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Challenges to ethical publishing in the digital era: a journal editor's response to the limited mind reading skills of academic authors

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Challenges to ethical publishing in the digital era: A journal editor's response to the limited mind reading skills of academic authors

Curno's paper (2016) provides a provocative assessment of the various ethical challenges that we all, including journal editors, face in the digital era. In this response I want to focus on what might be described as the "unintended" unethical behaviours that can arise and make some suggestions for how we might respond to them. In doing so, I leave aside the more intentional unethical behaviours that some have argued are a response to the increased pressure to publish (and publish as much as possible) ("counting") instead of focussing on the contribution of the research ("reading") (cf Willcocks, Avgerou, and Whitley 2008; Worrell 2009; Grey and Sinclair 2006).

A key argument in Curno's paper is the "confusion for authors of what are acceptable writing practices and what are not" (2016, xx – page to be determined from typeset final version). To a large extent, this confusion arises because of the limited mind reading skills of many academic authors. Here, I draw on Collins' (2010) differentiation between tacit and explicit knowledge. Collins notes that much of what is commonly called tacit knowledge is tacit not because it *cannot* be made explicit but rather remains "tacit" because historically we have chosen not to make it explicit, often because we assume that our conversation partners understand what we are talking about and so don't need it to be made explicit. In an environment where there is shared socialisation or "cultural transmission of practices" (2016, yy – page to be determined from typeset final version), this assumption of mutual understanding may well hold. In other environments, however, including international scholarship, mind reading skills may be the only way to access this "tacit" knowledge if it is not made explicit.

Therefore, in the absence of widespread mind reading skills, there is a need to be explicit about expectations of academic writing including appropriate citation of sources and self-plagiarism (Samuelson 1994) and to convey this clearly to potential authors. For example, much of the current tension about whether authors should be listed in alphabetical order or in order of work contribution can be resolved by having institutions clearly state how they evaluate author lists (Krasnova et al. 2014). For example, despite having a surname towards the end of the alphabet, I don't worry too much about alphabetical order being misconstrued as signalling limited contribution as my own institution uses a form of author contribution statement in its internal tenure and promotion processes.

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3 Fortunately, journals and PhD programmes are increasingly describing what is
4 considered ethical behaviour. Nevertheless there are probably still areas where the
5 knowledge remains unnecessarily “tacit” and so I will articulate some common
6 examples that, as a journal editor, we have received. These have arisen because of
7 lack of clarity about expectations (or authors not reading the available guidance)
8 rather than deliberate attempts to deceive and are often raised at “meet the editors”
9 sessions at international conferences.
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14 A common question is whether it is acceptable to submit a conference paper directly
15 to the journal? Our answer: time will have passed since the conference paper was
16 submitted, since the paper was presented and since the feedback on the conference
17 presentation was received; all these factors are likely to contribute new ideas that
18 could make the underlying paper even better and the journal would expect (hope) to
19 receive (and publish) the resulting even better paper. Another question is whether it
20 is acceptable to submit a paper that originally appeared in a different language but is
21 otherwise unchanged apart from the translation? Again, we would hope that both
22 the translation process and further reflection on the paper’s argument would lead to
23 us receiving an enhanced version of the paper rather than a simple translation.
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29 Another example of often unarticulated “tacit” knowledge is whether the authors
30 should submit a covering note that explains the full history or provenance of the
31 paper. To journal editors “it is obvious” that providing this information is incredibly
32 helpful. For example, if a reviewer reports that they have seen the paper presented
33 at a conference, we don’t need to launch an investigation into possible academic
34 misconduct as we can simply reassure the reviewer that we know that the
35 submission is an enhanced version of the conference paper.
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40 Similarly, it is helpful if the authors tell us where a paper was previously reviewed
41 (and rejected) and (ideally) provide the previous review and a description of how
42 the paper has been updated following that previous review. This will hopefully also
43 reduce the practice of immediately sending paper rejected by journal A to journal B.
44 For specialist areas of research with limited numbers of reviewers it is increasingly
45 easy to spot a rejected paper that has been immediately resubmitted elsewhere. Not
46 reflecting of the reviewer comments and adjusting the paper accordingly, even if the
47 paper was rejected from that previous journal, is disrespectful of the time and effort
48 that the reviewers have devoted to their reviews and is unlikely to make the
49 reviewers more supportive of the paper when it is submitted, unchanged, to a
50 different outlet.
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56 As noted in Curno’s paper, journals are increasingly using copy (plagiarism?)
57 detection software on all submissions. To me, this carries an unreasonable
58 presumption of guilt on the part of authors. It also incurs not insignificant financial
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3 and administrative costs in processing all the submissions and reviewing their
4 “plagiarism” scores. These administrative overheads are likely to increase when the
5 majority of journals run submissions through the detection software as many
6 rejected submissions are likely to appear as matches for the submission to the new
7 journal. In such cases, asking authors to provide a full history of the paper will help
8 editors manage the potential matches.
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12 Copy-detection software also frequently picks up poor writing and paraphrasing
13 practices (Hayes, Whitley, and Introna 2006). With journal articles, and increasingly
14 books as well, available electronically, rather than proper paraphrasing there is a
15 growing temptation for authors to cut / copy and paste relevant extracts from the
16 source material and only then attempt to re/overwrite them “in their own words”.
17 In most cases, authors are unable to do this sufficiently well and as a result the
18 sophisticated copy-detection algorithms highlight the text as potential plagiarism
19 cases that need to be investigated by journal editors.
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24 Another area of “tacit” knowledge around academic misconduct and academic
25 writing is the important distinction between accusations of plagiarism and proven
26 cases of plagiarism. Kock (1999) presents his own case where his investigation of
27 alleged plagiarism against work he had written turned into an allegation that he, in
28 fact, was the plagiariser of the other person’s work rather than vice versa.
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32 As Curno’s paper notes, the challenges to ethical publishing in the digital era are
33 many and varied. In this paper I have reviewed one aspect of the problem, namely
34 the challenge of making authors aware of the expectations (and reasons for) full
35 disclosure of their paper’s provenance. The use of copy-detection software,
36 intended to address the problem of academic plagiarism, ironically may cause more
37 problems for journal editors in the absence of this provenance information and
38 highlights the need for clear articulation of a journal’s expectations that is well
39 understood by authors.
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