

## Concerns Expressed: A Snap-shot of Expressions of Concern in FT50

**Salim Moussa**

Université de Gafsa, Institut Supérieur des Études Appliquées en Humanités,  
Cité des Jeunes, Gafsa 2133, Tunisia  
*salimmoussa@yahoo.fr*

**Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva**

Independent Researcher,  
Ikenobe 3011-2, Kagawa-ken, 761-0799, Japan  
*jaimetex@yahoo.com*

### ABSTRACT

*Background.* An expression of concern (EoC) is usually issued when there are concerns about the integrity or accuracy of a previously published article, although those concerns in themselves are not serious enough to warrant a formal retraction at the time the concerns were raised.

*Objectives.* This paper examines the contexts and contents of EoCs published in the Financial Times 50 (FT50) journals, which are widely regarded as the most influential and respected in the fields of business and management.

*Methods and Result.* A search using the Retraction Watch database revealed only three instances of EoCs in FT50 journals, with the oldest published in April 2015 and the latest in August 2021. A search on Clarivate's Web of Science Core Collection indicated that the articles to which the three EoCs were associated have amassed together 581 citations by 22 November 2023. Examination of the content of these EoCs showed that they were prompted by a complaint, a university-led investigation, and a third party. This paper also sheds light on the contexts behind the issuance of these EoCs in these FT50 journals, while highlighting concerns about them.

*Contributions.* This paper focuses on a type of scholarly document (i.e., EoC) that has received little attention within the library and information science literature.

### INTRODUCTION

The FT50 list is a collection of journals compiled by the British daily newspaper, the Financial Times (FT), that is used to provide an annual ranking of MBA programs at business schools (Moussa, 2021). In the early 2000s, the FT list included 40 publication venues, but was reorganized and expanded to 45 journals in 2010, and reshuffled and expanded to include up to 50 journals in 2016, as described by Rodenburg et al. (2022), who provide a detailed historical account of the three FT list versions.

The journals on the FT50 list are widely regarded as the most respected and influential in the fields of business and management (Fassin, 2021; Moussa, 2021, 2022a). Researchers, academics, and practitioners rely on these journals to stay current on the latest developments and trends in their fields. In several countries, some recruitment, tenure, and/or promotion

committees even require candidates to publish at least one article in one of these journals in order to be hired, tenured, or promoted (Fernandes & Walter, 2023; Rodenburg et al., 2022).

However, regardless of its ranking or prestige, any journal can be the subject of publication ethics concerns or research misconduct (Green & Johnston, 2022). For example, the *Journal of Consumer Research*, which is on the FT50 list, retracted up to five articles in 2020 alone (Moussa, 2022b). In 2022, the *Journal of Marketing Research (JMR)*, another FT50 journal, retracted three of its articles (Moussa & Charlton, 2023).

While retractions “are essential to keep the scientific literature trustworthy” (Vuong, 2020, p. 149), a less severe tool than a retraction for maintaining the scientific literature’s credibility—a warning sign of sorts—is an expression of concern (EoC). According to Vaught et al. (2017, p.1), the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) formally introduced the term EoC as a standard for biomedical journals in 1997. According to the Council of Science Editors (2022, p. 73), an EoC “is a publication notice that is generally made by an editor to draw attention to possible problems, but it does not go so far as to retract or correct an article”. An EoC is usually issued when there are concerns about the integrity or accuracy of a previously published article, although those concerns in themselves are not serious enough to warrant a formal retraction at the time the concerns were raised (Teixeira da Silva & Dobránszki, 2017; Vaught et al., 2017).

EoCs are a relatively non-standardized type of editorial notice compared to retractions and “considerable differences in policy and practice remain between journals” (Vaught et al., 2017, p. 2). Even in terms of terminology, there is little agreement about how EoCs should be worded. Even though editorial expressions of concern, notices of concern, and publisher’s notes are other names for EoCs (Vaught et al., 2017, p. 1), in this paper, to avoid confusion, we refer to them as EoCs.

The aim of this paper was to assess the contexts and contents of EoCs in FT50 journals.

Why might EoCs be relevant to library and information science? We see two possibilities here. First, EoCs might distort or skew the use of information in work that is under scrutiny by virtue of the hesitation of scientists who may decide not to cite such work. Second, and as a function of the first reason, scientific information in papers to which an EoC is associated might not be entirely reliable, thereby impacting the integrity of downstream information that may be linked to, or rely on, it (Schneider et al., 2022). Librarians need to be able to identify an EoC and appreciate the reliability of information in that paper in order to assess potential impacts on the literature’s integrity due to citation.

## **IDENTIFYING EOCS IN FT50 JOURNALS**

Using the Retraction Watch database on 6 June 2023, and verified on 22 November 2023, a search using the subject combination “(B/T) Business-General OR (B/T) Business-Marketing” filtered for the notice type “expression of concern” revealed 37 items. After inspecting these 37 items, we identified three instances of EoCs published in three FT50 journals, namely *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes (OBHDP)*, *Journal of Accounting Research (JAR)*, and *Journal of Marketing (JM)*. The three EoCs in question are listed in Table 1. The oldest of these EoCs was published online on 24 April 2015 while the online publication date of the latest EoC was 20 August 2021.

## **WHAT PROMPTED THE THREE EOCS?**

Journal editors/publishers are prompted to publish EoCs in response to a variety of events (Noonan & Parrish, 2008). Examination of the content of the three EoCs revealed three

distinct prompting events. For the *OBHDP* article, the EoC was prompted by a complaint due to “the fit statistics reported in the article contain many errors”. The EoC provides no information about who voiced the complaint or when it was voiced. Concerns raised by an investigation and a report led by Bentley University in Massachusetts (USA) prompted the EoC for the *JAR* article. The report of the Bentley investigation is not about research misconduct of the two co-authors of the *JAR* article, but rather about a third person who provided them with survey data. As for the *JM* article, the EoC was issued following a third party contacting the journal suspecting data fabrication, “based on the identification of unusual patterns in three studies reported in the article”.

### **WHO ISSUED THE EOCS?**

For the *OBHDP* article, the EoC was issued by the then editor-in-chief. For the *JAR* article, the EoC was issued by the editors and the two co-authors. The *JM* EoC was issued, at the suggestion of the editor-in-chief, by the American Marketing Association (AMA), the association that owns *JM*.

### **WHAT HAPPENED TO THE THREE EOCS?**

None of these three EoCs has matured into a formal retraction, corrigendum, or withdrawal of the EoC. Though this lack of maturation is understandable for the *JM* EoC, which is relatively recent (825 days old), the *OBHDP* and *JAR* EoCs were issued more than seven years ago (Table 1). The lack of maturation of these EoCs into retractions, corrigenda, or withdrawals of the EoCs leaves the authors and readers of these three articles in a suspended state while they await a resolution. Some authors may experience stress or anxiety as a result of this uncertainty. The findings of the paper may be validated and confirmed, resolving the EoC, or the paper's validity or its loss of integrity may be confirmed, resulting in an erratum or retraction. Readers who wish to cite an article associated with an EoC may choose not to do so (Teixeira da Silva & Yamada, 2021).

### **HOW FREQUENTLY HAVE THE THREE ORIGINAL ARTICLES BEEN CITED?**

Using Clarivate’s Web of Science Core Collection (WoS-CC) on 22 November 2023, it was found that the *OBHDP*, *JAR*, and *JM* articles to which the three EoCs were associated have amassed 450, 113, and 18 citations, respectively. Table 2 shows that the three articles continue to receive citations despite the fact that EoCs have been associated with them.

### **ARE THERE CONCERNS ABOUT THE THREE EOCS?**

While searching WoS-CC, we found no indication that EoCs have been issued for these three articles, i.e., they are not visible to prospective users of these papers. However, the document type “Expression of Concern” is usually covered by WoS-CC. Moreover, the publisher of *OBHDP*, Elsevier, has not linked the EoC to the original article.<sup>1</sup> This is quite surprising coming from a prestigious journal<sup>2</sup> and a well-known publisher, both of whom are members

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S074959781000107X> (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

<sup>2</sup> See <https://publicationethics.org/members/organizational-behavior-and-human-decision-processes> (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). In its notes from a forum discussion of the topic of EoCs, COPE recommends that the original article be digitally linked to its EoC.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is highly likely that the majority of readers and citers are unaware of the EoC associated with the *OBHDP* article. This is a very likely explanation for why the *OBHDP* article is the most cited among the three questioned articles and why it continues to accumulate citations at an increasing rate (see Table 2).

The *JAR* EoC is quite strange (in our opinion) since the two co-authors of the *JAR* article have not mentioned in the acknowledgement section of the original article that they obtained survey data from a third person. Rather, they thanked the person “for arranging access to the executives who participated in [their] survey”. None of the original article’s 22 footnotes mention that the data were obtained from a third party. The phrase “our survey” is used repeatedly by the two co-authors throughout the *JAR* article. The EoC states, however, that “Section 4 of the [...] paper includes empirical analysis based on survey data obtained from” that third person. It is not clear why the authors did not provide, in the original article, clarity to the *JAR* editors about the source of their survey data. More intriguing is the fact that, in addition to the EoC, issue 4 of *JAR*’s volume 54 includes three retraction notices (or retraction statements) issued for three articles in which the first author of the paper for which this EoC was associated is the lead author or a co-author. We also note that the publisher (Wiley) has labeled the paper as being “retracted” on both the original article and EoC landing pages<sup>4</sup>, even though only an EoC has been issued. The author bylines of these three retracted articles include the name of the third person mentioned in the Bentley report. Another concern about the paper’s authorship could be raised: Why is that third person not listed in the author byline? Does providing data not qualify a person to be an author? At this junction of our paper, we feel that it is worth making a historical note regarding authorship of the *JAR* paper to justify our queries. Even though an authorship issue was not formally raised in the EoC, current (2014-2023) ICMJE authorship guidelines (ICMJE, 2023), which may or may not be applicable to journals in the fields of business and management, but might nonetheless be applicable to other Wiley journal titles<sup>5</sup>, notes that four clauses must be met in order for authorship to be merited. In that sense, the “data donor” would only satisfy a part of clause 1, namely “Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work”, but does not seem to satisfy clauses 2, 3, and 4. In our interpretation, as an external third party, we see this as insufficient grounds to merit authorship (i.e., this person is not a valid author) when using the 2014-2023 recommendations are used. We note that when the *JAR* EoC was issued, in 2015, the current ICMJE guidelines would have already been in place. However, when the original *JAR* article was published, in 2011, an older 3-clause version of the ICMJE recommendations existed in which valid authorship did not have to satisfy all three clauses, merely one of the three, as was suggested by “or”, as opposed to the current “AND” (Teixeira da Silva, 2011). In this case, that is, according to the ICMJE recommendations in 2011 (pre-2014 version), this person would have likely qualified for authorship.

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<sup>3</sup> See

[https://publicationethics.org/files/Notes%20from%20Forum%20Discussion%20Topic\\_Expressions%20of%20concern\\_final.pdf](https://publicationethics.org/files/Notes%20from%20Forum%20Discussion%20Topic_Expressions%20of%20concern_final.pdf) (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

<sup>4</sup> See <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1475-679X.12088> (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

<sup>5</sup> See <https://authorservices.wiley.com/ethics-guidelines/index.html#5> (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

**Table 1. Three expressions of concern (EoCs) in three FT50 journals**

Journal	Publisher	Original article's DOI	EoC DOI	Date of EoC online publication	Days since EoC issuance <sup>1</sup>	EoC initiator	EoC issuer
<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	SAGE Publishing	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242919841595">https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242919841595</a> (Published online: 23 April 2019)	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429211026311">https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429211026311</a>	20 August 2021	825	Third party	AMA
<i>Journal of Accounting Research</i>	Wiley	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-679X.2011.00430.x">https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-679X.2011.00430.x</a> (23 September 2011)	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-679X.12088">https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-679X.12088</a>	5 June 2015	3093	University-led investigation	JAR editors and authors
<i>Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes</i>	Elsevier	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2010.11.002">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2010.11.002</a> (8 December 2010)	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2015.04.004">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2015.04.004</a>	24 April 2015	3135	A complaint	OBHDP editor

DOI - digital object identifier

<sup>1</sup> Calculated on 22 November 2023, with <https://www.timeanddate.com/date/duration.html>

**Table 2. Citations collected by the three articles to which EoCs have been associated**

Journal	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 <sup>1</sup>
OBHDP	13	19	30	34	28	32	41	43	46	47	63	37
JAR	-	3	1	4	14	5	18	18	12	14	20	4
JM	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	6	3	5

<sup>1</sup> Citations until 22 November 2023

The *JM* EoC has triggered its own concerns among readers. Some of them described it as “the weirdest expression of concern [they] have ever read”.<sup>6</sup> Retraction Watch, the Center for Scientific Integrity’s official blog, featured on 23 August 2021, a post titled “Readers puzzle over marketing journal’s failure to retract”.<sup>7</sup> For some commentators, *JM*’s failure to retract that article and instead issuing an EoC was a matter of marketing (i.e., to preserve the prestigious status of *JM*). *JM*, the top-tier marketing journal established in 1936, has never retracted a paper. On PubPeer, a post-publication peer review site, readers commented on questionable effect sizes in the studies reported in that article.<sup>8</sup> We note that the lead author of that *JM* article saw one of their 2013 *JMR* articles retracted, on 27 May 2022.<sup>9</sup> *JMR* is one of five academic journals in AMA’s fleet. A 2013 *Marketing Letters*’ article by the same author was retracted, on 5 March 2016.<sup>10</sup> For the sake of background information, *JM* in 2021 salvaged a questionable article co-authored by a researcher who has had multiple retractions (Charlton, 2021). *JM* “corrected” that questionable article by removing the name of the author with multiple retractions and allowing their two co-authors to re-run the analyses, revise the manuscript, and re-publish it with a corrigendum (see volume 84, issue 6, pp. 130-143).<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this paper, we note that in the entire publication history of all 50 journals in the prestigious FT50, only three EoCs have been issued to date, in two cases, over seven years ago. None of these cases has been resolved, leaving readers and citing authors unclear as to the validity of those papers’ findings. We encourage the editors of these journals to revisit these cases of EoCs and seek a resolution.<sup>12</sup> We noticed that the concerns raised in these three EoCs are about data anomalies and data integrity. These EoCs could have been avoided if data availability policies for submissions to these journals had been in place. Unfortunately, after reviewing the current author/submission guidelines of these three FT50 journals, we have found that neither *OBHDP*<sup>13</sup>, *JAR*<sup>14</sup>, nor *JM*<sup>15</sup> has a data availability policy in place. Other FT50 journals, however, such as the *American Economic Review*<sup>16</sup> and the *Quarterly Journal*

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://sage.altmetric.com/details/112102997/twitter> (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

<sup>7</sup> See <https://retractionwatch.com/2021/08/23/readers-puzzle-over-marketing-journals-failures-to-retract/> (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

<sup>8</sup> See <https://pubpeer.com/publications/FD67AA4683BA301389F29245611CBF> (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

<sup>9</sup> See <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00222437221101398> (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

<sup>10</sup> See <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11002-016-9401-6> (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

<sup>11</sup> See <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0022242920936653> (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

<sup>12</sup> For example, on 8 June 2023, the editors of the *Journal of Consumer Research* issued an EoC for a 2012 article, which matured into a retraction notice on 29 October 2023; it only took them 144 days to retract it (see <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucad037>).

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.elsevier.com/journals/organizational-behavior-and-human-decision-processes/0749-5978/guide-for-authors> (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

<sup>14</sup> See <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/1475679x/homepage/forauthors.html> (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

<sup>15</sup> See <https://journals.sagepub.com/author-instructions/JMX> (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.aeaweb.org/journals/aer/about-aer/editorial-policy> (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

of *Economics*,<sup>17</sup> have data availability policies that state that papers will be published only if the data (and code) used in the analysis are clearly and precisely documented, and access to the data (and code) is not exclusive to the authors. These three journals, as well as the organizations that support them (AMA for *JM* and The Chookaszian Accounting Research Center for *JAR*), should revise their editorial policies to make data availability mandatory. We also urge Elsevier, the publisher of *OBHDP* and a COPE member, to digitally link the EoC to the original article so that readers and citing authors are aware of it.

It should also be noted that the three FT50 journals under scrutiny (i.e., *JAR*, *JM*, and *OBHDP*) were recently analyzed using the AI-driven Academic Journal Predatory Checking System (AJPCS) devised by Chen et al. (2023), and were classified as “suspected predatory” journals (see Teixeira da Silva et al., 2023, pp. 15-21). Is AJPCS sensitive to the aforesaid as well as any other questionable publishing practices by these three journals (which were revealed by Teixeira da Silva et al., 2023, pp. 5-6), and is this one possible reason why it classified them all as “suspected predatory” journals?

Overall, librarians play a crucial role in identifying papers with EoCs and assessing the reliability of information within those papers. When confronted with an EoC, librarians must be able to identify it and comprehend the implications for the scientific literature's integrity. Librarians can make informed decisions about the inclusion or exclusion of papers with EoCs in their collections and guide researchers in accessing trustworthy and dependable information by evaluating the reliability and potential impacts of such papers.

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<sup>17</sup> See [https://academic.oup.com/qje/pages/Data\\_Policy](https://academic.oup.com/qje/pages/Data_Policy) (last accessed: 22 November 2023)

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