A Piece of My Mind

Read It Again: It's Good for You

Most of you believe that a scientific article should be published only once, in one journal. You are, in fact, the self-righteous majority who tries to stifle repetitive publication. The free-thinking individuals who reject such arbitrary rules and manage to break them, in valiant defiance of the copyright law, are a small, scattered, and unorganized group, until now too weak to defend their position publicly. In all fairness, repetitive publication deserves a hearing. Here are my arguments in favor of it.

Wider Dissemination of Information.—This is a fairly obvious advantage. An article appearing in multiple journals aimed at the same audience is less likely to be missed by those cursory readers and hasty scanners out there. The author of a multiply published article will be able to have the following dialogue with his or her colleagues: "Have you read my article?" "No, where?" "Everywhere! Don't you read anything?"

Repetition Is the Mother of Learning.—How true! Let's say your article appeared in only one journal once. Will it be remembered as well as it would if it had been published over and over again? Of course not. But it is important to make each version just a little bit different in order to trick people into rereading at least part of the article again before they realize it's not new. Rearrange the order of authors' names, or superficially change the title; it doesn't take much time or intelligence. Education by repetition is a difficult pedagogical task, but someone has to do it.

Practice Makes Perfect.—Experienced authors know that despite the most diligent efforts on their part, or on the part of the publishing staff, errors still creep into the final printed version. How nice to have another chance to do it better the second or third time around! In the meantime, your observations may have increased and you can add one more case and yet another to those described in your initial report. Repetitive publication thus provides a continuum that closely parallels your own learning curve, your accruing knowledge. What am I saying—it actually mirrors the progress of science itself!

Shorter Publication Time at Less Cost.—Republishing an article that has been through the copy editing and production process is as easy as working with a prefab piece. Since most major journals adhere to the same style requirements, a previously published article practically zips through the publication process.

Strengthening of the Peer-Review System.—Once repetitive publication becomes widely accepted and the same articles are published over and over again, very little editorial space will be squandered on so-called new articles. Reviewers' jobs will be easier, and they'll be able to devote more time to the few and familiar articles referred to them occasionally. The task of periodical reappraisal of the same material will hone the reviewers' skills and yield veritable exegeses of those topics.

Higher Literary Quality of Manuscripts.—In order to produce multiple variants of one article, the authors will have to be highly proficient in English, adept in synonymy, and quite versatile in all genres of scientific literature, from the lyricism of a letter to the editor to the dramatism of a panel discussion or the epic power of an original report. Less experienced authors will have difficulty maintaining the contents intact from one superficial mutation of the article to the other, but that's what separates the pros from the amateurs.

Getting duplicative articles published is not easy, particularly now, while it is still only an avant-garde movement and repressive editors are on the prowl. But the advantages are plain for anyone to see. If you haven't memorized them yet, it's all right. I am trying to republish this elsewhere.

Germaine Roman
Chicago

We welcome contributions to A PIECE OF MY MIND from readers. Submissions should be addressed to Roxanne K. Young, The Journal of the American Medical Association, 535 N Dearborn St, Chicago, IL 60610.