

Statement to ASCE Executive Committee

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Before proceeding to the summary of why the authors' appeal was declined, and the limited role I played in the decision letter written by Dr. Kaspar Willam that I cosigned, I would like to express my deep respect of ASCE, and how grateful I am that this august organization has provided me with opportunities to contribute to the Civil Engineering profession as Editor of the *Journal of Engineering Mechanics (JEM)* and as President of the Engineering Mechanics Institute (EMI). As I stated during my induction ceremony, I never imagined, as the first member of my family to graduate from college, that one day I would be elected Distinguished Member of what I consider to be the most prestigious Civil Engineering organization in the world. The day I received the phone call from Executive Director Smith informing me of this great honor was one of the happiest of my life.

This case is associated with a Discussion related to a publication by Drs. Le and Bazant that Dr. Johns and Mr. Szamboti (the authors) submitted to *JEM* in 2011. At that time Dr. Willam was sole Editor of *JEM*, and after the standard peer-review process he declined it in May 2012 "**for technical reasons**". Two important points must be noted and remembered; (1) the Discussion was not declined as being "out of scope" and (2) I was not co-Editor or Editor at that time and therefore played **no role in the decision**.

In June 2012 the authors appealed the original decision to Dr. Willam, who as sole Editor initiated his evaluation of the appeal. My editorial role started soon after the EMI Conference held at the University of Notre Dame (June 17-20, 2012). At that time I served on EMI's Board of Governors, and when we met at the Conference Dr. Willam informed us that he had fallen (way) behind on the review process of a relatively large number of papers. The authors' appeal was one of approximately three dozen papers that had been under review for (if I remember correctly) as long as several years. The Board asked me if I was willing to serve with Dr. Willam as co-Editors, with the agreement that; (1) Dr. Willam would be responsible for completing the reviews of all submissions that had been assigned to him up to that time, (2) I would be responsible for all future submissions, and (3) I would serve as sole Editor once Dr. Willam completed the reviews of all the papers for which he was responsible. I accepted and served as co-Editor/Editor from 2012-2021.

I was still on the University of Minnesota faculty when I became co-Editor of *JEM*. While there I received an email from one of the authors asking me why a decision had not yet been made on the appeal. At almost the same time that author copied me on an email to the other author, wherein he speculated that the appeal was being stalled by the Editors because they did not want the appeal to be published, and that they were hoping that the authors would give up and submit

their work to another journal. I replied by stating that copying me on an email with statements that were not true was inappropriate (the author in turn replied that he had inadvertently copied me), and then explained and apologized on behalf of the *Journal* that the appeal was not being deliberately stalled, but instead that their submission was but one of many on which Dr. Willam had fallen behind. I also told the author that I planned to see Dr. Willam at the EMI Conference we were both attending August 4-7, 2013 at Northwestern University, that I would discuss the situation with him and urge him to make a decision on the appeal. I did precisely that, and Dr. Willam completed the review and declined the appeal (soon after) in August 2013.

The decision letter was written by Dr. Willam, and he submitted it himself on the *Journal's* online portal. He informed me that he had decided to stand by the original decision to decline the appeal for **technical reasons**. During our conversation I told him that as sole Editor I would not send out for review any future submissions associated with forensic analyses of the collapse of the Twin Towers, because I believe *JEM* is not the correct "venue" for them. He asked me whether I would agree to include a statement in the decision letter to give the authors a "heads up" that they should not submit any additional manuscripts on the subject in the future, and I agreed. Because the decision about future submissions was mine (see footnote*) he suggested and I agreed that we should co-sign the decision to decline the authors' appeal. It is very important to note, as I explained over the past decade (and communicated by the staff member(s) of the ASCE Journals office), that the appeal was **declined for technical reasons**, and not, as the authors have expressed in their complaints to the EMI Board of Governors, the ASCE Committee on Professional Conduct, (CPC) and Committee on Publications Ethics (COPE), for being "out of scope". I also note that from 2012-2021 I held steadfast on my decision to not consider submissions associated with forensic analyses of the collapse of the Twin Towers, as evidenced by the fact that I refused to consider for review a paper that Dr. Bazant wanted to submit on that topic. In retrospect, it may have been better if I did not ask Dr. Willam to write that statement about **future** submissions. Then the "out of scope" issue would not have been raised at all, and I would not have co-signed the decision letter (because Dr. Willam made the decision to decline the appeal based on **technical reasons**).

In summary, none of my actions as Editor were inappropriate, and certainly unethical. I dealt with the authors the same way I did with the thousands of other authors who submitted manuscripts to *JEM* during my tenure as Editor; with respect, serious consideration, honesty and transparency. The authors' complaints against me and Dr. Willam were considered by the EMI Board of Governors, the ASCE CPC, and COPE, all of which decided that these complaints have no merit (see footnote **). I hope the ASCE Executive Committee will concur with their decisions.

Footnote*

The authors' appeal was declined for technical reasons. But a few words about a journal editor's role are warranted, since this topic was addressed by the groups referenced above. Journals compete with each other to publish high-impact papers. The editors play a critical role in

achieving the goal of increased submissions of high-quality manuscripts, while reducing the number of published papers that prove to be relatively insignificant to their audience. Therefore most editors do not send out for review all submissions. If a submission does not offer promise as a significant contribution to the field, it receives what some journals refer to as a “desk rejection.” My rough guess is that between 2012-2021 I “handled” approximately 5000 manuscripts, and declined without review hundreds of them (approximately 10%). The following quote is what I write to the authors when I decide their paper will not be sent for full review. Not a single author who received a “desk rejection” complained about the decision.

“JEM is receiving many more submissions than it can process through a full review in a timely manner. Therefore only those manuscripts that offer promise for significant impact and interest to the JEM audience are being sent for full review, after an initial review. This paper should be submitted to another journal. The decision does not reflect a judgment on the quality of the work.”

Footnote**

There has been a large amount of correspondence between the authors, myself, EMI’s Board of Governors, the ASCE CPC, and COPE. I do not want to re-hash its content. But it may be useful here to include what I consider the most important portions of COPE’s decision letter to the authors, which make it abundantly clear that the Editors and *Journal* behaved appropriately.

“Dear Dr. Johns,

... Based on the information we received, we consider that the journal followed an adequate process to follow up on the issues raised, as they provided further clarification on the grounds for the rejection and on the editor involved in the handling of the submission... We acknowledge that you disagree with the editorial decision for rejection but our review focuses on procedural matters and we cannot comment on individual editorial decisions, as those lie with the editor. Based on the information we have received, we consider that the journal followed an adequate process in this case, and that they have agreed to take suitable steps to address the areas where process updates are required.”