Title: A comment on *The extent and causes of academic text recycling or 'self-plagiarism'* by Serge Horbach and Willem Halffman, currently in press at Research Policy

Date: 17 December 2017

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With great interest I have read the article by Serge Horbach and Willem Halffman titled *The extent and causes of academic text recycling or 'self-plagiarism'* which is currently in press at *Research Policy*. Horbach and Halffman have done an incredible amount of work in analysing the prevalence of self-plagiarism in articles by researchers affiliated with Dutch universities in the fields of biochemistry, economics, history and psychology.

Horbach and Halffman find that self-plagiarism is much more common in economics than in other fields. This finding has generated a lot of response in Dutch public discourse. In the week after its first publication online, the paper's findings were discussed in most Dutch media outlets.[1] Part of the paper's attraction is that it confirms the general perception, instigated by the Peter Nijkamp scandal, that there is something unscientific about the publication practices of Dutch economists. This is the very same scandal that the authors use to motivate their paper and advance as a case study in it.

Though I do not wish to defend Peter Nijkamp's self-plagiarising practices and though the publication practices of Dutch economists may indeed be in need of improvement, I think Horbach and Halffman's data-collection choice could be regarded as implicating or working towards the conclusion drawn from the Peter Nijkamp case that self-plagiarism is much more common in economics than in other fields. To prove my point, I have replicated Horbach and Halffman's study, using a more suitable choice of data collection, and have arrived at substantially different results.

The data collection issue

The issue is that Horbach and Halffman use the top 6 economists from the Econmentop 2013[2] out of *Economisch Statistische Berichten* (ESB) as their list of most productive economists, while selecting the most productive researchers in the other fields through a publications search in Web of Science. Due to the criticism of the method used in compiling the Econmentop up to 2014[3], the method was changed from 2014 onwards. From that point in time, the method has been almost identical to the one used by Horbach and Halffman for the other

[1] To name a few: NRC (2017) *Economen schrijven zichzelf relatief vaak over*, 27 September 2017. De Volkskrant (2017) *Nederlandse economen en psychologen plegen vaak zelfplagiaat; vooral prominente wetenschappers*, 25 September 2017. Das Kapital (2017) *Bewijs: economen vallen in herhaling*, 26 September 2017. Nederlands Dagblad (2017) *Nederlandse economen plegen vaak zelfplagiaat*, 27 September 2017. BNR (2017) *Wetenschappers plegen veel zelfplagiaat*, 26 September 2017.

[2] Up to 2014, universities were invited to provide a list of their top economists. From this, *ESB* then calculated the total article influence score from all the peer-reviewed publications of these economists in the preceding five years. Phlippen, S. (2013) De Econmentop 2013. *ESB*, 98(4674&4675), 776–777.

[3] Abbring, J., B. Bronnenberg, P. Gautier en J. van Ours (2014) Alternatieve Econmentop met meer kwaliteit. *ESB,* 99(4684), 266–269.

disciplines and to the searches for articles published in the field of economics with an author's Dutch university affiliation and a publication date within the last five years.[4]

By relying on the Econementop 2013, Horbach and Halffman have introduced four issues for potential discussion:

- **Favouritism and/or oversight by department heads.** For the Econementop 2013, the department heads in economics were asked to provide a list of their top economists, of whom ESB checked their publication record. For the Econementop from 2014 and beyond and for the other fields in Horbach and Halffman all the researchers were included. It is conceivable that some economists who are publishing well were not nominated by department heads in 2013 or earlier, but it is inconceivable that they would not be listed in Web of Science.
- **Counting publications outside of the field.** In the Econementop 2013, all the peer-reviewed publications of the nominated economists have been considered as to the other fields, and for the Econementop 2014 and after only the peer-reviewed publications published in the field itself are considered. This is relevant for researchers publishing in several fields as some of their contributions may consist of using techniques common to a one particular field to explain an effect in another field. Self-plagiarism may in these cases by less harmful. Please note that for instance the number 1 in 2013 – Richard Tol, an economist working on global warming – is no longer on the list after 2014.
- **Great weight upon authors with many low-impact publications.** In the Econementop 2013, publications were weighted using the journal's percentile rank score, yet for the Econementop 2014 and beyond publications are now weighted using the article-influence score of the journal in which they have been published, and in that case only the fifteen articles with the highest weighting are considered. By using the article-influence score instead of the percentile rank score as a weight, publications in both the top 5 journals and the well-read field journals receive more emphasis.
- **Different time periods.** Horbach and Halffman compare the economists' publications in 2008–2012 with publications from 2010 and onwards as to the other disciplines. Using the Econementop 2016 would have eliminated this issue, as it uses publications between 2011 and 2015.

However, more troubling from an academic point of view is the fact that there seems to be no reason for using a top 6 in 2013, other than that Peter Nijkamp was included in the Econementop for the last time in 2013, ranking 6th then.

[4] From 2014 onwards, by using Web of Science, *ESB* has calculated the total article-influence score of the fifteen highest scoring publications during the last five years in the field of economics by researchers with a Dutch university affiliation. Phlippen, S. (2014) De Econementop 2014. *ESB*, 99(4699&4700), 786–788. Phlippen, S. (2015) De Econementop 2015. *ESB*, 100(4723&4724), 751–753. Lukkezen, J. (2016) De Econementop 2016, *ESB*, 101(4744), 759–761.

Given the motivation of the paper and the emphasis placed on the case study, this may be regarded as implicating the conclusion.

Replication

Are Hobach and Halffman's results directed by Peter Nijkamp's inclusion in the list? I believe this to be the case. I have checked the papers in the top 6 of the Economentop 2016 using Horbach and Halffman's methodology, and have also used the same plagiarism-detection software. In the period 2012–2016, these authors published 68 papers[5], 63 of which I was able to access through Utrecht University. 50 out of 63 had a plagiarism score higher than ten percent, but for 48 of those the score was lower than ten percent, after allowing for near-identical working papers and chapters in PhD-theses. The remaining two displayed an overlap with papers by the same author in the methodology section, but had acknowledged this fact in their papers. According to Horbach and Halffman, this is allowed.

Thus, an analysis of a selection of economics authors more comparable to authors in other fields has zero cases of self-plagiarism as its outcome.[6] A robustness analysis of Horbach and Halffman, for instance by using the Economentop 2016 or a top 5 or top 20 of the Economentop 2013, might have uncovered this as well.

Relevance

The answer to the question whether there is more self-plagiarism among Dutch economists has an academic as well as a societal relevance. It has academic relevance because it tells the reader whether he or she is dealing with a trend warranting further research, or with an idiosyncrasy of the Nijkamp case best suitable for informal discussion. It has societal relevance, as the current paper feeds the general public's distrust of economists in the Netherlands, without providing arguments that are convincing enough for economists to change their publication practices.

Should there indeed be more self-plagiarism among Dutch economists, a more convincing paper should help to convince both the economic discipline and the general public of the need for action.

[5] I limited my analysis to the fifteen papers of each author that are published in journals with the highest article influence score.

[6] I am happy to provide further details of my analysis on request.