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Journal Self-Citation XI: Regulation of "Journal Self-Referencing" – The Substantive Role of the AIS Code of Research Conduct

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Abstract:

The practice of a publisher requiring authors to include citations to previous articles in the publisher's journals is widely acknowledged to be inappropriate. This paper presents the reasons why that is so. It considers possible means whereby the practice could be subjected to control, and concludes that the primary regulatory vehicle is the Code of Research Conduct of the Association for Information Systems (AIS). The framework created by the original 2003 Code is described, and the extensions approved in principle by the AIS Council in December 2008 are shown to greatly enhance the discipline's ability to bring pressure to bear on publishers that misbehave in this way.

Keywords: citations, references, publishers, editors, reviewers

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I. INTRODUCTION

This special set of papers considers a requirement set forth by the publisher of a refereed journal that articles published in that journal should contain at least five references to previous articles in that journal – a practice referred to as "journal self-referencing."

An organization that carries on the business of publishing has an economic interest in at least its own financial survival. In many cases (including that of the publisher whose actions gave rise to the controversy), a publisher also needs to achieve profits for its shareholders. Revenue depends primarily on the sale of subscriptions, which in turn depends on being noticed by researchers and librarians, being seen to contain articles worth reading and citing, and accumulating citations.

Editors are primarily motivated by the desire for an effective and high quality communications medium and the reputation of the journal, the community that surrounds it, its authors, and its editor and associates. On the other hand, the journal's survival is dependent on an adequate supply of funds, and reputation derives from the papers it contains and their subsequent citation. Hence, many journal editors are not only subject to pressure from the publisher to encourage journal self-referencing, but also have a direct interest in doing so.

A number of avenues are available whereby an editor can legitimately encourage authors to cite papers. Guidance provided to authors can indicate to them the importance of the "cumulative tradition" notion, whereby "researchers build on each other's and their own previous work" [Keen 1980, p. 5]. It is perfectly reasonable to remind authors of the need to cite relevant articles and to recommend that before submitting their paper for review they consider the whole corpus of relevant works, including prior publications in the journal in question, and in other journals that are within that particular publisher's stable. It is difficult to challenge on ethical grounds the encouragement of journal self-referencing if it is done in a manner consistent with appropriate research practice.

During the review process, one of the reviewer's functions is to identify inadequacies in the author's literature review and exposition of existing theory. This role may extend to recommending specific bodies of work that are directly relevant and/or sufficiently authoritative and/or sufficiently similar that they should not be overlooked [Clarke 2006]. If the reviewer draws additional references to the author's attention, these may quite reasonably include previous articles within the journal in question and within other journals in the publisher's stable.

Recommendations of additional citations requires care on the part of the reviewer, and hence on the part of the editor. Such care is particularly crucial where reviewers have a self interest, e.g., where they are recommending consideration of their own publications, especially if they do so in preference to others that may be more salient. The practices of editors vary, with some writing only brief covering notes referring to the review reports, while others define which aspects of the reviews should be reflected in a revised submission. In some cases, for example, an editor may need to provide guidance that overrides a reviewer's recommendations, perhaps because of self interest or because the reviewer has a limited view of the literature. Some editors go so far as to write a further layer of review. In that case, an editor may quite reasonably add further suggestions about relevant literature not currently reflected in the paper. The possibility also exists that the editor may need to propose cuts to a bloated citation list, or a more balanced selection of references.

The boundary between such suggestions for extra references and inappropriate journal self-referencing might seem to be blurred, but a clear criterion exists: relevance to the paper under review. Neither a reviewer nor an editor (let alone a publisher) has any ethical basis for suggesting extraneous references.

A further clear delineation exists: The role of the publisher is, at most, to select good editors who will assess and assure the quality of research articles, drawing on their training and experience in doing research. The publisher has no role whatsoever in the quality assurance of research content. Thus, the quality assurance of paper content is entirely under the control of the editor and editorial board. There is accordingly no ethical basis for a publisher to intrude into the question of citations.

The remainder of this paper is based on the assumption that deliberate journal self-referencing is unethical, and that means are needed to prevent it occurring. The following section considers what means might be available. The discussion is subsequently narrowed down to one primary mechanism: the codes of conduct of professional bodies.

II. REGULATORY ALTERNATIVES

Publishers work under some formal, legal constraints. For example, constructive misrepresentation and other forms of improper trade practices might act as a constraint on the publisher's attempts to control authors' citing practices. Copyright law may have an impact under some circumstances. However, broadly speaking, the practice of journal self-referencing appears not to be directly subject to law, and it is difficult to see any way in which it is likely to become so. Moreover, court action is an expensive and slow means to seek redress, particularly as the financial resources of the publisher generally outweigh those of the author.

The primary form of regulation that is applicable to such circumstances is informal controls. People are socialized by their education, by their mentors, and by their colleagues. Their sense of what is acceptable behavior is conditioned by what they see successful people do without being chastised for it. The boundaries are therefore defined when disapproval is expressed, and seen to be expressed, by senior members of the discipline.

Authors of research papers are provided with a great deal of guidance, some of it formalized, such as the materials that support PhD programs, and instructions for authors issued by conferences and journals. Some informal guidance is provided by advisors and experienced co-authors. Much of the guidance, however, is in the form of exemplars. Authors absorb norms by osmosis from the large number of papers to which they are exposed during their studies that, by implication, evidence proper approaches to adopt.

As doctoral candidates become professionals, they acquire the skills necessary to behave in ways consistent with conventions for their discipline. As they move onward and adopt senior roles, however, they encounter only limited formal guidance. The academic literature on appropriate behavior by reviewers, conference chairs and editors is relatively limited [e.g., Lee 1995; Davison et al., 2005]. These are metatopics rather than substantive issues within the subject matter of the discipline itself.

In mature disciplines, conventions become institutionalized. This commonly takes the form of a "learned society" or "disciplinary association," which declares requirements of members, expresses them in a "code of conduct," and establishes procedures for dealing with complaints about behavior claimed to be in breach of the code.

In the IS discipline, the maturation process is well advanced. The discipline's emergence can be confidently traced to the University of Stockholm in 1965 [Clarke 2008]. Thirty years later, in 1994, the international professional body Association for Information Systems (AIS) was formed. By 2003, a decade later, AIS published a Code of Research Conduct. It is in the process of upgrading that code into a mature instrument for evaluating the appropriateness of behavior by professional IS researchers.

The AIS Code of Research Conduct is the primary means available for exercising control over inappropriate behavior among IS academics. This applies to their behavior in all of their roles, as researchers, authors, reviewers, and editors.

The remainder of this paper accordingly examines the aspects of the 2003 version of the Code that relate to journal self-referencing, and then the amendments that are currently in the process of being approved.

III. THE AIS CODE OF 2003

A few years after the AIS was formed, an AIS Research Conduct Committee was established. This committee prepared the original (and still current) version of AIS Code of Research Conduct [AIS 2003]. A major motivation for the work was concern about the lack of a clear framework for evaluating accusations of plagiarism. The Code's scope was not limited to that issue, however. Instead, a comprehensive instrument was created.

The Code is addressed to "members of the AIS," and contains advice on 16 "code items." Of these, two are expressed as "mandatories," ten as "recommended ethical behaviors," and four as "advisories." The majority address behavior by members in their roles as researchers and authors, but one of the ten "recommended ethical behavior" items is directly relevant to editors and reviewers. "Flagrant disregard [of this item] ... can result in damage to your reputation, editorial sanctions, professional embarrassment, legal action, and the ill will of your colleagues."

The relevant item (number 5) states, "Do not abuse the authority and responsibility you have been given as an editor, reviewer or supervisor ... Editors, reviewers and supervisors are by definition in a position of authority over others. Under no circumstances, should you use your position for personal advantage (such as by coercion) or to the disadvantage of others."

The Code is not specific about the kinds of behaviors that constitute "abuse of authority and responsibility," "use of position for personal advantage," and "coercion." However, in determining whether a particular practice is in breach of the item it is open to the AIS, through its Research Conduct Committee, to take into account existing norms and to apply accepted ethical principles. Given the pressure on researchers to achieve publication in quality journals (popularly referred to as the "publish or perish" syndrome), editors, especially of highly-reputed journals, have considerable power over authors. Given this power difference, the AIS Research Conduct Committee might well interpret a requirement for journal self-referencing as a form of coercion.

Moreover, if it is considered necessary in order to overcome uncertainties, the AIS is able to amend the Code and provide more specific determinations as it has already done for some other items, such as the rights of research subjects, and the interests of co-researchers.

IV. RELEVANT AMENDMENTS UNDER WAY DURING 2009

During 2008, the AIS president requested a small task force to undertake a review of the Code, and recommend any appropriate enhancements. The primary motivation was the apparent need for refinements to Item 1 relating to plagiarism. However, the charge to the task force was broad, and involved re-examining the whole of the Code and the means of applying it.

The task force presented the AIS Council with recommendations [AISTF 2008a] and a revised code [AISTF 2008b]. Both were adopted in principle by the Council in December 2008. Their implementation is, however, conditional on a vote by the membership, which is scheduled to take place during 2009.

The task force recommended many refinements and clarifications to the substance of the Code, although none that specifically address journal self-referencing. On the other hand, the recommendations go much further than merely upgrading the content of the Code. Two aspects of these additional recommendations are highly relevant to the control of journal self-referencing.

One recommendation is that the AIS constitution be amended to require members to comply with the constitution, bylaws and codes. This is a condition of membership of most professional associations (including many relevant to IS, such as the Association for Computing Machinery – ACM, the Australian Computer Society – ACS, the British Computer Society – BCS, and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers – IEEE). It ensures that the behavior of members can be judged against the ethical norms expressed in the Code.

Subject to approval of the motion by AIS members, all members would be bound by the Code in all of the roles that they play. Once a subscription renewal cycle has been completed, all journal editors who are members of the AIS will therefore be able to be called to account for a breach of Item 5 of the Code. Moreover, non-members who submit to AIS journals and conferences will be bound by the Code, because of the terms of the author statement that they sign.

This would, however, seem to leave untouched those journal editors who are not members of AIS. IS researchers publish in a wide range of journals, including in cognate disciplines and in multidisciplinary journals that view particular research domains through many disciplinary lenses. Hence, many editors who handle papers by IS researchers are not themselves IS researchers, and therefore are unlikely to be members of AIS, leaving them beyond its reach.

A further recommendation adopted by AIS Council addresses this circumstance. The existence of the Code is to be communicated to editors and conference chairs of AIS affiliated research publications, and to other journals and conferences. The effect of this recommendation is that all journal editors will have the Code drawn to their attention, including Item 5 relating to the behavior of editors. This can reasonably be expected to reinforce the impacts of codes of other associations to which editors belong. It also represents a warning to editors that inappropriate behavior of this and other kinds is increasingly likely to come to light and reflect badly on the editor, the journal, and the publisher. The warning, in turn, strengthens the hand of editors *vis á vis* publishers, and makes it easier for them to resist publishers' attempts to impose inappropriate terms.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The practice of journal self-referencing is generally regarded as being inappropriate, and is seen by many as being a serious breach of ethical standards. A regulatory framework exists within the IS discipline that provides means whereby control may be exercised over requests to authors to add insufficiently relevant citations to their articles. Full implementation awaits approval by the members of AIS, publication of the updated Code, and notice to journal editors.

DECLARATIONS

The authors have been involved in ethical aspects of the IS discipline over an extended period. One (Robert Davison) has been active in AIS code activities since their inception. Together, the three authors served as the task force that recommended the changes to the AIS Code of Research Conduct discussed in this paper.

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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:
1. these links existed as of the date of publication but are not guaranteed to be working thereafter.
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