Text recycling reveals flaws in science’s reward system

In 2015, the Dutch economist Peter Nijkamp was judged to have engaged in “systematic copy-pasting” by a committee organised by his institution, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Nijkamp is one of the most prominent scientists in the Netherlands, with more than 2,300 journal publications. Examining 261 of these, the committee found that 60 showed substantial and unacknowledged overlap with Nijkamp’s other publications.

The controversy sparked a debate in the Netherlands about the permissibility of recycling previously published work. The absence of formal rules led to Nijkamp’s acquittal, but also to new guidelines on acceptable reuse of text by the Dutch academy of sciences. Part of Nijkamp’s defence was that recycling was common in economics.

The case highlighted the contentious position of academic text recycling—defined as the reuse of one’s own writing in academic publications without proper reference, ranging from a sentence to entire articles—among the various forms of academic misconduct. It also raised interesting questions about how the reward systems of science influence the nature and causes of misconduct.

The extent and patterns of recycling in academia is not clear. In a recent study, we sought to shine a light on the nature and causes of misconduct. It also raised interesting questions about how the reward systems of science influence the nature and causes of misconduct.

The causes and risk factors that we have identified hint at potential measures to curb inappropriate recycling. These include the drafting and implementation of guidelines, for example in journal policies. Enhancing social controls among co-authors and turning attention to prolific authors’ publication practices may also help to avoid undesirable text recycling.

Digital distribution is gradually turning the academic literature into one huge “meta-journal” in which papers are available to all. With any previously published article readily accessible, text recycling is becoming more and more silly and unnecessary—arguably serving little purpose than boosting one’s publication record. Revisiting the scientific reward system to make it less dependent on productivity indicators would be the best way to avoid such undesirable incentives.

‘Simple output indicators will overestimate the productivity of researchers.’

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