significantly influence journal impact factor scores for this set of journals.

Table 2. JIFs and Ranks With and Without Self-Citations 2007

	With	Rank	Without	Rank
MIS Quarterly	5.826	1	4.870	1
Academy of Management Journal	5.017	2	4.174	2
Academy of Management Review	4.372	3	4.035	3
Marketing Science	3.964	4	1.470	18
Journal of Marketing	3.750	5	3.159	4
Journal of Finance	3.353	6	2.960	5
Organization Science	3.130	7	2.391	8
Journal of Accounting & Economics	2.829	8	2.450	7
Journal of Financial Economics	2.682	9	2.477	6
Administrative Science Quarterly	2.211	10	1.826	10
Strategic Management Journal	2.160	11	1.963	9
Information Systems Research	2.115	12	1.769	12
Research Policy	2.042	13	1.604	14
Review of Financial Studies	2.000	14	1.793	11
Journal of Accounting Research	1.931	15	1.726	13
Journal of Management	1.875	16	1.583	15
Management Science	1.867	17	1.410	19
Journal of Business Venturing	1.763	18	1.224	23
Journal of Management Information Systems	1.739	19	1.568	16
Leadership Quarterly	1.738	20	1.393	20
Journal of Marketing Research	1.733	21	1.344	21
Journal of Consumer Research	1.631	22	1.305	22
Accounting Review	1.605	23	1.488	17
Journal of Information Technology	1.531	24	1.219	24
Information Systems Journal	1.435	25	1.000	25
Journal of Environmental Economics and Management	1.122	26	.796	27
Journal of Risk Uncertainty	1.119	27	.839	26
European Journal of Information Systems	.712	28	.394	30
Journal of Strategic Information Systems	.710	29	.452	29
Human Resource Management	.642	30	.478	28

Note: This Table is based on data published by Thomson Reuters. It is used with permission.

We next examined the list in Table 2 to see if the removal of journal self-citations substantially changes the rank positions for any journals. We found that two thirds of the journals in this list change ranks, with the most substantial change occurring for *Marketing Science* which moves from fourth to 18th. On the other hand, there are 10 journals that maintain the same rank and 14 others that only shift one or two positions. It needs to be acknowledged though, that even a single rank change can be meaningful to journal owners and representatives as well as to authors and other members of the community.

What does this all mean? It means that self-citations do make somewhat of a difference in journal impact factors. Since JIF values are used to varying degrees in establishing journal quality, we need to be wary of practices, such as forced self-citation, that can distort the meaning of the JIF. Thomson Reuters JIF data that are most prominently



displayed in their citation reports do include self-citations, but Thomson Reuters also provides JIF data without self-citations. Whether or not the practice of forced self-citations is common, we suggest that the use of JIF values without self-citations would be a useful deterrent to the practice of forced self-citation when the motive is to boost impact factors.

In fact, the periodic dissemination of an updated Table 2 throughout the community could serve as a means of exposing journals that could be interpreted as inflating their JIF. It would certainly raise red flags among members of the community who do use the journal impact factors as one desideratum for assessing journal quality.

RQ2: Is it appropriate?

Keeping in mind that we earlier posed the question of appropriateness of forced self-citation in the domain of social norms, we have to conclude that it is not an appropriate practice. The informal results from the survey are overwhelming negative, with 89 percent (100/112) of the respondents asserting that the practice was not appropriate. Crews et al., [2009] obtained similar results. In their survey 75 percent of the non-journal representatives felt that the practice was on the “unreasonable” end of the scale.

Are there any conditions under which forced self-citation would seem to be more acceptable? Like all hard and fast judgments, there are likely exceptions. Exceptions become more obvious in the flagrant breach than in the observance. Thus, it is only really possible to sketch out a few sample situations and then overview the variety of circumstances that might generate exceptions. In the final analysis, individual editors make regular decisions about whether they want authors to self-cite the journal. Hence there are, no doubt, many cases that are not covered by the few exceptions listed below.

In view of the negative opinion that the community has toward forced self citation, what would seem to be a more appropriate request by editors would be to add citations to their journal earlier (quite early in fact) in the review process. At this stage in the process, authors would be freer to reject the request/requirement and to seek out other journals that did not enforce compliance. Additionally, the argument that editors make that there are truly relevant articles in their journals that are not being fully utilized would be more compelling if this request did not appear to game the system by its timing.

Another condition that could make this practice more palatable would be a healthy balancing of citations rather than a mechanistic, numeric rule. Suggesting near the end of the review process that the authors add five more citations from the editor's journal certainly smacks of gaming. Specific, named references that were poignant and happened to be from the editor's journal but also happened to be five in number would nominally be a value-add to the article. In our minds, the number five would make more sense if the proportionality were in keeping with the request. If, for example, the named references were five in number and the authors had not cited the editor's journal at all beforehand, then, given the normal number of citations in typical articles, this request might not be unreasonable. But if the authors had already cited the editor's journal 10 times, and the request is for another five, serious suspicions arise. Again, this situation would be even more appropriate, it seems to us, if the request were made during an initial screening review by the editor.

RQ3: Is it ethical?

In a certain sense, the question of appropriateness and ethicality overlap, but we will try to separate them on the grounds of community standards, as articulated previously. To be appropriate is to accede to the wishes of the community. Appropriateness would seem to be connected with social norms and community values. Thus, when someone comments that another's behavior is “inappropriate,” we generally mean that it does not conform to the social norms that have developed over time, or at least what an individual believes to be such social norms.

Ethical practices are different in that they are most often divided into utilitarian ethics or deontological ethics. In the former case, the usual manner of describing the approach is “the greatest good for the greatest number.” In the latter case, the argument stems from principles so that irrespective of what might be for the greater good, it is simply right or wrong.

Arguments based on deontological principles have the Achilles' heel that there may not be a set of underlying assumptions or premises that the principles can be built from. Killing others is wrong, for instance, except in circumstances where one's own life is in danger or possibly in acts sanctioned by the community, such as war or capital punishment for heinous crimes. On what basis do these exceptions arise? If they arise from what most would accept as reasonable exceptions, then we are in the same arguing position as the utilitarian philosophers.

By the same token, the means by which the “greatest good” is determined is a weakness of this philosophical grounding. Is it an opinion survey? Or measures of behavior? Or a more abstract means of deciding what is best for the greatest number? In the latter case, we would be adopting a position that is closer to the deontological epistemology.

Nevertheless, we will take the stance that the greatest good can be argued on the basis of traditions that seem to be generally accepted by the community. Since journals are so visible, in their output, at the very least there may be some basis for determining the “greatest good.” Journal output is of greatest value to the community, we would argue, when it is a vehicle for the dissemination of knowledge. Knowledge has an inherent purpose -- to increase understanding of the world and make it possible for human beings to function more effectively (including more ethically) in that world. This is, of course, at the highest level of abstraction.

More to the point, IS journals are publishing knowledge that intends to improve organizational use of information systems and technologies. In the language of the *MIS Quarterly* editorial objective, it is, “the enhancement and communication of knowledge concerning the development of IT-based services, the management of IT resources, and the use, impact, and economics of IT with managerial, organizational, and societal implications.”³ If this generic mission resonates with the bulk of the community, as it seems to have done for decades, then we can assume that if the journal is meeting these goals it is serving the needs of the “greatest number.”

Ethics, however, are not easily determined at the highest level of abstraction, but rather, at the operational level. The editorial practice of requiring authors to cite more articles in the journal in which they are publishing is a practice at the operational level. Can we apply the logic of meeting editorial missions for the greatest good to this practice? If a practice begins to undermine the larger mission, then we could infer that this practice would not serve the greatest good in the long run. Does this specific practice help the community as a whole in publishing enhanced knowledge about IT? We would argue that it does not. The empirical basis for this argument was discussed earlier, but what follows is the line of reasoning.

If, as argued, the practice of forced self-citation continues, all journals will eventually be pressured to adopt this stance to protect their margins. Margins for a journal are represented by recognition of excellence, and this attitude is affected, in part, by citation impact scores. Unless the community value shifts to value citation impacts more highly with self-citations removed, there will be a tendency for journals to self-cite more and more often. In the long run, this form of gaming will hurt the entire community as it will render useless one of the most useful tools of measuring the influence of journals. The community will be hurt specifically because this approach will undermine the ability of journals to meet their mission of enhancing knowledge of IT. If the desideratum of citation ceases to have meaning, the differentiation between journals will be weakened and the highest caliber work may not have the effect it deserves as it becomes lost in a sea of similar journals.

In short, the argument we are developing is that the greatest good is achieved when there is maximal differentiation between journals, and the standards to which a journal holds its authors is as high as the status and concomitant requirements of the journal itself. In this way a journal will find its distinctive niche in the hierarchy and will not blur its position by forced self-citation.

We cannot leave this topic without saying that scholars also need to be wary of not self-citing enough, as well as having too extreme a reaction to the possible problem of journal self-citation. This situation would occur when authors are artificially induced not to cite the journal at which they are being reviewed. In fact, if the journal editors are doing a good job, then they are publishing papers in the journal that must be cited in order for the authors to link their own work to the best ongoing research. In a certain sense, the better the journal, the more it has to be cited. It is difficult to say if this could ever become a real issue, but it speaks volumes about the reason for citation in the first place. We cite the work that makes the largest splash and if a large percentage of that work is appearing in the journal to which the authors have submitted, so be it. This argument becomes weaker as the perceived quality of the journal becomes lower.

³ Whereas we are quoting the journal objectives of *MIS Quarterly* here, the terms and motives of this mission are very similar to that of nearly all other IS journals.

III. PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS: JIF WITH AND WITHOUT JOURNAL SELF-CITATIONS

Our basic argument in this paper is that, although journal forced self-citation may or may not be legitimately viewed as a serious problem today, it could become a problem in the not too distant future. The community most probably believes that the practice is inappropriate (on the whole, and ignoring conditions under which it would be more appropriate). And there are some arguments that the practice is not ethical from a utilitarian standpoint. Assuming this logic is correct, how do we solve this problem?

An ideal, but at the same time idealistic solution, would be for the community to recognize the potential danger from forced self-citation and show its displeasure by boycotting these journals. Journal editors would sense that they were inviting the displeasure of the community and cease forced self-citation.⁴ Given the need for authors to publish and the huge pressures on junior faculty to target the best journals [Dennis et al., 2006], this outcome is supremely unlikely to happen. Thus, in spite of our arguments in this paper that the community would be hurt by this unethical practice, journal editors would continue to engage in it and would be supported in their actions by the acquiescence of their authorial base.

A more pragmatic solution is for the community to transition to disseminating journal impact factors both with and without self-citations. In answering the question of whether forced self-citation was common practice, we present evidence that journal self-citation appears to be affecting rankings at the moment. Using 2007 as a base year (Table 2), the JIF with self-citations differs statistically from those without. Our analysis also indicates that some journals do dramatically change positions when self-citations are removed. In brief, there could come a time when self-citations would greatly impact the distribution of rankings and thus distort the true influence of a journal. We can head off this eventuality by switching to a purer comparison of JIF, both with and without self-citations, such as in Table 2.

If this transition were to take place, there would be little incentive for editors to request/require forced self-citation that was strictly for gaming purposes because gaming would have no effect on the rankings.⁵ If this were the case, editors who, when screening submissions quite legitimately ask authors to cite specific and relevant articles to the editor's journal, would be less intimidated about making such suggestions.

Conclusions

Citations will, no doubt, continue to be important for evaluating journals and their influence. They will continue to be used in tenure and promotion cases. If the practice of forced self-citation is not curbed, there could be serious repercussions and inequities for the field in years to come.

⁴One might wish that there was a truly efficient marketplace for journal articles and that the community would be aware of which journal editors were making such unreasonable requests. Alas, the market may not be very efficient and information about journal editor practices not widely disseminated. Thus, this solution may be better in the ideal than in the actuality, in all likelihood.

⁵ Since the first author of this article is currently editor in chief of *MIS Quarterly*, he will address in this footnote whether there is an official policy or position of *MISQ* on this issue. First, let it be noted that journal policies come and journal policies go as editors in chief change. Even if this were the policy of the current EIC and *MISQ*, it might not remain so in perpetuity. It might be better to discuss this as both a belief and an observation, perhaps even a personal belief and a personal observation.

From the standpoint of the personal beliefs of the EIC, this article represents a logic, but it also represents an opinion. So, not surprisingly, my belief is that it is not a healthy practice for *MISQ*. Moreover, the impression I have is that *MISQ* editors typically do not engage in this practice. I cannot recall a time when I was asked, as an author, to add *MISQ* references specifically to increase the number of citations to *MISQ* publications. Nor have I ever done so as a reviewer, associate editor, or senior editor on a paper.

Whereas *MISQ* has no official policy on forced self-citation, were this practice to become anything more than extremely rare our editors would, I am sure, be discouraged from making such suggestions to authors (at least by the current EIC). That being said, a perhaps cynical response to these assertions is that *MISQ* does not need citations and, therefore, there is no pressure for editors to encourage journal self-citation. Whereas this would appear to be accurate on the surface, I would contend that the underlying logic is flawed. I have been arguing for the past year in my editorials [Straub 2008a; Straub 2008b; Straub 2008c; Straub and Ang 2008] that citations are even more important for a journal like *MISQ* because this is at least one good way for us to determine that the journal is continuing to have an impact on the scholarly community and that we are meeting our mission. It also suggests the extent to which we are publishing some of the most important works in the field (i.e., those that are most heavily cited) and enticing authors to send us their best work.

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Editor's Note: The following reference list contains hyperlinks to World Wide Web pages. Readers who have the ability to access the Web directly from their word processor or are reading the paper on the Web can gain direct access to these linked references. Readers are warned, however, that:

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