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Journal Self-Citation XVII: Editorial Self-Citation Requests – A Commentary

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Abstract:

Editors have made requests of manuscript authors to carefully examine their reference lists and to incorporate references from the target journal. These requests seem to have become more common, as is evidenced by this and other commentaries on the issue. Journal self-citation requests may be viewed as impinging on an author's academic freedom and could be construed as an unethical or unprofessional request. In this commentary we argue that it is not necessarily the case that all, or even many, of these requests cross the line into unprofessional or unethical behavior. There are a number of institutional and stakeholder forces that play a role in this seemingly simple editorial request. These forces arise because of the environment that is faced by editors, authors, publishers, and their audiences. We incorporate some discussion on these various motivating forces and the responses to them. Rather than rushing to alter our codes of ethical editorial conduct, we need to take a careful look at our research and publication environment to determine the reason editors would make journal self-citation requests.

Keywords: self-citation, impact factor, publishing, research, ethics

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I. INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I focus upon whether editorial promotion of journal self-citation is an unprofessional or unethical practice for research and publication. The discussion will be focused from the perspective of an editor and editorial board member, but will incorporate some discussion from a reviewer's and author's perspective. I am not speaking for any publishers or other editorial board members of any of my affiliated journals. I base much of this discussion on either personal opinion or from the perspective of personal experiences.

II. SOME EXPERIENCES WITH JOURNAL SELF-CITATION REQUEST PRACTICES

The issue of concern is the request by some editors and/or reviewers of submitted manuscripts to a target journal to consider or require that manuscript authors reference articles that have been published, or are even forthcoming from the target journal. Whether or not this practice is common is an initial question.

First, let me provide a little personal background. I have had dozens of manuscripts go through the review process at a broad variety of journals. I also served as a peer reviewer for an even larger set of manuscripts. In addition, I served (and continue to serve) on a number of editorial boards and am editor for a variety of cross disciplinary journals, not only information systems (IS) journals. My publications and editorial positions are multidisciplinary and cover information systems and technology, operations management, and even environmental management topics. Therefore, my experiences may be broader than many who strictly publish within only the IS field. I use this broader experience to provide perspective on this issue.

In some fields, such as medicine and the hard sciences, this 'Eigenlob'¹ is relatively common. I have found this practice to be increasingly common during recent years. For example, on one reviewer form for *Journal ABC*², there is an explicit question that asks, "Does the paper make adequate reference to earlier material in *Journal ABC*?" For another journal, *Journal XYZ*, the editor requests that authors take a look at previous and *forthcoming* articles³ from the journal and consider referencing these articles as well. Finally, *Journal KLM* explicitly requests that authors consider incorporating at least a certain number of references (three to five) before actual publication. Each of these journals is represented by a different publisher; one is IS focused, while the other two are interdisciplinary but have strong IS representation. In some circumstances this request occurs prior to acceptance, in some circumstances the request occurs after acceptance for publication. As a reviewer and editor, I have made similar requests that authors consider incorporating references from the target journal. In my particular situation, if an article has gone through review, whether or not an author references articles from the journal does not affect my final acceptance decision. I have not heard of any journal editor whose decision is affected by meeting a citation request. Thus, in my opinion, it is not very common that a manuscript will be rejected because it did not meet the journal self-citation request.

When manuscripts go through the review process it is not uncommon for reviewers to request that authors reference particular articles. This practice seems to be relatively common and is typically viewed as a characteristic of a good review. In a number of circumstances, albeit a small fraction of my submissions, my papers were rejected because they lacked or included too few references from the target journal. In fact, having served as an editor for a journal that focuses on a more specialized field of IS and technology management, I have even flagged some articles that I believed were poor fits for the journal revealed by a lack of citations from this journal. It was not the only element I used to judge fit, but it certainly does play a role.

Overall, I believe authors should make the effort to consider the type of articles and the readership of the journal. Part of that effort is to identify and reference articles from the target journal. I will return to this issue later when I discuss some motivations and the development of a stream of research and sense of community within a journal.

¹ "Eigenlob," means "self-praise" in German. The term was introduced by Glick [2007] to help define self-citation by authors and journals.

² I have changed the name of the journals mentioned in this paper. Some journals have a number of regional editors and it is not clear that all editors of all of these journals use the same reviewer sheets and give the same directions.

³ For *Journal XYZ*, after acceptance authors are provided access to a 'forthcoming' articles website and database. They are asked to peruse the articles to determine ones that might be appropriate to reference. The pipeline and access for forthcoming articles is easier to manage with the electronic and database format used by many publishers. In fact, some journals have forthcoming articles that can be two to three years in the forthcoming pipeline. Many times you will see references with a "published online" date rather than a hardcopy volume date.

III. THE ETHICS OF SELF-CITATION PRACTICES

Another concern is whether self-citation could be considered ethical and professional. In terms of ethical publishing practices, many organizations, including the Association for Information Systems (AIS), categorize ethical publishing practices into those that must be adhered to and those that are recommended behaviors. Under AIS's Code of Research Conduct "mandatory ethical practices" category, there are three primary items required: (1) no fabrication, (2) no falsification and (3) plagiarism [AIS 2009]. Scanes [2007; pg. 603] defines each of these categories as:

- Fabrication: the overt concocting or manufacturing of data that are deliberately false
- Falsification: the deliberate changing of data; this includes the selective inclusion or exclusion of data
- Plagiarism: the copying or paraphrasing of another's work; that is, taking credit for someone else's work

The Committee On Publishing Ethics (COPE⁴), a British not-for-profit "concerned with the integrity of peer reviewed publications in science, particularly biomedicine" [COPE 2009] states under its "Duties of Editors" guidelines for editors that:

"Editors' decisions to accept or reject a paper for publication should be based only on the paper's importance, originality, and clarity, and the study's relevance to the remit of the journal." [COPE 1999; pg. 45]

It is not clear how well these practice categories apply to the ethical or unethical practice of requiring authors to self-cite from the target journal. It can be argued that editors and publishers requiring authors to incorporate citations into a research paper may be unethical if they are fabricating or falsifying data. One of the particular issues that may be perceived as unethical is that of deceptive citation, a falsification problem. Deceptive citation is usually attributed to inappropriate citation or citation from not reading the original article that is cited (secondary citation). Thus, if an author is asked by a reviewer or an editor to incorporate a citation, is the reviewer or editor putting the author in a position for falsification? I believe this to be the case only if the author does not read the article or reads the article and includes the citation with inappropriate attribution of data. However, it is not completely apparent that the editors or reviewers are enabling or forcing the author to fabricate, falsify or plagiarize data and information with a request for journal self-citation. If authors are requested to include target journal citations and do not have access to the target journal articles, they may be 'forced' to 'fabricate' references and potential deceptive referencing of articles that they have not read. However, similar to any other referencing requirements, it will be the author's responsibility to incorporate the appropriate references. *To mitigate this issue, I believe that an editor should provide the necessary time or provide access to the target journal articles and archives.*

The AIS "recommended" codes of conduct section recommends 12 specific items. The one most closely associated with editor and publisher practices focusing on the particular issue of journal self-citation requests by editors is the fifth recommendation. Specifically:

"5. Do not abuse the authority and responsibility you have been given as an editor, reviewer or supervisor, and take care to ensure that no personal relationship will result in a situation that might interfere with your objective judgment." [AIS, 2009]

I do not believe it is an abuse of authority or responsibility if an editor requests incorporation of citations from the target journal, or that this request by an editor of the journal represents a personal relationship that will interfere with objective judgment. Editors wish to have high quality and relevant material in their journal. This desire is not a personal, but a professional relationship. A personal relationship is more associated with the relationship with a particular author. Of course, abuse occurs if an editor rejects an article because of lack of citations by the journal after all other criteria (e.g., quality, relevance) have been met. For example, the American Astronomical Society of the Institute of Physics, under its professional and ethical standards for its flagship journal contains a section on "Attribution and Citation Practice" which explicitly states [American Astronomical Society 2009]:

"Authors are expected to devote the same care to the correctness and appropriateness of literature citations as to the other components of the manuscript, and to heed the recommendations of referees and editors to correct and augment the citations when appropriate. Responsibility ... rests fully with the authors, but the same principles should apply."

⁴ COPE includes over 4000 members who are mainly editors in chief of journals. The organization includes participation of the largest academic publishers in the world such as Elsevier, Wiley-Blackwell, Springer, Taylor & Francis, and the BMJ Publishing Group [COPE 2009].

The critical phrase here is “when appropriate.” The question of appropriateness of a citation request is where the judgment of the reviewer/editor and author may conflict.

The ethical and professional issue becomes less clear when acceptance of a submission is contingent upon incorporation of citations, especially a specified number, from the target journal. I view this contingency as a violation of item 5. It is an abuse, especially when there are not enough appropriate citations from the target journal that fall within these categories and that do not contribute to the knowledge in the manuscript. However, there is substantial room for debate below this extreme requirement based on simple non-contingent requests for inclusion of citations.

IV. EDITOR MOTIVATIONS FOR SELF-CITATION REQUEST PRACTICES

In the foregoing, I mentioned a number of practices on self-citation requests by editors and reviewers. I also initially indicated what may or may not be acceptable practices with these types of requests. I now consider some of the potential motivations for these requests. The drivers and acceptance of these motivations may help to further refine the professionalism and ethical nature of these requests. Unfortunately, there may be no absolute method to ascertain the underlying motivation for these requests, and determination of their professionalism or ethics still remains within a grey area.

These motivations can be considered from journal marketing and community building perspectives.

Journal marketing is meant to improve the visibility of the journal. One argument is that the quality of the journal influences its marketability and visibility. Many measures can be used to determine the quality of the journal from very subjective perceptual and opinion measures, to quantitative measures such as the impact factor. Thus, one of the most common methods to improve the visibility and image of a journal is to raise its ‘impact factor’. The impact factor, introduced by the Institute of Scientific Information (ISI) (now Thomson Reuters Scientific) is used to determine the relative connectedness of journals in terms of how many citations occur to its articles over time [Amin and Mabe 2000].⁵ Whether an impact factor is a true measure of quality of a journal and its articles is debatable. Impact factors also involve significant limitations. However, the use and acceptance of this measure by universities, funding agencies, journals, individual academics, and publishers made them quite visible [Slade 2006].

Editors know that many stakeholders pay attention to the impact factor. Thus, the environment is set to ‘game’ the impact factor so it can place the journal in its best competitive position. A few methods for gaming the impact factor are known from the literature and from experience. The following list of methods is not meant to be exhaustive, but only to be exemplary and to provide some foundation for motivation.

1. It is known that review articles are cited often and include a significant number of citations themselves. Thus, inclusion of more review articles is used in an effort to increase the impact factor of a journal. As a twist on the inclusion of review articles, I know of Journal ZZZ, in a non-IS field, that celebrated a significant anniversary (e.g., 10th anniversary since commencing publication) by putting together a series of self-citing reviews for specific topics related to “10 years of Topic ‘X’ in Journal ZZZ.” This practice increased the journal’s impact factor. But, it may also fit within the context of further building community and providing a service for its readership, as will be discussed below.
2. To increase impact factor, reduce the number of articles accepted, thereby lessening its acceptance rate which increases perceived quality and increasing the impact factor.
3. And, of course, recommending that authors cite works from the journal.

These three practices are all mentioned in the literature (e.g., see Brumback 2008 for a listing of these and other practices by medical and other journals).

Would these practices exist if not for the pressures faced by editors to increase impact factor and perceived quality for marketing their journals?

V. MOTIVATIONS FOR JOURNAL SELF-CITATION BY AUTHORS AND OTHERS?

If we turn the tables a bit here, is it ethical and professional for an author to send papers only to high impact factor journals? Is it appropriate for universities to favor journals with high impact factors? Is it right for granting agencies and their panels of reviewers to evaluate the quality of proposals based on the publications’ impact factors? Is it

⁵ The way impact factors are computed is discussed in Straub, D. and Anderson, C. [2009], one of the papers in this self-citation series.

necessary to use journal impact factors for rating agencies of schools and award programs by organizations on research output of faculty?

Given this environment it is not surprising that publishers and editors will attempt to game the system to help increase impact factors. After all, there are substantial, long term, positive marketing outcomes and benefits for such a strategy. Journal editors should carefully consider the quality and reputation of their journal in a situation where an artificially and inappropriately applied measure is used by a number of stakeholders who wish to emphasize the measure for various reward and performance measurement purposes. Some have even argued that that the impact factor measure is so flawed that it is the duty of editors to subvert it [Gollogly and Momen 2006; Slade 2006; Straub and Anderson 2009].

Due to external stakeholder influences, impact factor is arguably an important measure in the evaluation of the quality, and thus legitimacy, of the journal. Stakeholders, even authors, put increasing pressures on editors to raise impact factors [Bloch and Walter 2001]. Thus, it is actually beneficial for an author's self-interest to cite target journal articles, not only for previous articles in the journal, but for future articles they may wish to submit.

VI. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Alternatively, could self-citation result in less legitimacy? Tsay [2006], for example, found that journals that existed for a longer time do greater self-citation. Because these journals existed for longer periods of time, they may be considered more legitimate, and the implication is that additional citations would further their legitimization. For older journals, the development of community does become important and the process of self-citation may further community development.

Is increased self-citation (and extra citations, whether necessary or not) a neglectful, dangerous, and unethical practice? I would argue that it may not be. It may incur a minimal waste of paper and some people's time to read through the various citations, but overall, there could be significantly more benefits than costs. If an author was requested to include an article from the target journal, would this be wrong? Not really. Who does it harm and what is the damage of doing so? Would it cause misleading results and misleading research analysis? Only if the authors find that the references contain misleading and incorrect information and they are forced to include these as reputable sources. Even in such an extreme situation, however, they can argue with the editor that this particular reference or citation has problems. Furthermore, if they are asked to look into additional references, it may even enhance their work to broaden their scope of citations and references in a journal that very probably published similar works. I think there is service to the readership of the journal (in the extreme, if that is the only journal that a library or school or an individual subscribes to) and to the author to read and cite relevant and useful previous publications from that journal. A potential detriment to the community may be the extended time necessary to read, locate, and integrate the necessary references. This issue also argues for easy accessibility and clear identification of target journal articles to shorten any delays. It would also be advisable, to reduce this delay, that citation recommendations be made during the review and revision cycle.

Related to this last point is the need for a journal to develop a sense of community for the journal. Self-citation can help build this community. By community, I mean development and describing a thread of research and research agenda on a topic to those who are readers of the journal. A good review should show how the work fits within the broader stream of literature, and in some cases for the stream of literature to which the journal is a strong contributor. For the numerous specialty journals within the IS field, publishing research in such a journal and not citing a reference from that journal may be viewed as author negligence, or even apathy, by a reviewer or editor. For a generalist IS journal, the same argument holds. It may be less likely to find a concentrated stream of research, but typically these journals rely on generalized theories that may help ground the work further. It is rare that a groundbreaking paper for a journal topic is presented where previous related work from the target journal is nonexistent, even in an evolving field such as IS. Thus, showing a stream can actually help a journal's readership progress. It also allows authors to set a future research agenda for the target journal.

Even in a dynamic field such as IS, there needs to be some guidance toward a normalized science. Kuhn [1962] defined normal science as research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice. That is why, for IS to progress, a foundation is needed and why we as a field need to encourage the referencing of previous works. Journals that have an established history can help in building the IS 'science' by supporting and guiding authors on previous works in that field. To argue that IS is a dynamic field that has numerous paradigm shifts is not true. For paradigm shifts to exist, an accepted paradigm needs to be established and may take years or even decades to develop. It is not clear that the IS field dynamism is really representative of true paradigm shifts in the field. Thus, IS needs to develop this sense of community, and given the journals in our field, that means requesting and identifying previous works that have been developed within a given journal. A journal can be used to

identify a clear community for a normal science to more fully develop. Thus, from a field development perspective, self-citation may actually be doing the field of IS a service by furthering the development of dominant paradigms.

Given that a target journal is relatively established, difficulty in locating a related article in the target journal, even with groundbreaking research, is a sign that the article is potentially a misfit for the journal. This lack of target journal citations may be a sign for the authors, and the editors or reviewers, that there is lack of fit and relevance between a manuscript and the target journal's scope. According to COPE it is within the editor's purview to make sure that manuscripts are relevant to the journal. Thus, if an editor makes such a request, it may be providing a service to the author to help them truly determine if the journal is an appropriate fit for their research. If the author is unable to locate even one reference from the journal, the question of fit within this specialized community could be questioned. Fit and community development are important since this is how journals also build reputation. Publishing poorly fitting articles in a journal does a disservice to the readership by providing an ambiguous picture of the scope and direction of the journal. I am not stating that citations from a target journal are the only measure of fit, but lack of citations from the target journal do provide an initial flag for the editors, reviewers, and authors to evaluate more closely whether the subject of a manuscript is a fit for their journal.

VII. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTION

In this article, I have put forth my opinion that editorial request for journal self-citation may or may not be an unethical or unprofessional practice. The motivations for self-citation can be for a number of reasons, not all of which are nefarious.

There are a number of issues that do arise from the various points presented here. One is whether professional societies (and specifically AIS) should mandate that requests for self-citation are an unethical or unprofessional practice. I would support changes to the ethical code of conducts only if the argument can be made that such practices are unethical and unprofessional. In the current situation, and with the many pressures facing authors, reviewers, editors, and publishers, there is a great deal of ambiguity on whether these requests fall into the unethical and unprofessional category. Ethical code changes should be completed very cautiously and, I believe, when there is a strong consensus from a variety of stakeholders. A professional question that I am unable to answer at this point, due to a lack of a thorough study of the various parties that can be affected by such a decision, is whether the current codes are sufficient enough to cover the issue of inappropriate self-citation by journals and editors. They are broad enough at this point.

In terms of practice, I do have some additional recommendations. I certainly do believe that editors need to be quite careful on tying the target journal self-citation to acceptance of quality manuscripts that clearly fit within the domain and scope of their journal. Also, if editors want authors to cite from within their journals they need to provide the necessary time to locate or have direct access to the target journal articles and archives, especially in circumstances where revisions are requested of manuscript.

There are concerns with using self-citation for impact factor manipulation. Some professional organizations (e.g., the Committee on Publishing Ethics (COPE)) stipulate that manipulation of impact factor is unethical [Slade 2006]. But, I think it is better to address the cause of why manipulation of impact factor is occurring. The causes are from the various pressures facing editors, publishers, and authors from various stakeholders on the abuse of impact factors. Professional societies should encourage these stakeholders to eschew impact factor use for rewards and promotions. This practice will continue to increase and become more common unless the root causes are addressed.

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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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