

# ASSAf: Promoting scholarly activity through the SAJS

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The *South African Journal of Science (SAJS)* is an integral part of the Academy of Science of South Africa's (ASSAf's) core activities, responding directly to one of ASSAf's five strategic goals, namely the promotion of innovation and scholarly activity in South Africa, with a special emphasis on all forms of interdisciplinarity based on the core and common role of empirical enquiry. ASSAf's role as publisher of the journal is critical to the strategic direction and successful implementation of its scholarly publishing and open access activities. The *SAJS* is at the forefront of many new initiatives that ASSAf is introducing and that will influence the future of scholarly publishing in our country.

Dating back to 1903, the *SAJS* was first published as the proceedings of the annual meetings of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science, now known as the S<sub>2</sub>A<sub>3</sub>. A glance at the contents page of the first volume reveals a focus on topics not much different from the burning issues of today; there was a presidential address by Sir David Gill, a Scottish astronomer who spent much of his career in South Africa, and articles titled 'The Moral Education of Children in Schools', 'The Life of the City', 'Sewage Disposal in the Cape Colony', and 'Some Aspects of South African Forestry'.

In August 1947, the annual report became a monthly publication and the journal was published under the auspices of various bodies, including Macmillan Journals in London (the then publisher of *Nature*), the Associated Scientific and Technical Societies of South Africa, the Foundation for Education, Science and Technology, and the National Research Foundation. There were some difficult times over the years, but the journal sustained itself without interruption.

In 2002, a nascent ASSAf took the bold step of assuming responsibility for the publication of the *SAJS*, with the aim of building the journal's reputation as an independent scholarly journal of the multidisciplinary type. At the time the journal was in sound editorial hands, but needed a visionary approach to take it from a paper-based journal that had a relatively narrow focus of 'natural scientific' interest to one that is entirely digital and open to good papers from all empirical fields of enquiry. In keeping with the dual content of the world's leading multidisciplinary journals, the *SAJS* now aims to be the foremost repository of editorial comment, scholarly debate and review, and science and technology policy analysis relevant to South Africa. This lofty goal is still a 'work in progress', but significant strides have been made.

The journal's success is due in no small measure to the dedication of its succession of recent editors. The first of these was Dr Graham Baker, who arrived in South Africa in 1972 after a science publishing career with *Nature* in London. He set about the demanding task of taking the journal from a barely viable condition to a flagship multidisciplinary journal modelled on *Nature*. For 36 years, as full-time Editor, he dedicated himself to the establishment of the *SAJS* as a high-quality, internationally significant journal that showcased South African natural science research to a global audience.

Towards the end of 2008, ASSAf introduced a new editorial model, with Prof. Michael Cherry as part-time Editor-in-Chief, supported by ten part-time Associate Editors in various disciplines. It was at this time that the focus of the *SAJS* was also deliberately broadened, specifically targeting the hitherto neglected humanities and social sciences. Since then, submissions in the fields of the humanities and social sciences have steadily increased, warranting a recent decision to expand from one portfolio into two (each managed by an Associate Editor).

In 2009, the *SAJS* fully embraced open-access publishing and was the first South African journal to be uploaded onto ASSAf's new open-access platform, SciELO SA. Changes also took place in publishing mode, with the adoption of an online manuscript management system for the submission, peer review and publication of papers, now outsourced to OpenJournals Publishing. Digital publishing introduced new file formats (HTML/XML and EPUB), reference linking and DOIs for enhanced searchability and user friendliness. Embarking on digital publishing was a steep learning curve but was achieved through the dedicated efforts of a large number of people who set the *SAJS* on a course from which there was no turning back.

Dr John Butler-Adam took over as part-time Editor-in-Chief in November 2012. His assumption of the editorship coincided with ASSAf once more itself taking control of the publication of the journal – a move which brought with it exciting possibilities, but also a new set of challenges. At the same time, there was a rapid increase in the number of articles being submitted for publication from all parts of the world as the accessibility and reputation of the journal began to increase. The increased responsibilities in the ASSAf secretariat, together with the opportunities and demands of digital publishing, saw the creation of the post of Online Publishing Administrator in 2013, with Ms Nadine Wubbeling appointed part-time and later full-time in the role.

Digital publication of the *SAJS* has steadily become the dominant mode. Initially, the *SAJS* was published in dual mode, both print and digital, with the printed journal distributed free to ASSAf Members. In 2014, a decision was taken to discontinue the free distribution of hard copies and to focus on electronic distribution. Effectively, the hard copies were reduced from 700 to just above 100. Recently, the ASSAf Council approved the discontinuation of the print version in favour of electronic distribution via the bimonthly 'Highlights of the latest issue' emails that now reach over 9000 recipients. These emails include links to the full digital issue in three formats (PDF, EPUB and flip ebook) and are sent at a minimal cost of ZAR0.14 per recipient.

Digital publication has also ushered in new and sophisticated possibilities in terms of impact monitoring, so important in this era of ensuring effective utilisation of state funding and competing demands for resources. Using Google Analytics, one can capture data on readership by country, city and article. The *SAJS* has a developing social media presence: it has a Facebook page with 831 'likes' as of December 2015 and an active Twitter account, with 553 followers and 730 tweets. Media reporting of *SAJS* articles is monitored closely and is showing a pleasing growth.

It is planned to introduce Altmetric software that will also include alternative metric 'counts' and statistics from social media, blogs, news coverage and other online sites. Article-level metrics such as full-text downloads and citations will also be included for each new article.

The all-important Thomson Reuters Web of Science impact factor has shown a steady rise and is standing at 0.96 in 2015, up from 0.5 in 2010. The *SAJS* at 1848 cites ranks second among the South African journals on Thomson Reuters Web of Science in terms of citations.

The face of the *SAJS* has thus changed dramatically over the past few years. Much has been learned, and ASSAf is now able to assist other South African scholarly journals to benefit from the enormous advantages of open access and digital publishing through the National Scholarly Editors' Forum.

While the *SAJS* is currently in a very healthy state and is a publication of which the Academy is justifiably proud, there are still challenges to address, of which two can be regarded as foremost.

The first is the need to encourage submissions of higher-quality papers. As submissions have increased, it has become possible to be more selective, thereby increasing the rejection rate, which is often used (in a rather perverse way) as a measure of the quality of a journal. The

formal rejection rate, excluding those which are informally submitted to the Editor-in-Chief for an opinion, is currently hovering just above 85%, which is a healthy sign. Submissions have increased at an unprecedented rate, from just above 200 in 2009 to almost 500 in 2015. At this annual growth we are expecting to reach 600 submissions in 2017. While this is a measure of success and improved profile, it comes with numerous practical problems relating to costs, capacity constraints, publishing backlogs, reviewer fatigue etc., all of which have to be addressed.

A second and related challenge is the need to position the *SAJS* as a 'destination journal of choice'. All too often one hears the refrain that international specialist journals should be the first choice, with the *SAJS* placed fairly low in terms of preferred journal. The challenge is one of influencing the mindset of South African researchers such that the *SAJS* is not viewed as a last-resort local journal to which one can turn after one's paper has been rejected by a specialist international journal, but as an outlet where an author deliberately crafts an important paper for a multidisciplinary audience. It should be seen as an opportunity for scientists to communicate their work beyond a specialist audience and to make their work broadly accessible to a multidisciplinary audience and thereby improve impact on society. Increasingly, scientists need to pay attention to effective and broad-based communication of their results; it is no longer considered sufficient to confine results to specialist journals. As the pressures to communicate in the popular press and through social media are becoming more and more important, so the multidisciplinary journal is firmly establishing its niche. The role of South Africa's foremost multidisciplinary journal is fundamental to building the reputation of South African science and packaging it in a way that is positioned midway in the spectrum that extends from specialist to popular. There is still a journey ahead to realise this ambition, but the *SAJS* is now on an upward trajectory that could see this being achieved sooner rather than later.

