

# Acknowledged Web Posting Is Not Prior Publication

By Eugene Garfield

*The Scientist* 13[12]:12, June 7, 1999

Most scientific journals begin their instructions to authors with a strong statement against prior or double publication. *The New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)* states, "Manuscripts containing original material are accepted for consideration if neither the article nor any part of its essential substance, tables, or figures has been or will be published or submitted elsewhere before appearing in the Journal."

Most journals then list exceptions to the blanket rule; for example, presentation of the results at a poster session or meeting, with concurrent publication of the results in a meeting abstract. However, a number of publications are interdicting their authors from any prior publication of a paper on a personal or institutional Web site. For example, from the *NEJM* again: "Posting a manuscript, including its figures and tables, on a host computer to which anyone on the Internet can gain access will constitute prior publication." I believe their position is counterproductive to science

progress and does not serve the best interests of readers.

Editors present a variety of arguments for refusing to publish articles that report information that has been "published" earlier--either in the lay press or other media, including the Internet. Allegedly, if you have posted your creations on a personal Web site, you have somehow compromised publication in primary journals by undercutting the peer review process. On the contrary, I believe a "prior" distribution increases critical review (refereeing), which is so important to formal publication.

Contrary to the myth, publication on a personal Web site ordinarily does not produce the quantity of exposure one experiences in *JAMA*: The Journal of the American Medical Association, *NEJM*, or other large-circulation journals. None of the new methods of "prior" exposure are all that efficient. "Original" or formal publication has significance only

in the context of mass-distribution journals.

If journal X publishes an article, and readers are not aware of the information reported in it, and the author states openly that the ideas have been exposed on the Web, does this affect the value of that information to the reader? I've often encountered articles and books in which the author mentions earlier work with which I was not familiar. If the ideas are new to me, does it matter that the citing work is not the place in which the idea was first expressed?

Scientific communication is part of a long-term "educational" process. As in the case of many Nobel Prizes, delayed recognition of important ideas is not unusual. Their acceptance involves not only publication over a continuous period, but also proselytizing by their creators to colleagues in various fora. Many scholars have observed the importance of informal communication in science. Indeed, some degree of redundancy is absolutely essential to the dissemination of new ideas partly because there are so many new ideas out there competing for our attention. Redundancy in advertising is taken as a given. Is it really any different in science? Since it is impossible to be aware of everything that is published

today, redundancy serves a useful function.

Here's my advice to journal editors. If a paper meets your criteria for excellence, and if your readers will benefit from reading those ideas, do not be put off by the fact that the author has discussed those ideas in an open forum--whether on the Web or at a meeting, or even in the lay press. Ask your authors to acknowledge, by suitable references, if and where the work has been reported before. This will "protect" the small number of readers who may have heard the paper at a meeting. If the ideas were significant the first time around, readers will be glad to receive a second dose. And your journal will be serving its appropriate function as a disseminator as well as archive for the scientific record. The ethical issue is not whether the ideas are completely new, but whether the author has acknowledged the earlier exposure. That reference preserves the historical record for the first-time reader.

At a recent conference held in Cologne, Germany, John Maddox, editor emeritus of Nature, referred to a study that demonstrated that press releases not only increase stories in the lay press about articles published in primary journals, but also

increase citations by researchers to the research.<sup>1</sup> As reported by V. de Semir et al. in *JAMA*,<sup>2</sup> were it not for the extra publicity, the citing authors might have overlooked the

cited studies. These media reports are a variant of "prior publication." As an individual reader, any source is "prior" if that is where I first hear about it.

1. J. Maddox, "Comments made at the International Workshop on the Future of Biomedical Information and Biomedical Libraries," September 28-30, 1998, Castle Eichholz, Germany.
2. V. de Semir et al., "Press releases of science journal articles and subsequent newspaper stories on the same topic," *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 280[3]:294-295, July 15, 1998.

---

*The Scientist* 13[12]:12, Jun. 07, 1999