



6 KEY TAKEAWAYS:

SELF-PLAGIARISM

Overview

When it comes to academic and creative integrity, the concept of self-plagiarism is one of the most difficult and divisive issues. What is self-plagiarism? Can someone plagiarize themselves? Where do the boundaries lie when reusing previous work you created? What duties does an author have to their audience when it comes to reusing previous content? And do those duties change from industry to industry?

It was with those (and other) difficult questions in mind that, on November 1st, 2012, iThenticate brought together four of the best-known minds in plagiarism to talk about the topic and invite questions from others.

Those experts were:

Kelly McBride: Senior Faculty on Ethics, Reporting and Writing for Poynter

Rachael Lammey: Project Manager at CrossRef

Jonathan Bailey: Creator and Blogger at Plagiarism Today and a Plagiarism Consultant

Moderated by Jason Chu: Plagiarism Educator at Turnitin

The goal of the talk was not to try answer these questions with any finality, but rather, to bring together people with diverse opinions and backgrounds on the topic, and have a real discussion on the issues that many would rather not think about.

Discussion Point #1

When and Why is Self-Plagiarism Considered a Form of Scholarly Misconduct?

Panelists unanimously agreed that self-plagiarism is about misleading the audience, including both explicit and implicit misdirection.

Audience Question: "How do you define self-plagiarism and what is it?"

Rachel said an example would be one of an author who submitted a paper to a journal, claiming it to be original work. Though, when the paper was run through a plagiarism detection system, it was determined that a great deal of the work was contained in earlier works published by the author.

Kelly noted that, in her experience in journalism, it had to do more with the exact words and phrasing rather than the ideas or research, as it is with scholarly publication.

Jonathan likened self-plagiarism to traditional plagiarism in that there is a great deal of gray area and

the separation between what is acceptable and not acceptable to do. "I would say that, when you take a work you've done previously and present it as new or something that is original, that's when you cross the line. That presentation, whether it is implicit or explicit, is when I consider it self-plagiarism," Jonathan said.

Audience Question: "Why would an author or researcher wish to mislead the public?"

Jonathan explained that the climate for academia is one of "publish or perish" and that the competition for grants has intensified as more universities and researchers compete for a smaller number of grants.

Kelly then added that there is a similar pressure in journalism with the 24-hour news cycle and to be a part of the conversation at all times. "In addition to that, I think that sometimes there is a financial pressure to re-publish. People get paid for their articles and, rather than come up with something new, they try and make as much money as they can off the same idea over and over again," she said. Kelly also noted that writer laziness can also be a factor as many will self-plagiarize when they aren't out of time or under pressure for more money, but because they don't want to do the hard work to come up with something new.

TAKEAWAY #1: Everyone agreed that the pressure to do more with less is helping drive the rise in self-plagiarism. However, this shift in the climate is not likely to go away anytime soon as competition continues to tighten and budgets continue to shrink. Even if there were a major shift in the publishing environment, both in journalism and in research, it's unlikely the problem would go away as internal factors continue to play a critical role in many cases.

Audience Question: "Is self-plagiarism more of an issue in academic circles where authors aren't necessarily paid for their work?"

Kelly responded by saying that, in many cases, an author is paid for their work but retains control in it. This is a situation that's becoming increasingly common in journalism as more and more reporters become contractors and not employees. However, Kelly continued by saying that there were separate ethical issues involved when dealing with self-plagiarism, "I still think (even if you haven't given up any rights in your work) that it's dishonest if you suggest that, 'Hey, here's a whole new paper that I've written' when half of it appeared somewhere else," she said.

Jonathan continued to emphasize the need to separate the legal side from the ethical side of the issue. Using the example of Jonah Lehrer, he highlighted that, if an author self-plagiarizes work from a previous publication he or she worked for, that those two publications can have a legal issue as the latter has infringing content from the first.

TAKEAWAY #2: Defining the boundaries of what is and is not self-plagiarism is as difficult, if not more so, than with traditional plagiarism. The reason is because there is still disagreement on what is and is not self-plagiarism and the boundaries are often different depending on the field of work. For example, self-plagiarism means something completely different in academic research vs. journalism, which in turn is different from the legal field and is in turn different from creative writing. To make matters more complex, legal issues are likely to also arise from self-plagiarism as writers sign away more of their rights, meaning that even though they are plagiarizing previous work they created, they don't hold the copyright in what they are pulling from. This could raise a separate, but equally difficult set of questions in the near future.

Audience Question: "If there's an expectation that only original literature be contributed to the body of scholarly literature?"

Rachel said that it's common for old research to be used and expanded upon, introducing new data. "That's not necessarily original research in the way that science works, but you're adding to the information that's already there and reexamining it," Rachel said. However, in those cases, Rachel added, it's important to cite and acknowledge the original research, even if you performed it. Rachel added that it's important for the author to work with his or her editor(s) to determine what is acceptable both to the place that is publishing the work and its audience.

TAKEAWAY #3: The question points to one of the key challenges when it comes to self-plagiarism: Avoiding it. In research, this issue is especially pronounced as researchers often work in a tight niche and have to reference back to their earlier works and build upon. While this can be done in a way that greatly furthers the cause of expanding knowledge, it can also be done in a way that only furthers the researcher's publication record. It's important for editors and authors to keep the dialog open on these matters to avoid confusion and ensure that researchers can build upon their past works without fear of being accused of self-plagiarism.

Discussion Point #2

What Has Changed in the Past Decade that has Contributed to the Rise in Self-Plagiarism Allegations?

Jonathan said that, in the past 10 years, the Internet has brought about extraordinary change and that authors of all types are being asked to do more with less. This is true across bloggers, journalists and academic publishers and anyone else who publishes content. "Most people handle it (the pressure) in an honest way," Jonathan said, "They find ways to cope with it, deal with it and thrive under it. But, inevitably, some people struggle with it, both ethically and from a more practical standpoint as well and they do things like self-plagiarize to make ends meet."

Rachel echoed those concerns saying that a similar pressure to publish was being placed upon academics and was creating problems in that field as well. In particular, in the UK, she noted that universities were being assessed on the amount of research they have done and one of the important metrics is the number of published articles they have had.

Audience Question: "How does the Jonah Lehrer scandal illustrate the challenges in dealing with self-plagiarism?"

"Jonah Lehrer is an example of how people found one little chink in his writing, one small little problem with it and then... the whole entire Internet ganged up on him and started looking at every single word he wrote and the found lots and lots of problems," Kelly said, "We can compare and contrast writing so much easier now and the other fact is we now have this entire world out there with a lot of time on its hands ready to take on any writer that seems to be too big for his britches."

Audience Question: "Are authors trying to be original by pointing out the faults of others?"

Kelly said that, while the first person to file accusations often does get a reputation boost, most of the people who work on such cases remain unknown. However, she said that this often comes from frustrated writers who are more willing to tear down the work of others than look at their own writing.

Jonathan added that he understood the challenges of remaining original and fresh, especially for someone like him in a tight niche that forces him to retread a lot of the same material. However, he said it was key to find new tangents and ways to expand and add to the subject to keep things new and exciting. Still, he said he's had several occasions where he's started an article, tried to Google a question on it only to be taken back to his site and see that he'd written that exact article before and quickly needed to come up with something new.

Audience Question: "Why is it important to be original in the academic publishing sphere?"

Rachel said that there was a real push by authors to get published in top tier journals and those journals demand new research and are less likely to publish papers that build on previous work. This makes originality incredibly important in order to get into the cutting-edge publications.

TAKEAWAY #4: If there's one thing that kinds of publishers want, across every field, it's new content. Whether it's new research, new articles, new ideas or new blog posts. However, no writer or research can hope to keep up with the demand for "new" and that can make short cuts, such as self-plagiarism, very tempting. Perhaps the only thing greater than the pressure to keep being new and novel is the equal pressure put on by others to find problems expose them, as the Jonah Lehrer case showed. Though many might argue that the motivation behind such investigations is less-than-pure, more about tearing down an idol than discovering the truth, their impact can not be denied.

Discussion Point #3

What is Being Done to Prevent Self-Plagiarism?

Kelly said that the important thing for editors are doing, and should be doing is making what was implicit explicit and clearly stating rules for self-plagiarism. This problem has become especially important in journalism as more and more reporters are no longer employees but freelancers. "They're contractors," Kelly said, "So, they don't actually come into the office to do their work. They work from their house and they have contracts with a lot of different publications."

More and more, publications are putting originality guarantees into their contracts and are looking deeper into other works the author has done. This has become necessary as it was much more difficult to self-plagiarize as an employee who did all of their work in one location.

Audience Question: "What is some advice you can provide those who are looking to publish and what are some steps they can do to ensure that they are not self-plagiarizing?"

"The first thing I always advise people to do is that, if you have any doubts about something you're wanting to do, talk to your editor, talk to the people above you," Jonathan said. Beyond that,

Jonathan said that it's rare for people to get in trouble for giving too much information or "over citing" a work, making it better to be safe and give too much information than to give too little. In the end, according to Jonathan, it's all about being honest and open.

Rachel agreed with this when it comes to academic publishing saying that, "A lot of publishers will have a policy on referencing, and a lot explicitly mention self-plagiarism. So what you can do, is you can just go over the instructions for authors for the journal and have a look, or look at the journal's plagiarism policy to see what they have as their advice on it." No matter what, Rachel added, you can not be too clear on citing your sources, including your previous works.

Audience Question: "Are editors open to hearing from authors or is there an invisible wall there?"

"No," Kelly said, "Editors would love to hear from authors." She continued saying that editors want to know more about the process for getting writing done. However, she added, authors need to have a process in their writing that lets them track where the information they are using is coming from. According to Kelly, being able to describe with confidence where your work came from not only helps you protect yourself against allegations of both plagiarism and self-plagiarism, but helps you add something to the work of others and expand upon it. Also, it's important to keep in mind, perhaps working out with someone else, what is most important in your work and where you may need to do more work to flesh out your ideas.

Jonathan, echoed Kelly's suggestion and recommended starting with an "elevator pitch" version of what you want to write and what's new in it. It's best, when working with an editor, not to start out with a completed work not just because it can create issues with organization, but also because editor's generally won't read it.

TAKEAWAY #5: It's no longer acceptable to just assume that the rules of self-plagiarism are understood. Editors need to spell out the rules explicitly, including putting them in contracts as well as in any guidelines they publish. Likewise, authors have an onus on them as well to check with their editors and clarify any confusion or uncertainty they have. There should never be a situation in which an author gets accused of self-plagiarism when they truly felt they did nothing wrong. It's crucial that the standards be clear and that both parties know what the rules are in this area.

Discussion Point #4 Q&A

Audience Question: "Is it legitimate to reuse previously published information in a Ph.D thesis with a reference to the publication?"

Rachel said, flatly, that this is acceptable, so long as the reference is appropriate. However, she added that you need to be careful as many journals will demand the copyright in work they published though they will very rarely have any issue with it being reused in a noncommercial manner, such as a thesis. Still, it's important to read the journal's copyright policy before doing that. Rachel also added that publishers generally look favorably on other reuses of work that point to or link back to the original article as that it is a "key part" of how research works, the citing and referencing of previous works in a noncommercial way.

Audience Question: "How do you deal with authors that withdraw manuscripts after being asked to address self-plagiarism issues within them?"

Rachel said that she had seen the same thing happen a great deal and that it was a “tricky” issue. “A lot of journals use iThenticate through CrossRef to check a paper when it gets submitted to the journal.... If they find instances of self-plagiarism the policy is to send it back to the author. The author then has two choices, they can either do what the editor suggests and correct the work, or they can withdraw the manuscripts and submit it to another publication to see if it is accepted there.” Rachel also recommended the organization COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics), which helps journals establish guidelines and deal with these types of ethical challenges.

Audience Question: "How are organizations handling the rise in self-plagiarism given the volume of works to parse?"

Kelly noted that publications don’t operate in a vacuum, in particular with journals, and editors know other editors. Kelly then asked Rachel if one editor would then let others know that a paper had been withdrawn after questions of plagiarism had been raised and that the person behind it may be preparing to submit it to their journal.

Rachel said that doing so is “double edged” because it might be a mistake or the editor might not have been clear about what they wanted done, making it tricky to know whether or not to spread the word about the paper and its author.

Kelly agreed saying that its delicate because you don’t want to start calling up others to tarnish the reputation of authors in the field but, on the other hand professional courtesy enables editors to do it in a way that doesn’t make an accusation. “We think of the world, especially the Internet, as this vast world where nobody knows each other but, in fact, we’re all connected closer than we ever have been,” Kelly said.

TAKEAWAY #6: Tools, such as iThenticate can go a long way to helping detect self-plagiarism and prevent its publication. However, they can’t fix the underlying issues and causes of the problem. It’s going to take a concerted effort from everyone involved in publishing to address and deal with and address this issue, which will be difficult because it’s still a problem that many refuse to acknowledge even exists. However, that approach is going to have to come with balance. understanding that mistakes do happen and that creating an atmosphere of terror around the subject doesn’t help anyone. Fortunately, there are many great resources out there, such as COPE, to help address and deal with these issues and publishing communities, in general, are continuing to get better organized on ethical issues.

For more Q&A on self-plagiarism, please visit: ithenticate.com/self-plagiarism-q-and-a