

An open letter to the membership of the American Chemical Society

This letter is meant to inform the membership of the American Chemical Society (ACS) about the detrimental changes that have been made to the operations of *Chemical and Engineering News (C&EN)*. We, a group of current and former *C&EN* Advisory Board members, have recently been made aware of a major change to the focus and direction of the mandate of *C&EN*. As board members, we take it as our responsibility to inform the broader ACS membership of the potential impact of these changes on *C&EN* moving forward. We also call on Albert Horvath, the new CEO of ACS, and Susan Morrissey, Vice President of the Communications Division and Publisher of *C&EN*, to reinstate safeguards to *C&EN*'s editorial independence.

As members of ACS, we have greatly benefited from the expert journalism and reporting that we find within the pages of *C&EN*. We have come to expect and rely on *C&EN* as our source for quality information when important things happen in the world of chemistry. Over the years, the *C&EN* journalists have been recognized for their talent and efforts with competitive national awards that typically go to people working at much larger journalistic institutions. *C&EN* has always punched above its weight and delivered a product that has become to many the most important benefit of membership in the American Chemical Society. Along with the people at *C&EN*, the bedrock of this quality is editorial independence. Based upon the current changes made to *C&EN* by the leadership of the ACS, that editorial independence has been revoked.

In March of 2021, ACS undertook a major organizational restructuring. Part of that restructuring involved the creation of a consolidated Communications Division which would oversee external affairs, advertising and sales, marketing, web strategy and operations, webinars, and *C&EN*. Prior to this, *C&EN* was housed within the Publications Division, placing budget oversight at Governing Board for Publication while a separate Editorial Board had oversight for its journalistic activities. Both of these oversight panels were in place to protect the editorial independence of *C&EN* from any undue influence. In the current organization, those safeguards have been removed.

As it stands the Communications Director, who also serves as Publisher of *C&EN*, has full oversight of the budget and journalistic practice of the magazine. This reorganization precipitated a flurry of changes within *C&EN*. Most importantly, many of our seasoned journalists understood the ramifications to editorial independence and sought new employment. The *C&EN* Advisory Board was not consulted about these changes at the time – a cause for immediate concern. Several of the advisory board members pressed ACS leadership (CEO Thomas Connelly and *C&EN* Publisher Susan Morrissey) for clarification on what the reorganization meant for editorial independence. We received a wholly unsatisfactory assertion that *C&EN* operations would be no different than before the reorganization. Importantly, no details were provided in terms of the mechanism by which editorial independence would be preserved.

After these communications, some advisory board members decided to resign their positions while others of us remained to evaluate *C&EN*'s new direction. Many journalists and editors departed. Most notable, at the time, was the decision by Amanda Yarnell, *C&EN*'s managing editor, to seek new employment. Through it all, the professional staff at *C&EN*, led by Editor-in-Chief, Bibiana Campos Seijo, continued to produce a magazine with reporting characterized by its thoroughness and integrity. This was done with dwindling support from ACS. As an example, the staff of *C&EN* has lost 10.5 full-time staff positions over the last 8 years. The new organization of *C&EN* within the broader communications division of the ACS and apparent conflicts of interest with editorial independence has made it particularly difficult to refill the positions. That ACS membership did not observe any changes to the quality of the product generated by *C&EN* is a testament to the talent and dedication of the staff.

Over the last few days, the Advisory Board's concern for the magazine's editorial independence has deepened. It appears that ACS News (awards, governance, happenings, etc.) will take priority over news from the chemical enterprise. Dr. Campos Seijo and senior editor Dr. Jyllian Kemsley were fired on Monday, December 12th. In a message to the Advisory Board, *C&EN*'s publisher stated, "This reorganization will better position *C&EN* for the future, allowing it to strengthen its focus on its role as the *official organ for the American Chemical Society* (emphasis ours)." These changes are made despite years of focus group studies showing that, among the different

types of stories *C&EN* reports, readers prefer science coverage, followed by business, policy, and education content. ACS News has always been the lowest priority in these focus groups.

For many, *C&EN* is the primary benefit to ACS membership. We rely on their journalists for their deep insight into chemistry and chemical engineering and their exemplary journalistic standards. There is no other magazine that covers the chemical enterprise quite like *C&EN*. It is required reading for anyone whose career interfaces with chemistry, the central science. Losing *C&EN* to a change in editorial focus will be a tremendous blow for all of us. *This wholesale mission change is one that we cannot stand behind.*

The ACS executives will cite the costs of running the magazine as one reason for this change. It is true; our membership fees do not cover the activities of *C&EN*. The profits generated by ACS Publications and Chemical Abstract Service subsidize much of the work within the broader mission of the ACS, including *C&EN*. These profits are used to justify the salaries of the top executives, as well. Our membership within this organization gives these activities the non-profit status that props up all of this. And what do we get out of our membership? The major member benefit of ACS is receiving our subscription to *C&EN*. What good is that subscription if *C&EN* primarily becomes a newsletter of ACS activities?

We call on the executives at the American Chemical Society to immediately put a halt to the editorial changes to *C&EN* and refocus on what ACS members have come to expect: quality journalism on the important stories that affect the chemical enterprise.

Signed, current and former *C&EN* Advisory Board or Editorial Board members

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