Essay criticizing efforts to increase diversity in organic synthesis deleted after backlash from chemists

Personal essay in Angewandte Chemie points to deeper problems within the community, chemists say

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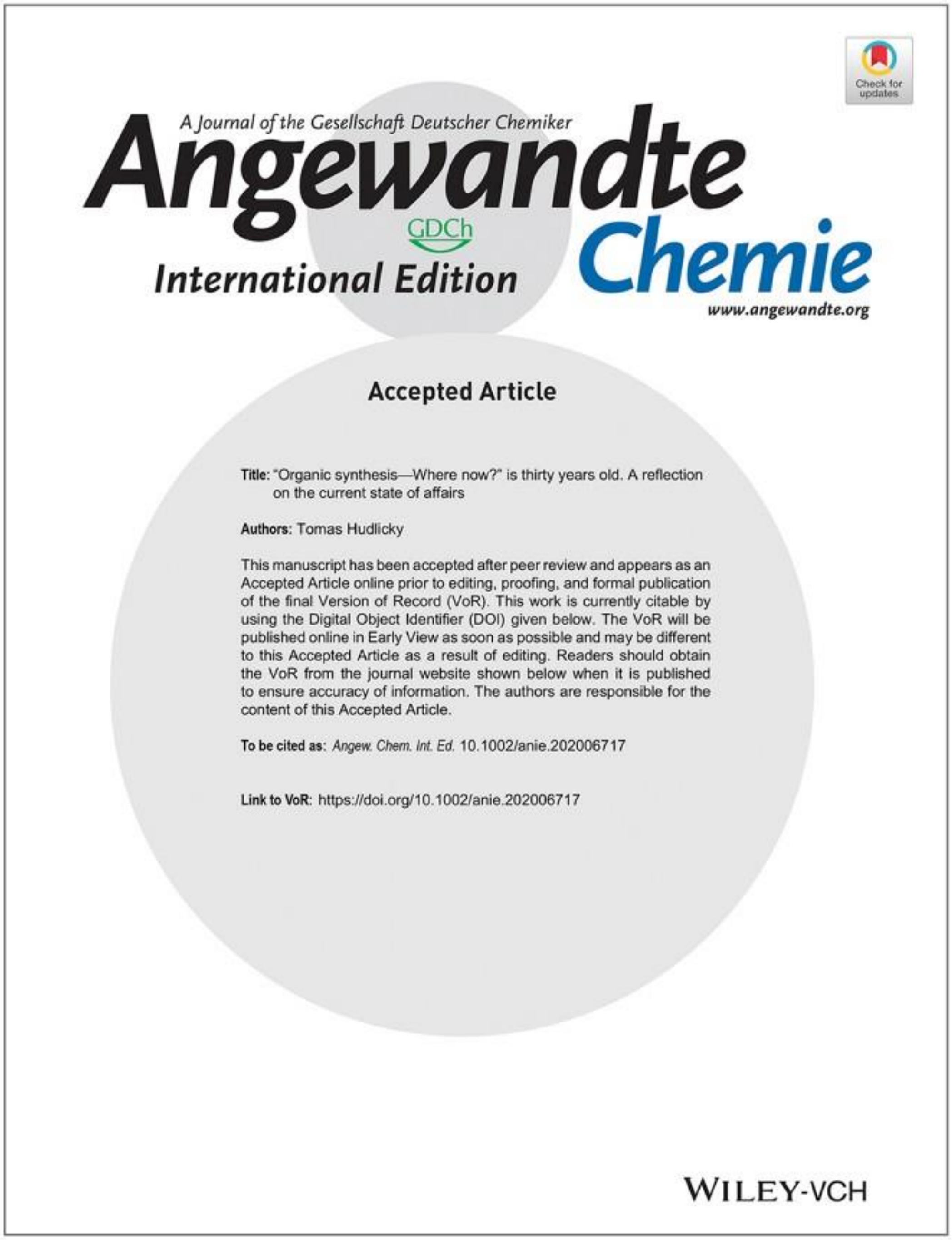
https://cendigitalmagazine.acs.org/2020/06/11/essay-criticizing-efforts-to-increase-diversity-in-organic-synthesis-deleted-after-backlash-from-chemists-3/content.html?utm_email+=35A4845845452414546C14C961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Accepted Article

Title: "Organic synthesis—Where now?" is thirty years old. A reflection on the current state of affairs

Authors: Tomas Hudlicky

This manuscript has been accepted after peer review and appears as an Accepted Article online prior to editing, proofing, and formal publication of the final Version of Record (VoR). This work is currently citable by using the Digital Object Identifier (DOI) given below. The VoR will be published online in Early View as soon as possible and may be different to this Accepted Article as a result of editing. Readers should obtain the VoR from the journal website shown below when it is published to ensure accuracy of information. The authors are responsible for the content of this Accepted Article.

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WILEY-VCH

Hudlický's essay has now been removed from *Angewandte Chemie's* website.
Angew. Chem., Int. Ed.

A June 5 essay on the state of organic synthesis sparked immediate outcry from chemists due to the author's criticism of efforts to increase representation of women and underrepresented groups in the field. The journal that published the essay, *Angewandte Chemie, International Edition*, has since removed the article from its website and suspended two of its editors, while it investigates the editorial process that led to the essay's publication. Several members of the journal's international advisory board have also resigned in protest over the essay.

The piece, written by Tomáš Hudlický of Brock University, reflects on factors that influence how the field of organic synthesis continues to develop. One of the factors that Hudlický discusses is workforce diversity. He argues that efforts to promote diversity have prioritized inclusion of certain groups of people at the expense of meritocracy.

After immediate and intense criticism of the piece by chemists on social media, the journal quickly deleted the essay from its website. The digital object identifier (DOI), a universal code used to identify published articles, first sent readers to a "page not found" error message, and now redirects to the journal's home page.

Hudlický
Guacamoleman/Wikimedia

Angewandte Chemie is the official journal of the German Chemical Society (GDCh) and is published by Wiley-VCH. Since June 5, the journal, its publisher, and GDCh have released a series of statements detailing steps taken in response to the essay's publication. As C&EN went to print, the publisher has established an interim editor-in-chief committee made up of four employees from the editorial department of Wiley-VCH. This committee will take full editorial responsibility for *Angewandte Chemie*. Wiley-VCH has not confirmed the status of Editor in Chief Neville Compton at the journal. It has confirmed that two editors involved in the essay's publication are suspended and that the referees who reviewed the essay will no longer be used as peer reviewers for the journal.

On June 8, 16 chemists jointly announced they were resigning from *Angewandte Chemie*'s international advisory board. In the statement, the chemists denounced "the essay and the process by which it was published" before adding that their resignation "provides the journal with an opportunity to reconstitute the Board in a way that reflects our broader community and society." One of the 16, Cathleen Crudden, a chemist at Queen's University, had originally announced her resignation from the board on June 5. She says she felt she could no longer have her name associated with the journal. "In addition to this one instance, *Angewandte Chemie* has shown a significant lack of leadership in terms of addressing issues related to equity, so I felt it was time for me to remove my name from their board," she wrote in a statement emailed to C&EN. Chemists criticizing the essay say that the opinions expressed by Hudlický point to much wider problems within the chemistry community, which has failed to adequately address overt and covert discrimination against chemists who are members of underrepresented groups. "Fixing this is not about removing one article," says Jen Heemstra, a chemist at Emory University and author of C&EN's Office Hours column. "It is about dismantling the pervasive, toxic culture that selects for and promotes these values."

"As an experienced recruiter and a leader of a large group of chemists in the pharmaceutical sector, I can tell you that these views [expressed by Hudlický] are not only factually wrong, they represent the exact types of biases that have long plagued the field of organic chemistry," says L.-C. Campeau, executive director, head of Process Chemistry and Discovery Process Chemistry at Merck & Co. "In our own work, we've benefited immensely from a more inclusive culture and increased diversity leading to more creative solutions to the unprecedented scientific problems that we solve every day in our quest to improve human health."

Hudlický feels that his essay had been taken out of context and he stands by what he wrote, adding that he has received emails of support as well as criticism since the article was published and then deleted. He points out the diversity of his own research group, and explains that he is not against diversity, instead he is arguing against preferential hiring of one group over another. Hudlický confirms that the article had gone through peer review and that *Angewandte Chemie* had not informed him before it removed his article from the journal's site. He describes attempts to destroy his career and those of the editors who handled his essay as going "beyond censorship." He argues that his article should not have been deleted from the literature record and instead the journal should have invited chemists to write rebuttals.

"The real tragedy is that this article does not represent an isolated opinion," says Andy Cooper, an organometallic chemist at the University of Liverpool. "Most of us have seen or experienced this kind of stuff up close, and it needs to change."

The surprise, says César A. Urbina-Blanco, a senior postdoc at Ghent University, is that the views made it through peer review and were published by the journal. The hard work that chemistry needs to do, he says, involves looking at where these attitudes survive, something that has too often fallen to those who are most affected by them. “Minorities are the only ones starting these conversations when we shouldn’t have to be,” he says. “Academia is where we belong, but it’s not us who need to change.”

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