

Scientific Communication in a New United States Government Regime: What We Need to Consider Now

Kristin S Inman

On January 20, 2025, a new Administration was sworn into office and issued a flurry of executive orders, initiating a series of actions that I believe will change the course of scholarly publishing, at least for the next several years. Here, I provide an inside view of the immediate consequences of those orders, focusing first on those related to the operations of the federal government staff, offices, and departments/centers. I follow with broader implications for the scholarly publishing community, related to the intricate relationship between this community and the federal government—notably as a critical funder of research and as a financial supporter of several journals.

I am writing this from my personal experience and perspective as a (now former) science editor for *Environmental Health Perspectives* (EHP), a journal published with support from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), an institute of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). My intent is to approach this topic with as much objectivity as possible, but to also share my firsthand experience of how these actions have affected government-backed journals, and to propose necessary considerations for nongovernment journals and publishers. My goal is the spread awareness for those who are not intimately associated with a government entity and to describe how

I think the changes to the federal government will affect scholarly publishing as a whole.

It Started with an Order

To me, it all began with Executive Order (EO) 14151: “Ending radical and wasteful government DEI programs and preferencing”. This order states that “The Biden Administration forced illegal and immoral discrimination programs, going by the name ‘diversity, equity, and inclusion’ (DEI), into virtually all aspects of the Federal Government”.¹ Government organizations were told to terminate all offices, positions, and programs related to DEI, a concept rooted in equitable treatment of persons regardless of race, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or religious beliefs.

I signed onto my computer on the morning of January 22, 2025, and opened the first of many emails to come from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).² This one was unlike any I had ever seen. It essentially said that I would be penalized if I failed to report anyone who attempted to circumvent EO14151 (Figure 1). In an ad-hoc meeting with my team, I learned that government agencies were given 24 hours to scrub all mentions of DEI and related terms from their websites. The NIEHS strategic plan, which included ambitious DEI-related goals, was removed from the website entirely (Figure 2).

In the days that followed, supervisors were told to provide lists of DEI-related activities and related personnel. Government employees were instructed to immediately step down from any DEI-related activities, committees, or responsibilities, both internal and external. As a member of the board of directors for CSE, I had to decline to participate in any DEI-related voting or discussion.

Meanwhile, the White House had also issued EO 14168³ for the purpose of “restoring biological truth” to the federal government. This order stated that “Federal funds shall not be used to promote gender ideology”—which in practice

Kristin S Inman is a former science editor for Environmental Health Perspectives, a journal published with support from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), an institute of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

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DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Office of the Secretary

Washington, D.C. 20201

TO: HHS Employees

THROUGH: Dorothy A. Fink, MD, Acting Secretary

FROM: Scott W. Rowell, Deputy Chief of Staff - Operations

DATE: January 22, 2025

SUBJECT: Information: DEIA Office Closure

The Department of Health and Human Services is taking steps to close all agency DEIA offices and end all DEIA-related contracts in accordance with President Trump's executive orders titled *Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing* and *Initial Rescissions of Harmful Executive Orders and Actions*.

These programs divided Americans by race, wasted taxpayer dollars, and resulted in shameful discrimination.

We are aware of efforts by some in government to disguise these programs by using coded or imprecise language. If you are aware of a change in any contract description or personnel position description since November 5, 2024, to obscure the connection between the contract and DEIA or similar ideologies, please report all facts and circumstances to DEIAtruth@opm.gov within 10 days.

There will be no adverse consequences for timely reporting this information. However, failure to report this information within 10 days may result in adverse consequences.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Figure 1. Copy of the email that was sent to all HHS staff and contractors.

meant the term *gender* and any associated concepts were banned from government websites, documents, and grant making.⁴ The President additionally rescinded Biden-era orders and actions addressing topics such as climate change, environmental justice, and equity for specific racial and ethnic groups.⁵

The Ripple Effect

Grants supporting DEI, "gender ideology," HIV and AIDS research,⁶ COVID-19 research,⁷ and other areas were cut, with termination letters stating that the research "no longer effectuates agency priorities." Even as I write this article, I continue to see LinkedIn posts describing grant money that was rescinded, and the topics triggering grant cancellation now are expanded to include those that are related to LGBTQ health. For an up-to-date idea of the scope of this

funding crisis, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) maintains public lists of HHS contracts terminated in full or part since January 21, 2025.⁸

At *EHP*, we had to have serious conversations about whether to publish certain manuscripts—not just new submissions but also those that were already in the pipeline. *EHP* was established by the NIEHS director in 1972⁹ and has a long history of editorial independence from the institute—the freedom to act without political interference. This independence was in line with the principles of scientific integrity highlighted in the NIEHS's recently withdrawn statement on the topic. However, new questions arose: Would publishing about climate change put a target on our back? Would mentioning health disparities put us on the chopping block? Many authors understood this and withdrew their papers to publish in a non-government-

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NIEHS 2025-2029 Strategic Plan

The 2025-2029 NIEHS Strategic Plan has been removed.

Please check back for updates.

Figure 2. The message that replaced the NIEHS 2025-2029 strategic plan on January 22, 2025—an eerie reminder of content that seemed to “vanish” overnight.

backed journal, but some did not, and still others accused the journal of censorship. I imagine these conversations were, and are still, happening between other government-funded journals and authors, and that there is equal frustration at having to reconcile scientific integrity with federal restrictions (eg, Johnson¹⁰).

DOGE: Massive Restructuring of Government

The next big change for the academic publishing landscape, in my opinion, came with the institution of the “Department of Government Efficiency” (DOGE), followed almost immediately by a reduction of the federal workforce. Beginning mid-February 2025, probationary employees were fired en masse; federal employees were offered deferred resignation (to be paid through September 2025 if they resigned), voluntary separation incentives, and early retirement options, while federal contractor option periods were not renewed. I was one of the first *EHP* contractors to have my contract expire—I was informed by my contract company on March 13, 2025, that the previous day had been my last. On February 6, federal employees received a memo informing them that the President required that “Agency Heads shall promptly undertake preparations to initiate large-scale reductions in force (RIFs), consistent with applicable law.”¹¹ Agency heads were instructed to submit a plan for massive downsizing of their departments, with a final date of execution of September 30, 2025. Once downsizing is complete, agencies are to hire no more than 1 person for every 4 who were let go.¹² At the time of this writing, RIFs had begun in earnest at many federal institutes, including NIH.

What It Means for Scholarly Publishing

The direct consequences of these orders were felt by federal staff, departments, and related entities, but it is likely the changes being implemented now will have an impact on science and scholarly publishing for many years to come.

The Devastation of Federally Funded Journals

Government-backed journals are relatively unique in that, because they are supported by tax dollars, they are fully open access and charge no article processing charges (APCs). While the world was discussing Plan S¹³ and deciphering the Nelson Memo,¹⁴ federally funded journals were offering fully accessible content. These journals have been critical for the dissemination of science, especially for those in resource-limited areas who may not have the means to publish in journals with APCs, and who may not have access to articles behind paywalls.

I was unable to find a reliable, complete list of federally funded journals in the U.S., but know there are a handful of HHS-funded human health journals, including *EHP*, *Journal of Health and Pollution*, *Preventing Chronic Diseases*, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*, and *Emerging Infectious Diseases*. Several others cover agriculture, materials science, and security. There are likely several more supported by other federal agencies. The loss of federal employees and contractors (like me, formerly) means fewer staff to manage these journals—assuming they are not shut down altogether.

On April 16, 2025, an authenticated draft plan to restructure HHS was leaked (Figure 3),¹⁵ proposing the discontinuation of funding for *Emerging Infectious Diseases* and *Preventing Chronic Diseases*;¹⁶ funding for *MMWR* was proposed to remain. To my knowledge, no other HHS-supported journals were named. However, between the federal limitations on language and the widespread cutting of federal dollars, I expect that others will meet a similar fate. Indeed, as of this writing, *EHP* and *Journal of Health and Pollution* announced that they would no longer be accepting new submissions for publication, citing an anticipated loss of critical contracts for peer review and publication of manuscripts.¹⁶

For those journals that remain, a new problem emerges. The inability to publish on certain topics represents a significant ethical dilemma: turn away good science,

Figure 3. Excerpt of the authenticated draft plan to restructure the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). From HHS 2026 Discretionary Budget Passback.¹⁷

Reforming and Restructuring CDC

The Budget reforms the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to refocus CDC on emerging and infectious disease surveillance, outbreak investigations, preparedness and response, and maintaining the Nation's public health infrastructure. The Budget includes funding to support NSC's Biothreat Radar Detection System. The Budget also discontinues funding for the Emerging Infectious Diseases and Preventing Chronic Disease monthly peer-reviewed journals. Funding for the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report is maintained.

ensor authors to remove offending language, or face the possibility of that science being taken down from any online sites. Moreover, will publication of such science be seen as a refusal to comply with executive orders? If so, what will the consequences be for the journal? These journals will have to walk a fine line between failing to comply with federal orders and author censorship; both options would mean an almost certain end to the journal.

Beyond the implications for federally funded journals, I expect significant challenges to established policies and standards for journals, publishers, and societies in the scholarly publishing arena.

Who Will Do the Science?

Between the cancellation of grants and the reduction of the federal workforce, many of whom were scientists, I predict the scientific enterprise as a whole will be hit hard. Laboratories are scrambling to reassign orphaned scientists (those whose principal investigator had been fired or incentivized to step down) or are shutting down entirely. Those who have built their careers researching such topics as exposure to noise pollution in minority populations, HIV treatment and vaccine development, climate change mitigation strategies, mental health in transgender persons, and many other topics for which the current administration has disallowed federal funding, will now have to find nongovernment funding or shift the focus of their science. Both options seem daunting—researching, writing, and submitting a grant is no easy task, and available funds are limited, with NIH being the largest public funder of biomedical research in the world.¹⁸

A potential, not often discussed, consequence of the current environment is the lack of *future* scientists. I have been thinking a lot about these new scientists, those who are just graduating or finishing their postdoctoral work, those who have their entire career ahead of them. Will they stay the course and pursue an academic track in the face of dwindling grants and uncertain government support? I suspect that even when we find our “new normal”, there will be an evident gap in the number of trained scientists that are available to do the work. I fear this shortage of quality scientists may continue for generations.

Will the Quality of Science be Maintained?

I am additionally concerned for the quality of the science overall. Less money often equals fewer opportunities—opportunities to validate data, follow up on unexpected findings, and respond to reviewer requests for more data. Will we need to lower the bar for what we consider publishable? Indeed, this bar is specific to the journal, but science is driven by the need to know more, to validate, and to question what we think we know. This becomes increasingly difficult with limited funding. Will we need to trade quality for quantity? I think back to my graduate school days when cloning a gene was an entire PhD project (my PhD project, in fact) and today, it can be done in weeks. Will we amend what is considered a “publishable unit” to maintain scientific excellence?

I hope that we are all thinking about the answers to these questions. I offer no solutions but encourage us to come together as a community to consider the challenges ahead and, if necessary, adapt our practices in ways that support scientific integrity and the standards of the field. Scholarly publishing has seen its fair share of challenges and has come out stronger in the end. I invite all who are reading this article to broadly share this information, consider the questions I've posed, and engage in earnest conversations with colleagues and friends about the future of scholarly publishing.

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