Self-plagiarism in scientific journals: an emerging discussion

The evolutionary process of disseminating scientific information has undergone different paradigm shifts throughout the years. In this respect, publication without external (peer) reviews, possibilities of publishing very long articles, lack of guidelines for ethical purposes, among others are part of the trajectory of scientific publication. All of these dilemmas were, in one or other manner, solved by establishing strict guidelines, always having the ethical approach as fundamental.

More recently, ethics in publication has been deeply discussed, especially regarding the definitions of what is a substantial contribution for a scientific product in order to warrant authorship. This topic has also been, at least in part, well understood by the scientific community. In the same line of ethical aspects of publication of scientific articles, self-plagiarism appears into the picture and deserves a deep reflection.

Plagiarism has been defined as the imitation of what has been idealized by someone, without giving credit to the actual author and/or “stealing” ideas. This has been a matter of discussion in science throughout the years and has been understood as an ethical fault. The author of a scientific product should always be credited by what he/she has created. Therefore, it is important that ideas, scientific results, development of materials etc. are properly registered in order to allow an ethical dissemination of knowledge. Thus, publication and registration are the best forms of avoiding unadverted plagiarism. On the other hand, imitation of what has been written or performed without credit should be banned. Nowadays, different mechanisms using electronic search are able to detect plagiarism and this has started to be used by scientific journals. The identification of plagiarism is able to detect both plagiarism and self-plagiarism. However, one question should arise: Can someone be considered under plagiarism of him/herself? Taking into consideration current research and publication paradigms, the answer is yes. Another question could be asked: What is self-plagiarism and until what point this is not necessary in order to better disseminate scientific information? Self-plagiarism is the imitation of what has been previously published by the same author or group of authors.

The reflection of the present editorial tries to put different sides of this dilemma into perspective. First, it should be highlighted that the “Publish or perish” paradigm has led to an increase in the quantity of publications. Additionally, scientific merit of people very frequently is only analyzed by amount of published articles. This might have increased the number of projects that are subdivided in small parts in order to increase number of publications, probably decreasing quality of the information.
When a project is subdivided, it is almost natural that parts of it need to be repeated, leading to self-plagiarism. Of course, when this discussion is made, in any matter, dual publication of articles, repetition of important outcomes without any new approach should be ever considered adequate.

On the other side, it should be highlighted that current research strategies stimulate research co-operation and, therefore, ample projects should be planned. When one is part of an extensive project, the odds of having part of the information from the project repeated in different publications is high. Therefore, when supposed plagiarism is detected in the methodology sections, there is a common sense understanding that this should not be considered an ethical infringement. However, the methodology has to be clearly dealing with different approaches. For example, a national epidemiological survey related to numerous health problems, would probably generate similar descriptions of study sample, sampling strategies and even descriptions of included individuals could be the same, without being considered plagiarism (per se or self-plagiarism).

It should also be highlighted that scientific journals, for logistic reasons, frequently pose limitations in size of the article, number of figures/tables that lead to the necessity of similar ideas or parts of articles to be published in more than one paper. Some journals even accept the same project with parts 1, 2 or 3. However, the art of disseminating scientific information should always include creativity. This means that an author or research group should be stimulated to use creativity to conceive the paper, including its style and the way of translating scientific information. It is supposed that when the authors do not have the language of the publication as their mother tongue, this could increase difficulty. However, this should not be an excuse for self-plagiarism.

Another aspect that should be warned is that there are groups of researchers that frequently use the same research models and this makes it difficult to avoid, at least in part, self-plagiarism. In this respect, authors are encouraged not to use “writing models”, despite of the research model. The sections of introduction, results and, especially the discussion, should really include novelty both from the knowledge point of view, as well as from the scientific approach to a research question.

The number of journals using self-plagiarism detection has increased and they tend to be strict in this respect. As long as this detection is used with caution and taking into consideration the peculiarities or each article, this practice is interesting. However, this should not be delegated to non-specialized personnel, who could lead to misunderstanding and misleading conducts.

In summary, researchers should be aware of the dilemma of self-plagiarism and, within the possible limitations, avoid it and treat the topic with maturity.