

Editorial

Commentary on duplicative publications

A reader recently alerted us to a pair of similar manuscripts published in two different journals, two years apart. Because this example provides lessons of broader implication for scientific publications in general, we wish to explore the matter in some detail here.

The articles in question are Yoon et al. (2004, *Geosciences Journal* 8(1), 1–10) and Yoo et al. (2006, *Quaternary Research* 65(1), 57–69). Both address the origin of a deposit identified in three cores off of King George Island, West Antarctica. The similarities between the two papers are striking: about 60% of the QR text is repeated verbatim (or nearly so) from the earlier paper; it also uses 7 of 9 figures and its one table previously published in the earlier work. There is no issue of plagiarism here; the four authors of the QR paper are the first four authors of the earlier paper. This is simply a question of whether the two publications are, in fact, distinct.

There are also differences between the two. The text and figures that are unique to the QR paper address topics not covered in the earlier manuscript, namely oceanographic conditions and benthic foraminifera. These additional data strengthen the explanations offered in the earlier paper, although they do not change either the glaciological interpretation or the environmental reconstruction.

There are also contradictions that suggest errors in one or the other paper. The lithofacies of the three cores are presented in identical images (Fig. 3, 2004; Fig. 4, 2006), and although the cores IDs are the same, two of them have different locators (e.g., “inner fjord” vs. “middle fjord”), and they are plotted in different locations (cf. Fig. 1 of both papers). Also, collection of the data reported in 2004 is stated to have occurred in 1998–1999, while those data reported in 2006 (including the identical lithofacies logs) were credited to a cruise in 2000–2001.

The corresponding author of the QR article was contacted and has responded promptly, emphasizing the importance of the previously unreported oceanographic and paleontological results. To this explanation we also acknowledge the likelihood of different expectations and standards for scientific publication across different cultures, difference that the editors of (and reviewers for) international journals struggle with regularly.

We have elected to write this note for three reasons: First, we want to acknowledge a heretofore unrecognized but substantial overlap between a paper recently published in *Quaternary Research* and one previously published in another journal. It represents a failure, however inadvertent, in our editorial process and we deeply regret it.

Second, we want to call attention to a contradiction between two published papers that may cause confusion for subsequent workers attempting to reconcile these two sources. We suggest that the authors reconcile the erroneous (or, at least, seemingly contradictory) information.

Finally, we would like to encourage both reflection and discussion across the community of Quaternary scientists about what constitutes sufficiently “new” or “additional” information to warrant a separate publication, and how much repetition of previously published material is appropriate to provide context without constituting outright duplication. Most obviously, any repetition of data, discussions, figures, or text *always* requires a clear acknowledgment to an earlier publication. The omission of any such acknowledgment (as in this recent case) may delay discovery of the duplication, but more likely it will breed distrust when the overlap is finally discovered. This journal’s Guide for Authors expresses general guidelines that are consistent with those of nearly all others: “Manuscripts are accepted for review with the understanding that the same work or closely similar work has not been published [and] that it is not under consideration for publication elsewhere”. It is the responsibility of the author to seek guidance from the journal editor, prior to submission, if there is any uncertainty about what is appropriate for repetition.

We are all aware of the professional benefits that seemingly accrue from an inflated publication tally, and the seductive appeal of dissecting a body of research into as many LPUs (Least Publishable Units) as decorum might allow. Yet the benefits of publishing many overlapping articles are fleeting at best, problematic at worst. If the work is never subsequently read or cited, the career benefits of one uncited publication are little enhanced by an entire portfolio of ignored literature. If, conversely, the work *is* read by others, then sooner or later the impropriety will be noted and brought into an intrinsically unfavorable light.

It is not the role of a journal to police its community, but it is our role to articulate, through both words and actions, our common scientific standards and aspirations. This is the spirit in which we offer this commentary, and in which we welcome further discussion from our readers and contributors.

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