



Chasing the Great White Whale

Since the inception of *Interface* in 1992, I have written every column published in “Pennington Corner” except the last one, which was authored by Mary Yess, ECS Deputy Executive Director. Mary authored the last column

because I was on a sabbatical for several months chasing the great white whale all over the world. I am referring metaphorically to Herman Melville’s story, *Moby Dick*, about the great white whale and Captain Ahab’s passionate chase around the globe to catch this mighty creature. After 29 years of service to ECS, I packed my bags, cut my hair, and armed with a few insightful books, I traveled and contemplated my future role in the science of electrochemistry. My great white whale has been the ECS mission, which I have pursued for nearly two decades as Executive Director, and I began to wonder whether the chase was coming to an end. We accomplished a great deal at ECS and the 2009 Annual Report published in the summer issue of *Interface* was entitled “Better than Ever,” to acknowledge that last year was the most successful in our 108-year history. I thought that perhaps we had caught the whale and the Captain’s work was done.

I never found the answer during my time away, but upon my return to ECS I was inspired to see the great white whale breach again, and she was an awesome sight, challenging us to take up the chase. She has breached because the Society’s mission has been challenged by the decline in integrity and quality of the publications content in the technical fields that we serve. ECS is the steward of electrochemical and solid-state science and technology, which is an increasingly important role now that commercial enterprises dominate scientific publishing and stymie the advancement of our science. The reality in the new millennium is that scientific publishing can but should not be a money-making proposition. There are many outstanding journals being published in our scientific discipline, but we are the lone nonprofit professional society and steward of the science.* Professional societies who have partnered with commercial entities have chosen to relinquish their stewardship role for a more lucrative business model offered through commercial publishers. This is tragic because commercial publishers are motivated by profit, and profit objectives inhibit dissemination, which ultimately slows the advancement of science. John Ewing, the former Executive Director of the American Mathematical Society, had this to say about this model, “We [Scientific-Technical-Medical

(STM) Societies] are failing in our primary responsibility to serve our disciplines and our members when we give away our publishing operations to commercial publishers.”

The bottom line decision making of the commercial model has led to exorbitant pricing of the journals, proliferation of low quality journals, and cost cuts in the editorial process in order to generate higher profit margins. The editorial peer review process is the buttress of scientific advancement, and while other journals in our field are weakening the review process, ECS is planning to double the number of leading scientists and publication professionals involved in our review process, which will also double our editorial costs. We also are holding fast on our prices to individuals for access to our Digital Library and making only modest increases for institutional subscribers. High prices represent an obstacle in the dissemination of information and we cannot accept a situation where multibillion dollar corporations, who set high prices to generate large profits, determine what scientific research will cost and what results are publishable. Our ultimate goal is to create open access to the ECS Digital Library, which means ECS is planning to eliminate the cost obstacles for the scientific research that we publish.

These decisions are simply actions that we must take in order to accomplish our mission. We project at least several years in which we will experience deficit spending and will have to utilize reserve funds to balance the budget. It is a difficult time to be a nonprofit publisher, but I relish the role and I am confident that ECS will prevail. We will be running a series of articles in *Interface* aimed at informing our authors and readers about our plan of action and why it is so important to support the publications efforts of the nonprofit publishers.

It is exciting for me to know that ECS will continue on its mission and sail the waters of science in our chase of the great white whale. I learned during my time away that such chases will never be over because of their very nature, and I am inspired anew to continue with the same commitment and determination as Captain Ahab. Melville’s story depicts Ahab as a madman, who despite his greatest efforts never does catch Moby Dick. The ECS leadership is not mad like Ahab; but we have a great passion and commitment to an important purpose: the advancement of electrochemical and solid-state science and technology. And we have to chase that purpose with all the fervor and dedication of Ahab. Maybe that is a bit mad, but it will certainly drive ECS to higher levels of service to our community and stewardship of the science. “What I’ve willed, I’ve dared and what I’ve dared, I’ll do.” (Captain Ahab).

*Among the top 10 journals ranked in the electrochemistry category of ISI Thomson’s *Journal Citation Reports*, ECS is the only nonprofit professional society publisher. Publishing technical journals for many professional societies has become a losing proposition, so many of the STM publishers who have been unable to subsidize their publications have given their publishing operations to commercial publishers.

Roque J. Calvo
ECS Executive Director