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Geoffrey Dick
*University of New South Wales*, g.dick@unsw.edu.au

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# Journal Self-Citation XIII: The Ethics of Influencing the Peer Review Process – An Essay

Geoffrey N Dick

*University of New South Wales*

*g.dick@unsw.edu.au*

Abstract:

This paper argues that there is no ethical support for a request from an editor to cite previous works in a journal to which the author is submitting work. It posits that higher values should exist in academia and that the reviewer's task is difficult enough. The paper looks at the specific question raised on AISWorld and tries to put this in the context of a supportive ethical framework, without success. It then moves to consider the roles and responsibilities of reviewers and editors more generally. The paper concludes by calling for openness and honesty in the review process with only changes for the good of the article being proposed.

**Keywords:** reviewing, review process, ethics

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Communications of the Association for Information Systems

We live in a world where managers communicate by using "management speak" – a way of talking that does not answer a question, often doesn't mean much, and can be interpreted in many ways; where decision makers seize on a handy piece of information with minimal regard to its validity or context to validate decisions already made in principle; where the utterances of political leaders are immediately followed up by "spin" – how to interpret the remarks in best possible light; and where most political leaders are, at best, tolerated by the community and at worst, held in contempt.[1]

We live in a world where "political correctness" encourages the use of tortured syntax and bad grammar. Witness the use of the plural pronoun "they" when a singular one is called for, but the author does not wish to offend readers by using "he" or "she"; universities and colleges are thought of as "$100 million businesses" and students are "customers"; where someone about to be fired or "made redundant" is "let go." These are all ways of dressing up communication so it will be acceptable to the recipient.

Academia provides a glimpse of a world where higher values and truth still matter. That is why, I believe, that the question raised by Gray on AISWorld as to the ethics of asking authors to cite works from the journal to which they are submitting their work, touched such a nerve in the community. Academics, with few exceptions, strive to write their theses and papers to convey precise meaning – to use all relevant and important references, to carefully note the findings of those who have gone before them, and, by and large, they recognise their limitations. The writings of academics are usually built on the basis of obtaining a thorough knowledge and understanding of the area as is possible, with minimal redundancy, identifying an area where they can make a contribution, conducting research in that area using a robust methodology, thinking about the findings, and writing it up. At this point it goes through a peer review process where it is frequently "double blind" reviewed and further assessed by associate editors and editors. The end result of this whole process is that findings are mostly published (frequently in a significantly different and improved form to the original and sometimes in a different journal). Generally, the authors are happy if someone reads their work, delighted if others build on it.

In this management driven world, individual academics are caught in the middle. Management in the shape of university administration, government and other grant funding bodies, and university rankings like to use "metrics". Academics need to contend with these measures. Some journals "count more" in the metrics than others. Clearly the researcher would like to get his work published in the best possible journal; it is good for both recognition of the work and the prestige of the author, not to mention promotion and tenure. To increase the chance of publication in a chosen outlet, should the author be asked or feel the need to cite the journal to which the work is being submitted? In my view the answer is clearly "No." The question here, seems to me, to be one of what is right and what is wrong.

Perhaps the Bible provides us with one of the oldest codes of ethics by means of the Ten Commandments. Over the last several thousand years (and probably well before) philosophers and thinkers have considered right and wrong and attempted to define codes and standards by which we live and play a part in society. Between them, these codes and standards are widely recognised as governing ethical principles by which most people in the world live, consciously or unconsciously. I can't find very much in any of them that is helpful in providing a positive answer to this question.

Most of us probably remember as a child being taught "do unto others as you would have others do unto you" -- the golden rule, in ethical terms. Would any of us like to be asked to cite a journal paper if it had not passed our earlier test of relevance and importance and had been deliberately left out? Descartes' rule of change essentially says that, if an action brings about a small acceptable change, that is fine, but if we repeat it, unacceptable change would result. Too true! Can we see a set of circumstances where all journals require themselves to be cited? If an action is not right for everyone then it is not right for anyone (Kant's Categorical Imperative).

Many live by utilitarianism, where we are guided by general principles but take particular circumstances into account and try and arrive at a solution around the common good. Even here, perhaps the closest ethical principle under which a positive answer might be found, where we might argue that the good of the community represented by the

[1] In my opinion, Barack Obama is a notable exception and perhaps, too, is Kevin Rudd, the Australian Prime Minister. It is possible that the election of both men was partly due to them being perceived as representing a break from the practices of the previous administrations and bringing on a change in managerial style.

journal will be enhanced by the journal's improved readership (and the standing of those who publish in it) it seems to me that this is nothing more than a "clever", short term technique.

I can find no justification in any of the above for an editor to require citation of the journal for that reason alone. Can anyone believe that a good paper, with ground breaking research, relevant to the journal would be rejected if it did not cite a previous paper published in the journal? The converse of this means that the practice seems to be saying "This paper is almost good enough, but will be acceptable if the author cites the journal." It is of course possible that the reviewer is aware of a paper previously published in the journal that would seem to be relevant but has been overlooked or ignored by the submitting author. This brings to me to the more general question of what is expected of reviewers.

I do not feel that the journal citation question can be considered apart from the general reviewing and editorial processes. What changes one recommends and the factors leading to acceptance and rejection are governed by many factors. These factors could include the general interest, the writing style, the contribution to the knowledge base, and the robustness of the methodology employed, as well as the quality and relevance of the cited works. Reviewers and editors are often given little in the way of guidance as to what makes a good paper. Questions such as "Does this paper make a contribution?" "Do I trust the methodology employed?" and "Will this article be useful to our readership?" swirl around in the reviewer's mind. The reviewer has to deal with personal biases and sometimes a scanty knowledge of the exact discipline area (more on this later). But paramount in the mind of the reviewer will be the over arching questions: "Does this work make a sufficient contribution to the knowledge base to be worthy of others reading it?" and if so, "Can I make any suggestions for how it might be improved?" A question as to whether the paper cites the journal clearly has no place in these considerations.

By and large, reviewing is a fairly thankless task. It counts little on one's CV to be able to say that one is a reviewer for certain conferences and journals. It may be that after a portion of one's life spent as a reviewer, one is invited to be an editor, which counts a little more. There is perhaps a certain satisfaction for the reviewer in being able to make a contribution to a "better paper," and there is the knowledge gained in the reading and review of what are good and bad writings which can help the reviewer with his own work. Against that though, to review well requires a significant time commitment and reviewers frequently find themselves in the position of commenting on an article about which they may have little specific knowledge and are aware of only a few previously published works in the same field. It is likely that the reviewer will often feel obliged to encourage the submitting author to look at a previously published work in the same journal. This is particularly so when one is reviewing for a niche journal with a very narrow field. Some journals look for "fit" – that the paper complements previous work. If so, let us say up front in the call for submissions that that is the case. To not do so could be considered misleading. I liked the proposal from one of the respondents to the original posting on AISWorld, suggesting that such a statement could read, "While we like articles that break the mold into new areas, we also encourage authors to build on previous work that was discussed in the journal in past issues to build continuity and coherence." We need to know where we stand. This argument brings up the question of perception.

There is a Chinese saying, "When you are crossing a melon patch, don't stop to tie your shoe laces." I am tempted to argue that a reviewer who suggests a relevant work from a previous issue of the journal would be perceived as requiring it for publication and therefore making an ethical transgression, but perhaps we should take a broader view. As a responsible member of the academic community, doing a voluntary task with no opportunity for personal gain or recompense, and one of a team, if one believes the paper under review would be a better paper due to the inclusion of work from a previous issue, he or she should go ahead and suggest it. It might, of course, be expected that this situation would happen only rarely. It is all right to tie your shoes in the melon patch, just don't make a habit of it, stand up straight afterwards, and let people see your hands. The same applies to the editor or reviewer. A similar set of circumstances surround a suggestion that one's own work be cited. An exception may be where the reviewer has a detailed knowledge of the area and can make a valuable contribution based on that knowledge – once again the "melon patch rules" above should apply.

As a reviewer and occasional editor or conference track chair, I have problems in the following areas. One is the citation of my own work. I may be delighted that it was picked up and advanced, and therefore would like to see it published (and the benefit of an extra citation) or I may be annoyed that the new work did not go in the direction I was looking for. In both cases I worry that bias will influence my recommendations or decision. It seems to me to be very difficult to overcome this conundrum. The second area is when I know the author and his or her previous work. For most journals the authors' names are not available to the reviewers but as an editor or track chair they often are. In any case, it is frequently possible to infer the authors by the topic, the style of writing, or the citations. Again, as a reviewer I strike both ends of the spectrum – if I know and respect the previous work of the author, or the opposite, I see the potential for bias in both cases. Is this just human nature? Can I take some solace from knowing I am only one of a team, only one voice, and my bias will be subsumed by the more objective ratings of my colleagues?

None of the foregoing deals with the belief (and I believe it is widespread) that many authors have that their chances of acceptance are improved if their submission cites the journal. I think we can leave that one stand – it would be nice if, in a few years, this belief was less prevalent and perhaps our view on perception will help.

Perhaps part of the problem lies in the commercial nature of most journals. Even in a relatively new discipline such as information systems we have many options for publishing our work. Most journals are now run as businesses (even those that get some subsidy from universities or professional associations) and many employ editorial staff who need to be funded. Revenue is largely driven by subscription and the journal management is charged with responsibility for economic viability. This is often achieved by improving competitiveness in the measures by which the product is assessed. But, ethics aside, such an approach can surely never be more than a short term solution. It is rather like improving the performance of trains against a timetable by redefining the meaning of "late." All journals will now rate well on this particular measure and new measures will have to be found, which in turn may also lend themselves to manipulation.

Academia stands for more. It is perhaps one of the last bastions against an ever increasing corporate world with its inherent and pervasive managerial style.

Let us keep academia true and valuable, and our communications away from commercial interests as far as possible (except of course where these are part of the work, as is often the case in IS). Academic writings need to be free from bias and ambiguity. They need to include all relevant background information (and only that). Such papers should be relevant, concise and precise – they should not be written to appeal to a particular group, nor should they be influenced by extraneous matters. They should be readable and understandable to a wide audience. The authors of well written, authoritative and informative papers that contribute to the knowledge base deserve, and are awarded, respect and standing in their communities. As I search for solutions here, I keep coming back to the proverbial melon patch (perhaps it should have been a mine field). Let us continue to be driven to doing the best job we can for the improvement of the paper and be up front and honest in our reviews. Let us resist strongly the temptation to suggest or be perceived to want any change other than that which we sincerely believe will enhance our papers.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Geoffrey N. Dick** is a senior lecturer in Information Systems and director of the undergraduate programs for the Australian School of Business at the University of New South Wales. He has been on the board of the AIS SIG Ed for most of the last 10 years, twice elected president, and on the executive board of the Australian chapter since its 2001 inception until 2006. He is a reviewer on the global textbooks project, a director of the International Telework Academy, and a member of the board of editors for the *Journal of Information and Management*. He has been an education track chair at AMCIS for each of the last four years, at ACIS last year and will be a track chair at ICIS 2010. His research (around 70 publications) is mainly in the areas of telecommuting (his Ph.D.) and online education – he is the recipient of an ICIS prize for best paper in education. He is a visiting professor at Georgia Southern and recently has been a visiting fellow at the University of Malaya, the Tec de Monterrey in Mexico, and Agder University College, Norway.

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