



## ***Inappropriate Use of Submission and Rejection Emails for Advertising Revision Services and Congresses***



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**Abstract:** Finding a niche journal for the submission of an academic paper can sometimes be a challenge for authors, and finding the right choice may involve a series of submissions and rejections. Emails from editors and journals related to the submission or rejection of a paper should be strictly related to these purposes, i.e., to inform authors that their paper has been received, outline the subsequent editorial handling or peer reviewer steps in the former, or the reasons for rejection in the latter. This paper highlights four cases of – in the author’s opinion – the abuse of such emails by COPE member journals and publishers (Emerald Publishing Ltd., Springer Nature, Elsevier, Wiley) to advertise for-profit English revision and editing services and/or conferences, as a way to maximize these emails for a dual purpose, namely to inform authors of submission-related aspects (valid communication) while also trying to obtain clients and thus business for non-submission-related aspects (invalid communication). Since an abuse of email-based communication for non-academic purposes is an ethics-related matter, there is a need for systematic research of this potential abuse of emails from both COPE member and non-member journals.

**Keywords:** Conferences; editing services; editor; editorial manager; email advertizing; online submission system; persuasion.

### **Introduction**

Emails are an essential part of academics’ daily communication, and a core element of personal information management (Whittaker et al. 2006). In the context of academic publishing, it is common for emails that acknowledge the submission of a paper to a journal to include information such as a manuscript number, the handling editor, and the ensuing processes that may follow submission. Emails related to intermediary processes, such as requested or required revisions, would also include peer reviewers’ and editorial remarks. Similarly, it is usual for emails that transmit a rejection to authors to not only transmit the rejection decision, but wherever editors act responsibly, to also indicate the reasons for rejection, either soon after submission, as a desk rejection, or following peer review (Teixeira da Silva et al. 2018). These would typically be the most scholarly uses of emails by editors, journals and publishers related to a paper’s submission and/or

rejection.

Such emails are not considered as unsolicited bulk, unsolicited commercial, or spam email (Teixeira da Silva et al. 2020; Altulaihan et al. 2023) because the recipients (authors) have implicitly or explicitly agreed to receive such communications from journals or their editors as part of the peer review process. Nor are such emails phishing attacks (i.e., false communications from a seemingly verifiable source) because no masqueraded identities are employed (Bhardwaj et al. 2020). Consequently, filtering out such emails or their senders, as would occur to avoid the receipt of spam or to truncate phishing attacks (Dada et al. 2019), makes no sense in the context of peer review because the content of these emails is from trusted sources and contains appropriate (i.e., relevant to the recipient) content.

It is not uncommon for journals to employ artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted software to format text within such emails in order to automate messages to authors, a method that is particularly useful when the volume of submissions to that journal are high. Automation might take on several forms: 1) submission acknowledgement; 2) resubmission reminder; 3) peer review invitation and/or reminder(s); 4) rejection communication. The publishing industry can be considered as a subset of supply chain-based businesses that are adopting more AI-based digital technologies to remain competitive (Hartley & Sawaya 2019), including for aspects such as marketing (Nair & Gupta 2021; Huang & Rust 2022) and email automation (Park et al. 2019). However, what if emails are used beyond specified and understood academic purposes, and are used for more strategic marketing or promotional purposes (Thomas et al. 2022)? In some unique cases, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, email management may have been strategized in order to reach remote users (Rysavy et al. 2021).

The objective of this paper, which relies exclusively on a limited number of emails received by the author from journals to which papers had been submitted, is to highlight a topic that has, to the author's knowledge, not yet been debated, but is worthy of wider reflection as well as the establishment of more rigorous guidelines related to editorial and publisher responsibilities.

## **I. Case Studies of Inappropriate Email Content by COPE Members**

In this evidence-based opinion paper, limited evidence is presented, as four cases, in which select Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) member journals and publishers have, in the author's opinion, abused a typically restricted medium of communication with authors, i.e., emails related to submissions, peer review, or rejections, to transmit additional information that is not directly linked to the author or the submitted paper. These cases are considered to be an abuse because they attempt to either gain additional sideline business, for example, via auxiliary paid services, which would result in financial benefit to the publisher, specifically the advertisement of editing services or conferences.

No formal methodology was employed to identify these emails, i.e., this is this is an anecdotal account undertaken on the basis of a post-factum analysis. Simply, as the author identified “interesting” or unusual cases related to email-based communication strategies by editors, journals or publishers, these were archived, then compiled. While there was no departing research question, the presumed null hypothesis, had there been one, would have been that no impertinent or irrelevant content would be expected in emails from editors or journals related to manuscript submission or rejection.

Case 1 involves Emerald Publishing Ltd. and the journal *Online Information Review*, which used a rejection email to advertise services to an English for-profit revision and editing service, Editage. Identical advertising was received in rejection emails from other Emerald Publishing Ltd. journals: *Records Management Journal* (April 2, 2020); *VINE Journal of Information and Knowledge Management Systems* (April 30, 2020; November 21, 2020); *Data Technologies and Applications* (September 18, 2020); *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion* (August 14, 2023). Emerald Publishing Ltd. also used a rejection email to advertise English revision services with Peerwith (Appendix, case 1). While these journals and publisher are COPE members, the English revision services are not.

Case 2 involves a Springer Nature journal, namely *Journal of the Egyptian National Cancer Institute*, which also used the rejection email to advertise two for-profit revision and editing services (appendix, case 2). The journal and publisher are COPE members, but the two English revision services are not.

Case 3 involves a Wiley journal, *Plant Biology*, which also used the rejection email to advertise a for-profit revision and editing service (Appendix, case 3). A slightly different email was also received by another Wiley title, *Journal of Evidence-Based Medicine*. The journal and publisher are COPE members, but the English revision service is not.

Case 4 involves an Elsevier journal, *Information Processing and Management*, which used the submission acknowledgement email to advertise an online conference. Since there were non-refundable fees associated with participation (US\$118.80-238.00), the email was essentially a free advertisement for a for-profit online event (Appendix, case 4). This case is even more egregious because an identical advert appeared even in 2023 emails associated with manuscript submission to this journal, i.e., advertising an outdated conference. The journal and publisher are COPE members.

## II. Discussion

On page 13 of its Principles of Transparency (PoT) manual, COPE states “there is a transparent business model, and ownership, revenue sources, and advertising policies/practices are independent of editorial decisions” and “any direct marketing is done ethically” (COPE Council 2022). On page 27, under PoT 15 “Advertising,” it is stated that “Advertisements should not be related in any way to editorial decision making,” while on the same page, under PoT 16 “Direct marketing,” it is stated that “Any direct marketing

activities (...) that are conducted on behalf of the journal, shall be appropriate, well targeted, and unobtrusive.” These clauses are also interpreted as advertising (especially for for-profit services) should not be permitted in communications (e.g., emails) that are related to editorial decisions. If anything, such adverts, as exemplified by cases 1 – 4, within emails related to submission and rejection are not only inappropriate and loosely targeted (i.e., they target authors whose papers are rejected), they are obtrusive.

Academia needs to debate whether it agrees with this form of advertisement and abuse of emails related to the submission and rejection of academic papers for ancillary purposes. The author is of the opinion that such COPE member status quo journals and publishers should not engage in ethically questionable practices, as noted in cases 1 – 4, related to such emails. Even more so when several of the organizations whose services they are advertising are not COPE members. This is because a potentially grey zone in ethics is created by mixing COPE (a publishing ethics brand) member services with non-COPE member services. Although this may seem – to those who created it – an innovative business model, i.e., by achieving two objectives within a single communication channel, namely the submission- or rejection-related email, it may be, in the author’s opinion, a form of abuse of the trust inherent in such email communications and their actual intended purpose.

### **III. Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research**

To address an increase in the volume of submissions to a journal, as part of its management strategy, it might revert to AI-assisted software to deliver automated messages to authors, either related to the submission, revision or rejection of papers. However, should such automation and customization include undesired and irrelevant content? Effective journal management should include making sure that such communications are appropriate and do not include content that lies outside of emails’ purported purposes. Importantly, authors should be within their rights to hold editors, journals and publishers accountable whenever “odd” or inappropriate email content is discovered. This paper records four cases of inappropriate content (in the author’s opinion) in submission and rejection emails by COPE members (journals and publishers), some of them among the largest in the industry (Nishikawa-Pacher 2022). However, since COPE also represents the commercial interests of its members, and not necessarily the rights of the authors that contribute to its members’ academic and/or business models, there is no formal platform – public or otherwise – for authors to represent their concerns about COPE members. For this reason, academics need to report, in the form of case studies, as was done in this paper, instances of email or service abuse, especially by status quo and COPE member journals and publishers, in order to hold them more accountable. By formally recording such cases, it will be possible to begin to determine which fall into the category of “junk management” status (Teixeira da Silva 2023), and which do not.

As a limitation of the evidence provided, this paper only reports on a handful of cases known to the author, so generalizations cannot be made. A wider exposure of similar abuses of email communications by COPE member journals and publishes that profess ethical publishing and managerial standards is merited, especially since such emails might not typically be classified as either spam or phishing attacks. They are also not clickbait-style emails because the subject content, which may define the success of email marketing campaigns (Paulo et al. 2022), is related to submissions or rejections (Pujahari & Sisodia 2019). Therefore, such within-email advertisements are more of an advertising appendix of legitimate emails, almost as a form of advertising within a framework of “strategic partnerships” (Hajarian et al. 2021). Is linking services and conferences to a legitimate email a novel form of business persuasion strategy (Sergeeva et al. 2023)? Therefore, a new classification that is based on a finer appreciation of the ethical parameters of such inappropriate advertising (i.e., the inclusion of information that might not be directly relevant to the recipient or user, or that they did not explicitly agree to receiving) is necessary.

Finally, there is a need to conduct quantitative research that assesses systemic practices by COPE member journals and publishers, specifically to gain an appreciation of the scale of emails that they regularly send, the category of recipients, and the content of such emails, in order to better appreciate if they merely benefit those journals and publishers by advertising external (i.e., unrelated) services. Since COPE members claim to operate on a platform of transparent publishing practices, such information should not be considered as “sensitive,” and the resulting data of such research would hopefully reveal how COPE member journals and publishers actually use or interpret their proclaimed standards in practice.

## Appendix

### Case 1

Top email extract: Rejection emails from a journal published by Emerald Publishing Ltd. (<https://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/>), ranked as the 14<sup>th</sup> largest publisher (Nishikawa-Pacher 2022), *Online Information Review* (<https://www.emerald.com/insight/publication/issn/1468-4527>), for paid English revision and editing services Editage (<https://www.editage.com/>), of a for-profit company, Cactus Communications (<https://cactusglobal.com/>). Both Emerald Publishing Ltd. (<https://publicationethics.org/category/publisher/emerald-publishing-limited>) and Cactus Communications (<https://publicationethics.org/members/cactus-communications>) are COPE members. Rejection email dates: April 2, 2020; April 17, 2023. Bottom email extract: Rejection email by an Emerald Publishing Ltd. journal *International Journal of Ethics and Systems* (<https://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/journal/ijoes>), for paid English revision

services Peerwith (<https://www.peerwith.com/>), a for-profit company. Peerwith is not a COPE member. Rejection email date: November 11, 2020.

“To help support you on your publishing journey we have partnered with Editage, a leading global science communication platform, to offer expert editorial support including language editing and translation. If your article has been rejected or revisions have been requested, you may benefit from Editage’s services. For a full list of services, visit: [authorservices.emeraldpublishing.com/](https://authorservices.emeraldpublishing.com/). Please note that there is no obligation to use Editage and using this service does not guarantee publication.”

“Emerald has partnered with Peerwith to provide authors with expert editorial support, including language editing and translation, visuals, and consulting. If your article was rejected, or had revisions requested on the basis of the language or clarity of communication, you might benefit from a Peerwith expert’s input. For a full list of Peerwith services, visit: <https://authorservices.emeraldpublishing.com/> Please note that there is no obligation to use Peerwith and using this service does not guarantee publication.”

## Case 2

Rejection email by a Springer Nature (<https://www.springernature.com/>) journal, *Journal of the Egyptian National Cancer Institute* (<https://jenci.springeropen.com/>), was used to advertise two paid for-profit English revision and editing services Nature Research Editing Service (<https://www.aje.com/services/scientific-editing/>) and American Journal Experts (AJE) (<https://www.aje.com/>), essentially both AJE. While Springer Nature (<https://publicationethics.org/category/publisher/springer-nature>) and *Journal of the Egyptian National Cancer Institute* (<https://publicationethics.org/members/journal-egyptian-national-cancer-institute>) are COPE members, Nature Research Editing Service and AJE are not. Of note, the preprint server, Research Square (<https://www.researchsquare.com/>) is the parent company of AJE (<https://www.aje.com/arc/company-awards-aje-research-square-received/>). Springer Nature, the world’s largest publisher based on journal volume (Nishikawa-Pacher 2022), purchased Research Square and AJE in December of 2022 (<https://group.springernature.com/jp/group/media/press-releases/springer-nature-completes-acquisition-of-research-square-company/23768186>). Rejection email date: January 29, 2022.

... “although your paper is well written and focused on an interesting topic” followed by “If improvements to the English language within your manuscript have been requested we recommend that you address this before submitting to another journal. We recommend that you either get your manuscript reviewed by someone who is fluent in English or, if you would like professional help, you can use any reputable English language editing service. We can recommend our affiliates Nature Research Editing Service (<http://bit.ly/NRES-HS>) and American Journal Experts (<http://bit.ly/AJE-HS>) for help with English usage. Please note that use of an editing service is neither a requirement nor a guarantee of publication. Free assistance is available from our English language tutorial (<https://>

[www.springer.com/gb/authors-editors/authorandreviewertutorials/writinginenglish](http://www.springer.com/gb/authors-editors/authorandreviewertutorials/writinginenglish)) and our Writing resources (<http://www.biomedcentral.com/getpublished/writing-resources>). These cover common mistakes that occur when writing in English.”

### Case 3

Rejection email (top excerpt) received from a journal published by Wiley (<https://www.wiley.com/>), ranked as the 4<sup>th</sup> largest publisher (Nishikawa-Pacher 2022), *Plant Biology* (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14388677>), for paid in-house English revision and editing services. A very similar email. Both Wiley (<https://publicationethics.org/category/publisher/wiley>) and *Plant Biology* (<https://publicationethics.org/members/plant-biology>) are COPE members. Rejection email dates: May 11, 2020 (*Plant Biology*); September 19, 2023 (*Journal of Evidence-Based Medicine*).

“If you would like help with English language editing, or other article preparation support, Wiley Editing Services offers expert help with English Language Editing, as well as translation, manuscript formatting, and figure formatting at [www.wileyauthors.com/eo/preparation](http://www.wileyauthors.com/eo/preparation).”

### Case 4

*Information Processing and Management*, a journal published by Elsevier, ranked as the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest publisher (Nishikawa-Pacher 2022), used the submission acknowledgement email to advertise a for-profit conference. Both Elsevier (<https://publicationethics.org/category/publisher/elsevier>) and *Information Processing and Management* (<https://publicationethics.org/members/information-processing-and-management>) are COPE members. Submission acknowledgement email date: September 5, 2022. The exact same conference was advertised in an email acknowledgement accompanying the submission of a paper to this journal on April 9, 2023:

“Also, you may be interested in the Information Processing & Management Conference 2022 (IP&M2022) occurring 20-23 October 2022 in Xiamen, China. IP&MC 2022 will be a truly interdisciplinary event and will provide excellent opportunities to meet scientific contacts, initiate new collaborations, and push forward innovations in research dissemination. If interested, visit <https://www.elsevier.com/events/conferences/information-processing-and-management-conference>”.

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