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How to Handle a Case of Redundant Publications in Four Elsevier Journals?

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ABSTRACT

Current ethical guidelines, as defined by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), note that redundant publications or duplicate copies should be retracted because they partake no new information, and may be perceived as unfair. Elsevier and its journals are COPE members. In 2000, four Elsevier journals (*Anaerobe*, *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, *Journal of Autoimmunity*, *Food Microbiology*) published an identically worded notice related to the digital object identifier (DOI), i.e., it was published in quadruplicate (four copies). Despite an alert to all four journals about this quadruplicate, none were retracted. If academics would like to cite this announcement, which of the four copies should they use? This case study raises an important deontological argument regarding the *laissez-faire* attitude of these journals, which charge a fee (US\$27.95-31.50) to access this document's four PDFs. Yet, other cases of duplications/redundant publication in Elsevier journals are frequently retracted. In the case of these four DOI-related papers, what does ignoring the three redundant copies suggest?

INTRODUCTION

Four identical copies related to an announcement about the digital object identifier (DOI) were published in 2000, when the DOI became a very important bibliometric tool, advancing the scholarly publishing community. Academic Press is a DOI charter member (Davidson and Douglas, 1998) and is now an Elsevier imprint. The four copies were published simultaneously on May 25, 2000, by four Academic Press/Elsevier journals: *Anaerobe* (*Anaerobe*, 2000), *Food Microbiology* (*FM*, 2000), *Journal of Autoimmunity* (*JoA*, 2000), and *Journal of Theoretical Biology* (*JoTB*, 2000). The four journals carry a 2022 Clarivate journal impact factor (and Elsevier/Scopus CiteScore) of 2.837 (5.6), 6.374 (10.4), 14.511 (19.9), and 2.405 (5.2), respectively, suggesting that, at least in terms of popular journal-based metrics, that these are “respectable” journals in their fields. None of the papers cross-references the others, and none of them have accrued any citations yet. It costs (individual access) US\$27.95 to access the *Anaerobe* and *JoTB* PDFs, and US\$31.50 to access the *FM* and *JoA* PDFs. It is unclear why there is a pricing differential when the

content is identical. It is also unclear why such an amount of money is charged when the content is fairly useless.

The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), likely the largest (in terms of members) ethics-promoting organization globally, has policies in place to deal with redundant and duplicate publications, not differentiating between manuscript types (COPE, 2019). So, an editorial or original research paper should be treated equally, i.e., as an information document. I note that three journals are COPE member journals, as is Elsevier, the publisher, but oddly, *FM* is not (COPE, 2023). Instead, *FM* claims to follow the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) recommendations about redundant or duplicate publications (ICMJE, 2022).

The objective of this paper was to test how the four Elsevier journals would handle this quadruplicate case because there may be more cases, not only in and among these Elsevier journals but also in the journals of COPE and ICMJE member publishers. Thus, if in the future, three copies are retracted or if three errata are published, or if the four copies are left intact, then this will be

an academic learning experience, in the case of correction or retraction about how to deal with similar cases in other journals and publishers claiming to be COPE- and ICMJE-compliant.

METHODS

The four papers were read to assess that their texts were identical. The author separately and sequentially submitted, over nine months (October 2021 to June 2022), letters to the editors of the four journals. A clear explanation of the problem was also provided in the cover letter, namely that a quadruplicate DOI note had been published, i.e., the four journals were officially notified in 2021 and 2022 of these redundant publications.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

JoTB and *JoA* rejected the letter (October 2021) for an identically worded reason: “reviewers recommend against publishing your manuscript.” *FM* rejected (February 2022) the letter, but failed to provide any reason for rejection, while *Anaerobe* rejected (June 2022) the letter, claiming that it was out of scope. None of the journals or their editors addressed the ethical issue of having published four copies of the identical text, nor did they offer any solution as to how to resolve the ethical dilemma of this quadruplicate publication.

Redundant publications can be perceived as unfair and a tax on editorial and peer reviewer pools (Siontis and Ioannidis, 2018; Ding et al., 2020). Using Web of Science and Scopus, Ding et al. (2020) noted that among 209 journals, 18% lacked any policy related to duplicate publication and salami slicing, while “33% only referred to a generic guideline or checklist without an explicit mention about either practice” (p. 281). Werner emphasized two points: 1) many cases of duplicate publication disappear “under the radar” (p. 210); 2) many journals lack clear policies to deal with this (Werner, 2021). The first assumption by Werner holds true for the four journals in this case, but the second assumption is not true since all four journals are COPE members and/or subscribe to COPE or ICMJE policies about redundant or duplicate publication. The redundancy of information is prevalent in medical systematic reviews (Siontis and Ioannidis, 2018).

Given their specific analytical skills, librarians could help to identify redundant publications and

alert indexing and data archival and indexing agencies about data/information redundancies (Spencer and Eldredge, 2018; Lee et al., 2021). Librarians can use bibliographic software to manage and remove duplicates (Bullers et al., 2018), but in this case of a quadruplicate publication, how would a librarian make an objective and unbiased selection, and which paper should they, or other academics, cite in a paper? Librarians could form an important part of a research team by identifying and removing duplicate literature (Schellinger et al., 2021). If so, then should librarians also not be involved in a more impactful way by ensuring that duplicate/redundant publications, if found, are retracted, so as not to distort information records? Absent rigorous standards, for and by librarians, especially those related to data curation, indexing, and the integrity of information, library and information science may fail to attain sustainable development (Khalid et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

The academic community needs to debate if the ethical differential between these four journals’ editors and their authorship constitutes a case of ethical exceptionalism (Teixeira da Silva, 2017), in which the COPE and ICMJE regulation (retraction for duplicate publication) only applies to authors, but not to the journals, their editors, or the publisher. Moreover, leaving the three additional copies intact and unretracted may be unfair because it may have contributed, at the beginning of the millennium, during its launch and expansionist stage, to the advancement and use of the DOI that is now a widely employed industry standard for data and librarian science. Market advantage, at the expense of established ethical rules, especially by leading players, may be considered as unfair gains (Teixeira da Silva and Vuong, 2021). A search on the Retraction Watch database reveals 467 items for “Duplication of Text”, 95 being associated with Elsevier (Retraction Watch, 2023), i.e., 20.3% of the total. If one considers that there likely exist other duplicates in other Elsevier journals, or that duplicates that actually exist are not being retracted, as evidenced by this case of a quadruplicate paper, then the 20% may be an underestimate.

DOI is an important tool for making data findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable (Wilkinson et al., 2016). In this case, the DOI

allowed for the unique identification of the quadruplicate copies of the millennium DOI announcement. These announcements carry no authors, so there are no authorship-related issues, but leaving all four copies intact, without retracting three redundant copies, affects the credibility of these journals because there is a *laissez-faire* attitude (Kharasch et al., 2021).

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