7-1-2009

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Janz, Brian D. (2009) "Journal Self-Citation XIV: Right Versus Right – Gaining Clarity into the Ethical Dilemma of Editorial Self-Referencing," *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*: Vol. 25 , Article 14.

DOI: 10.17705/1CAIS.02514

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Communications of the Association for Information Systems

Journal Self-Citation XIV: Right Versus Right – Gaining Clarity into the Ethical Dilemma of Editorial Self-Referencing

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Abstract:

The practice of editorial "self-referencing" – journal editors requiring that authors include in their papers a specific number of citations from the journal in which they seek to publish – has recently garnered significant interest within the IS academic community. A recent survey of AISWorld suggests that the vast majority of respondents find this practice inappropriate and unethical. Rather than dismissing this behavior as patently unethical, this paper seeks to better understand the possible motivations for this editorial behavior. The notion of the ethical dilemma is introduced, as well as a framework to assist in analyzing them. Ultimately, the analysis suggests that while editors may feel they have worthwhile reasons for requiring self-references, the potential long term risks to the journal, the academy, and the body of knowledge outweigh those reasons.

Keywords: self-referencing, individual behaviors, editorial behaviors, ethical dilemma, IS scholarship, society and ethics

Volume 25, Article 14, pp. 115-120, July 2009

I. INTRODUCTION

Is the practice of “self-referencing” – journal editors requiring that authors include in their papers a specific number of citations from the journal in which they seek to publish in – ethical? When posed with this question, it seems the reflexive response from the vast majority of MIS academicians was clearly “no.” However, to dismiss this practice out of hand as loathsome risks missing, or at least not appreciating fully, how such practices come to exist and persist. It is the intent of this paper to consider the practice of self-referencing from the perspective of facing an ethical dilemma, and in so doing, develop a deeper appreciation for the motives and reasons (both for and against) such practice.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE PRACTICE OF SELF-REFERENCING

Before embarking on a deeper analysis of the self-referencing issue, it is instructive to list at least some of the basic motives that may be underlying the practice.

First, it seems clear that editors believe that self-referencing helps to increase the number of “hits” when calculating a journal’s ISI impact factor. This artificial inflation of impact, in turn, inflates the perceived prestige of the journal. While there is some uncertainty as to whether ISI ratings consider self-references when calculating the impact factor, the vast majority of the academic population (as represented by the sample of respondents) suggests that we all believe that ISI ratings do include self-references. It seems reasonable to assume that editors share in this belief.

So, what are the benefits of increasing the perceived prestige of a journal? From a scan of the respondents, it seems the most obvious train of thought is an economic one. This stream of logic includes: 1) *ceteris paribus* -- journal readers will seek to spend their scarce reading time reading journals higher in prestige than those considered lower in prestige; 2) in order to read journals, readers must have access to them; 3) access to journals can be gained through either personal subscription to the journal or requests that the readers’ libraries subscribe to the journal or can supply copies through interlibrary loan; and 4) subscriptions provide the means to keep the journal financially viable, and as such, provide some measure of job security for the publishers and editors in question.

A second plausible motivation, albeit mentioned less by respondents, is one of “editorial ego.” That is, editors may believe that increasing the prestige of the journal by increasing the impact of the journal through self-referencing is in some way a personal reflection on them and their value or standing as an editor and scholar. Of course this perceived relationship is further exacerbated if the editor(s) request the self-referencing of papers they themselves authored. It is this second possible motivation – ego driven self-referencing – on which I focus because I believe it represents an ethical dilemma that editors face when they consider making requests for additional references.

The notion of ethical dilemma that I focus on here is not the traditional “right versus wrong” decision. This kind of decision is, in fact, not a dilemma at all, given that one alternative is clearly unethical. While the practice of requesting self-citation struck the vast majority of respondents as clearly wrong, I believe that by giving editors the benefit of the doubt we may learn a deeper appreciation for why the practice exists, and more importantly, how we might construct a meaningful appeal to the editors to cease the practice.¹

The nature of the ethical dilemma on which I will focus my discussion is of the “right versus right” variety. In these situations, the alternatives are not as clear cut, and persons on opposite sides of the discussion can provide seemingly sound justification for their held position. By thoughtfully considering both “rights,” a deeper appreciation of the complexity and an understanding of the issue can be gained.

¹ Author’s full disclosure: The author does not now, nor has ever held a permanent editorial position. The author did, however, serve as a guest editor for a special issue several years ago. The practice of self-referencing was not practiced by that journal.

III. ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Kidder [1995] provides a useful framework when considering “right vs. right” ethical dilemmas. He suggests a classification scheme that encompasses most dilemmas of this type, and the classifications again help to further understanding of the issue at hand. The four dilemma types espoused by Kidder include:

1. Justice versus Mercy
2. Short Term versus Long Term
3. Self versus Community
4. Truth versus Loyalty

In the next sections, I will explore each dilemma type and see how they may help us in understanding editorial behaviors.

Justice versus Mercy Dilemmas

In this scenario, the choice is one of doing what’s clearly right and just (justice) versus doing what seems to be emotionally compelling and feels right (mercy). An academic exemplar of this type of dilemma is one where a student, having failed a final exam, provides a compelling excuse and requests to take the exam over in order to improve his/her grade. While the just and fair (to the rest of the class) thing to do is for the professor to deny such a request, the appeal to emotion may find the professor sympathetic to the student’s plight, feeling that it is right to offer the re-take.

In the case of self-referencing, the majority of respondents that addressed the practice of self-referencing feel the just and fair alternative is for editors to cease this practice. However, the “mercy” position brings to light that it is possible that the editors feel that self-referencing helps to insure viability of the journal and, consequently, provides security for the journal’s staff (including the editor). In addition, unspoken personal motivations for such a practice might indeed include elevating the journal’s prestige and, consequently, the editor’s ego.

Thus the question becomes, “Is self-referencing, as a mechanism for journal viability and editorial staff security, a good and right thing for the academic community, or is it merely a rationalization for self-interested editors?”

Short Term versus Long Term Dilemmas

With this kind of dilemma, the choice is one of doing what makes sense in the short term, versus considering the longer term implications of choosing a specific alternative. An academic exemplar of this type of dilemma is found in the area of grade inflation. In the short term, professors and administrators may feel justified in inflating grades since it helps to keep immediate teacher evaluations high, and helps to keep students and parents satisfied (and thus enrolled and paying tuition to the institution, respectively). However, what are the longer term effects of grade inflation? Does an entitlement mentality for good grades develop in students, and does this decrease learning? Does the reputation as an “easy” grader, while helping in evaluations and student sentiments, actually harm the reputation of the educator and eventually the institution?

In the case of self-referencing, the short term rationale might be that it might keep ISI impact factors high and journals viable. On a personal level, editors might feel that high impact factors feed their academic self-esteem and standing among colleagues. However, in the longer term, self-referencing serves to degrade the importance of impact factors, and could motivate authors to blindly add self-references that add nothing to the body of knowledge. Furthermore, the practice of self-referencing could potentially motivate researchers to conduct and submit “safe” (i.e., uninteresting or non-innovative) research that falls in line with research that had been previously published in the journal.

Truth versus Loyalty Dilemmas

In these situations, the dilemma becomes one of doing what is truthful versus choosing an alternative that maintains loyalty to a person, organization, or institution. Sadly, the classic exemplar of this kind of dilemma occurs in the college classroom: during an exam, a student observes a fellow classmate cheating. Rather than doing what is truthful and right by “blowing the whistle” on the offending student, the observer instead decides to remain loyal to his/her fellow student, remaining silent. This kind of choice tends to be the path of least resistance. However, it tends to run afoul of university honor codes, and also risks skewing exam grades and potentially impacting the grades of all students in the course, including their own.

In the self-referencing context, this category of dilemma is especially relevant. Do editors do the truthful thing and allow authors to include just those references that are appropriate for the paper? Or does the editor, through a sense of loyalty to the policies of the editorial committee and/or the journal, ask for gratuitous self-references? Similarly, do authors add gratuitous references to increase their likelihood of acceptance? Clearly, it seems that the truthful approach, while perhaps difficult, is the more attractive alternative.

Self versus Community Dilemmas

With these kinds of dilemmas, the challenge is one of choosing between what is in the best interests of the individual facing the dilemma versus doing what is best for the larger community, e.g., team, organization, profession, or society. In academic settings, grade inflation is an example that may represent this kind of dilemma. Consider a programming course where a professor, concerned only with their teaching evaluations and avoiding the conflict of student challenges to grades, chooses to “give” higher than deserved grades to students rather than let the students receive the grades they’ve actually “earned,” and which indicate their level of course content mastery. As mentioned before, this choice may result in feelings of entitlement in students. However, it also runs the risk of harming the larger community by sending students that appear to be qualified (with grades that suggest they are capable programmers) to employers that quickly learn that their newly hired graduates need remedial training. This practice harms the recruiting company, risks damaging the relationship between the recruiting company and the university, and consequently risks damaging the reputation of the university (to say nothing of the newly hired recruits that suddenly find themselves being fired even though they think of themselves as competent).

As with the truth versus loyalty dilemma, the self versus community dilemma seems especially relevant in the context of self-referencing. In this case, does the journal editor choose the self interested alternative of requesting self-references (thus benefitting the journal and possibly the reputation and/or ego of the editor)? Or does the editor choose to do what is best for the academic community by letting the published research (and references) speak for itself? Again, it seems clear that the risks of rendering impact factors meaningless, potentially misleading readers, motivating authors to engage in gratuitous self-referencing, and perhaps ultimately watering down the quality of published research, far outweighs the more narrow benefits of helping a journal remain viable or soothing editor egos.

IV. PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Perhaps the biggest benefit of Kidder’s dilemma categories is that it allows considering sensitive ethical issues from multiple perspectives to see if a predominant course of action emerges. In the case of self-referencing, we clearly see that there are multiple motivations for both adhering to as well as shunning the practice. The question is, “Which set of motivations are most compelling?”

It seems that in all four dilemma types presented, the practice of self-referencing serves as an easy to implement, short term fix that may improve journal prestige and viability, and in so doing may also serve to salve the editorial ego. While editors may claim that viable journals serve to enlarge the population of journals that submissions can target, this reasoning seems weak. Thus, self-referencing would serve the purposes of the journal and the editor, with perhaps a more tenuous benefit to the community of researchers.

However, when considering the far reaching and long term implications of self-referencing, it appears that it could just as easily damage the reputation of both the editor and journal as a result of the disdain most researchers have for the practice. In one of the papers in this series Romano [2009] indicates that ISI, in its data tables, offers impact factors with self-references deleted because self-referencing can change the value of journal impact factors and the ability to evaluate the contributions of journals.² Thus, while we may have more journals to direct our submissions to, we may not be able to clearly know which journals are better than others unless we look at the details, and we may hold some of them in contempt for their editorial practices. In addition, it is possible that the value of future research would be compromised. This could occur if researchers were motivated to choose studies that incrementally build on previously published work in journals that reward self-referencing. With innovative, ground breaking research being viewed as more risky by comparison, the growth in the body of knowledge would be seriously impaired.

Thus, when juxtaposing the short term motivations for self-referencing with the long term consequences of its practice, it is apparent that we are comparing narrow, parochial interests of editors and their journals with broader impacts to research and the research community. In this light, it is my opinion that the downside risks to self-referencing far outweigh any upside benefits.

² Furthermore, ISI now delists journals who engage in excessive self-referencing. In its 2008 data, nine journals were removed.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Janz is the Palmer professor of MIS and director of executive education in the Fogelman College at The University of Memphis. He also serves as the associate director of the FedEx Center for Supply Chain Management. Mr. Janz's research interests focus on how information technologies affect organizational strategy and business processes. His recent research focuses on emerging technologies in healthcare. Brian's research has been published in *MIS Quarterly*, *Decision Science*, *Communications of the AIS*, *Journal of MIS*, *Personnel Psychology*, *Journal of Database Management*, *Journal of Information Technology Management*, and *Information and Management*. Brian has almost 30 years of experience in IT, working for IBM, Honeywell, and General Motors, as well as consulting with Fortune 500 companies and governmental agencies. He did his bachelor's work in electrical engineering at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Minnesota, and earned an MBA and a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota.

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Communications of the Association for Information Systems

ISSN: 1529-3181

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