Honesty in Publication

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A recent editorial in Water Research (39, 1–2), “The Ignoble Art of Cheating in Scientific Publications,” caught my attention because it addressed a number of issues related to publication misconduct, a topic that I have had to address more than once in the past few years. With acknowledgment to Mogens Henze, the editor-in-chief of Water Research (WR), I would like to mention several of the points listed in the editorial, as they are important for all authors.

To begin, it is important to remember why we publish. If you come from an academic background, then the answer might be to get tenure or to make full professor. If you work in the private sector, perhaps your firm offers a cash incentive. These, however, should not be the major motivating forces. We should submit papers when we: (1) think that we have done something that represents a contribution to a field (e.g., a new principle or design procedure, or a novel application of an existing principle); (2) have obtained data that has not previously been measured and can be applied to a problem; or (3) have completed a case study in which data from a field-scale system are integrated so to provide a complete picture of an engineered or natural system. There are many other good reasons to submit manuscripts, but the underlying principle is that we think that we have something new that can stand up to the rigor of anonymous review by our peers. Publications in archival journals such as the Journal of Environmental Engineering become part of a permanent record that may be referenced for decades to come.

The reputation of a journal is based on the quality of the work published, which in turn leads to a higher impact factor, a measure of the extent to which articles in the journal are cited in subsequent journal articles. As authors want to publish in journals with high-impact factors, and journal editors and publishers like high-impact factors, the goal of the author and editor should be aligned.

With this as a background, the Water Research editorial listed a number of areas where publication misconduct has been observed. All of these will first, reflect poorly on the author, and second, reflect poorly on the journal if a problematic article is published. Problems cited include:

1. Blatant misconduct in which an author submits another author’s previously published paper under their own name;
2. The use of text from a previously published article without referencing the source;
3. The division of papers into “least publishable units,” or LPUs. I recently managed a manuscript in which the authors submitted a lot of detail on a small aspect of a study. I did a literature search and discovered that within the past year, the authors had published two papers on other aspects of the same topic in another journal. The result was that the remaining information was not sufficient to warrant publication by itself.
4. Failure to properly list authors. This includes the responsibility to list deserving authors and to exclude those who would like to be included but did not make a significant contribution.

Here are two more issues that were not cited in the WR editorial.

5. Inappropriate suggestion of recommended referees. I was recently assigned a manuscript in which the author listed friends as potential reviewers. None of the recommended reviewers had the appropriate background. Since I knew all of the parties involved, it was easy for me to see what was happening.

6. I have observed the same article submitted to two journals concurrently. When an article is submitted to the Journal of Environmental Engineering, or any other journal, there is an understanding that it is not under consideration by another journal. The authors look particularly bad when both journals select an overlapping reviewer.

It is unfortunate that I have elected to use space in the Journal for such a negative topic. Unfortunately, I do not think it a coincidence that another leading journal in our field elected to publish an editorial on the same topic, nor is it a coincidence that this topic had come up in other discussions in which I have participated. Of course, if you have a question about how to handle a sticky issue, consult with an experienced colleague or the editor.