Statement on the Angewandte Essay Affair
Tomas Hudlicky, July 2020

Earlier this year I submitted an essay to Angewandte Chemie International Edition entitled “Organic Synthesis—Where now?” is thirty years old. A reflection on the current state of affairs. It was to be a tribute to Dieter Seebach and to his 1990 review,¹ which greatly influenced my own research program and my writing about organic synthesis. My essay was peer-reviewed, accepted, and subsequently posted on the Angewandte website on June 4, 2020. Within a few hours, it had already attracted the attention of many people on Twitter, who condemned the content of the essay, the journal for publishing it, and me for writing it. It rapidly became a full-fledged storm. Sixteen members of the International Advisory Board resigned in protest. It is not clear whether this action was spontaneous or solicited.

On June 6, editorial staff of Angewandte removed the accepted article from its website without a retraction notice and suspended the two editors involved in the review process, countermanding its prior acceptance. They also investigated the two referees, who were deleted from the journal database and will not be asked to review papers for the journal in the future.

The condemnation begun on Twitter continued on various blogs, in chemistry journals, and in statements issued by various chemical societies. Angewandte issued a statement of apology on the journal website for publishing my essay. Because Angewandte took down the paper so quickly, it is not clear how many people actually read the article before condemning it solely on the basis of other tweets.

On June 7, Brock University’s Provost and Vice-President Academic, Greg Finn, publicly issued “An Open Letter to the University Community”² in which he denounced me personally for the opinions I had expressed, contrary to Brock University’s freedom of expression policy. On June 9, the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) sent a letter to Brock’s President defending me³ and on June 10, the Brock University Faculty Union (BUFA) made a response in my defense.⁴ The National Association of Scholars (NAS) also issued a strong statement to Brock’s Provost.

The media reacted to these actions almost immediately. Brock University has received much negative publicity. Many statements in defense of my right to freedom of expression can be found in a compilation by Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS).⁵

What is troubling in this entire affair is that social media rage led to the intimidation of the executive staff of a major journal, attacked me personally, induced Brock University into issuing a strong moral condemnation of my views (and my values), with threats of taking further action against me. That Brock’s open letter was posted on the Brock homepage (and can still be found on the university website) greatly damaged my standing not only within but also outside Brock community.

I stand by the views I wished to express in the essay, some of which are common knowledge, while others were duly cited from primary and secondary sources. I will demand that Brock retract their Open Letter and issue a public apology in a timely manner, as per the terms of a grievance filed on my behalf by the Brock University Faculty Union (BUFA). In view of some apparent misunderstandings and misinterpretations generated by the essay, I am planning to edit the now “disappeared” document and publish it in revised form for the permanent record.

It is tragic to see that in several Western democratic societies, open discourse and debate can apparently be easily superseded by censorship, persecution, and condemnation, propagated by social media, reacted to by Brock University, all contrary to the norms of legal process and the upholding of freedom of speech. The appearance and pursuit in recent years of certain new and politically correct ideologies has led to the establishment of a society in which any opposition or any dissenting opinion regarding the new norms are silenced and punished rather than discussed. This is a very dangerous trend and one that may even evolve further into a new cultural revolution.

I realize that, in the current charged climate, some of my phrasing has led to misinterpretations. Although the essay could have provided more context regarding some of the mis interpreted statements (e.g., the short and
slightly reworded quotation from Polyani referring to the transfer of tacit knowledge), it is also the case that those who condemned the essay and slandered me should have read the content more carefully and not jumped to politically motivated conclusions. I elaborate on some of these points below.

The executives and editors at Angewandte Chemie and other journals, as well as the vocal chemical societies, should very carefully consider that their activities are damaging to our democratic establishment. They must all now either be honest in stating that they believe in censorship or they must change their current ways of dealing with opposing viewpoints.

Discussion of the opinions expressed in the essay

The essay is a short but well-documented paper—just over seven pages of analysis, followed by three pages of supporting notes and 22 references to the literature. It contains discussion of eight factors that influence or contribute to the evolution of the art and craft of organic synthesis. These factors, in the order in which they were discussed, are: impact of new technology, impact of information technology, diversity of workforce, integrity of the literature, transference of skills, universities as corporations, competition for resources, and diversity of research options. Some members of the chemical community reacted strongly to the discussion of three of these factors.

I will point out that my article did NOT contain anything that would qualify as unethical or unacceptable speech or conduct, as described in codes of conduct of many learned societies and certainly in the policies of Brock University and other institutions. The three contentious items were:

(1) **Diversity of workforce.** I expressed an opinion that hiring should be based strictly on the candidate’s merit and not based on the candidate’s identification with any particular group. With hindsight, I think that I could have worded some of the issues in a clearer and more diplomatic way, even though such effort may still not have diminished adverse reactions on social media. For example, updating the original version of Figure 1 to include an additional blue arrow to show positive influence of diversity of workforce on the field of synthesis may have mitigated some of the misinterpretations of my words.

I do not oppose diversity in the workforce and did not oppose it in the essay. I opposed preferential treatment of ANY group over another as it constitutes a zero-sum game: if a special advantage is offered to one group, another group is unfairly disadvantaged. If a group of candidates are similarly qualified for a position, however, I do think that someone from a disadvantaged group should be offered the position. It is only when someone who is considerably less qualified is selected for preferential treatment that I object. While acknowledging that structural inequalities and systemic bias exist to the detriment of some groups and, in the end, to the discipline itself, I believe that the best way forward to diversify university faculties in the medium to long term is to hire the most meritorious candidates who will best be able to train and mentor a diverse, inclusive group of next-generation scientists and scholars.

If one examines the photo of my current group on my Brock webpage, one will immediately realise that I am not against diversity at all. I focus only on scientific excellence. Only when diversity of opinions is allowed can diversity of workforce unfold its potential—through open discussion and debate, not by condemnation or silencing of differing views. Perhaps some of my staunchest critics amongst scientists should examine their own group websites.

(2) **Transference of skills.** The master–apprentice adage from Michael Polanyi was duly referenced in the text and was paraphrased in the context of passing skills from one generation to the next. Polanyi’s language of uncritical submission is fraught with implications in today’s world, especially without its full context. The full quotation is as follows:

> To learn by example is to submit to authority. You follow your master because you trust his manner of doing things even when you cannot analyse and account in detail for its effectiveness. By watching the master and emulating his efforts in the presence of his example, the apprentice unconsciously picks up the rules of the art, including those which are not explicitly known to the master himself. These hidden rules
can be assimilated only by a person who surrenders himself to that extent uncritically to the imitation of another. A society which wants to preserve a fund of personal knowledge must submit to tradition. \(^8\)

It was unfortunate that *Angewandte* posted the essay at the height of the outrage and protests over horrific and unnecessary killings by police of black individuals in the United States. The master–apprentice relationship was taken out of context. That any reader could conflate the “master–apprentice” quotation with slavery or abuse is, at best, a stretch, or at worst, willfully dishonest. The opinions that I stated with respect to the mentor–student relationship were grossly distorted and taken out of context by my detractors. The word “master” in this sense—a person who has mastered their field—applies to great artists, craftspeople, musicians, scientists, and others.

(3) **Integrity of the literature.** My mention of fraudulent papers from China was also duly referenced from primary sources and was in no way intended to reflect on scientists in general from that (or any other) country. I simply discussed existing established data sources that critiqued lack of ethical publication practices. Published only this month (July 2020) is another article that criticizes the fraudulent publication practices.\(^9\) Wherever there is a monetary incentive for the simple act of publishing a paper, the quality of the research, its integrity, and ethics may well ultimately suffer. Anywhere in the world that scientists are put under similar pressure, the outcome is likely to be the same.

Reactions to the other five topics were mild by comparison, likely because these were not related to the sensitive societal issues and trends that are prevalent at the present time. My critique of excessive use of internet and smartphones (their influence on focus and attention span), however, elicited some adverse comments, as did my discussion of new technologies available in organic chemistry today. The issues of addiction to social media and of reduced attention have been actively discussed by psychologists and neurologists.\(^10\)

**The aftermath**

Like many of my critics, the Brock University’s Provost took what I said out of context and expressed his opinion without scholarly dissection and rational analysis. He sent a letter to the Brock community (by email and by posting it in *Brock News* on Brock’s website, where it still remains) without the courtesy of discussing the matter with me first to clarify any misunderstanding or misinterpretation. It demeaned my person within the Brock community as well as outside and has been found to be libelous. Rather than engaging in a debate and a rebuttal of my opinions, he resorted to public condemnation based not on what was actually in the essay but what people were saying on social media, most of whom had not read the essay themselves but reacted only to other people’s posts.

The overt condemnation of my opinions and my person by *Angewandte*, Thieme, the Canadian Society for Chemistry, the American Chemical Society, *Nature*, and other entities is misplaced. That *Angewandte* staff removed, without a retraction notice, an accepted article that had gone through diligent peer review, suspended editors, and threatened to investigate the referees, amounts to blatant censorship as well as a potential breach of contract between the journal and the author. It is a truly frightening trend reminiscent of the actions of too many authoritarian governments during the 20\(^{th}\) century. In an open society, not one that responds unquestioningly to social media, the article would, and should, have sparked a lively debate. Why publish an opinion piece unless it challenges the orthodoxy? If all that gets published conforms to politically correct norms of the times, why publish at all? The current chill on academic freedom is not far removed from the unfortunate events of May 10, 1933, with the burning of libraries of “subversive” books or books written by “undesirable” authors.

Another consequence of this affair was the cancellation of a special issue of *Synthesis*, which had been planned to commemorate my recent 70\(^{th}\) birthday later this year, with more than 40 scientists invited to contribute. The editor and the editorial board of that journal have cancelled that issue, again reacting to the Twitter comments and distancing themselves and the journal from any association with me personally and professionally, thereby in effect supporting censorship and engaging in persecution.
Recently, Professor Douglas Taber, reporting in his publication *Organic Chemistry Highlights*, made a reference to some chemistry that I published in the *Journal of the American Chemical Society* in 2019. It is concerning that he removed the mention from that issue after he apparently received requests from chemists who were outraged that my published chemistry was to be included. This is no longer just censorship of my opinions but an orchestrated attempt to undermine my career. It is also a gross politicalization of science and a successful demonstration of what will happen to any critical voice in the future. It is a demonstration of power against freedom of expression, redefining the borders of what can be discussed in the hard sciences. I would hope that the chemical societies and journals will reflect on their public statements and come to my defense rather than joining the Twitter mob in condemnation of my person as well as those who voiced their support on my behalf.

Finally, some of my current and former international collaborators and colleagues have been cautioned by their respective chemical societies to dissociate themselves from me by, for example, not co-authoring reviews, chapters, or chemistry papers with me. Such action amounts to a purge of my name and all who may be connected to it. This has absolutely no place in any civilized society!

**The future**

Since the issues discussed in the essay are considered important by those on both sides of the issues, publication of an edited version of the essay can only serve as a stimulus to a much-needed constructive and civilized debate. On all eight topics, I was outspoken in my concern for the future of my discipline and in my defense of good science. Academic science can only flourish in a well-administered university where due attention is paid to teaching and suitable protocols exist for peer review and publication of scientific findings. The effort to increase diversity in the chemical (and other) sciences is a noble one indeed, provided it is done ethically and correctly and not by counterproductive preferential treatment of one group over another without due attention to merit, with the dreadful establishment of a quota system or demands for “correct thought” when filling positions, silencing of dissenting opinions (diversity!) and suppression of free speech.

In the fullness of time, perhaps, the community (and the editors and executives of the journals in question) will reflect on their actions and return to a model of debate rather than censorship and persecution of those who express an opinion that is not consistent with the current climate.

In closing, it will be interesting to see what future impact my essay will have. I remain curious about its discussion, and I would have been glad to see some of the blogs being continued instead of being shut down after the initially prevalent opinion had been recorded. It will be interesting to see whether freedom of expression and rational debate will be allowed to flourish again or whether the icy winds of Orwellian thoughtcrime will negate the Renaissance.

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3. Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT): [CAUT letter to President Fearon](https://www.bufa.ca/bufa-executive-statement-on-academic-freedom)
4. Brock University Faculty Union (BUFA) statement: [https://www.bufa.ca/bufa-executive-statement-on-academic-freedom](https://www.bufa.ca/bufa-executive-statement-on-academic-freedom)
5. Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS) summary of media articles and protest letters to Brock University, and other material in my defense: [https://www.safs.ca/issuescases/case.php?case=brock-chemistry](https://www.safs.ca/issuescases/case.php?case=brock-chemistry)
7. [https://brocku.ca/tomas-hudlicky/group-members/](https://brocku.ca/tomas-hudlicky/group-members/)