



Reflections of an Editor-in-Chief: 2008–2012

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I started as Editor-in-Chief of the *South African Journal of Science (SAJS)* in November 2008, and had a two-month overlap period with my predecessor, Graham Baker, who had been in the job for the previous 36 years! Having served on the Journal's board myself since 2003, when ASSAf took over management of the Journal, I had some idea of the changes I wished to implement, and how I might go about doing so. ASSAf had already decided on a different model for the role of Editor-in-Chief. Graham had been a full-time employee, whereas I had accepted a three-year contract (subsequently extended for a further year), in terms of which ASSAf bought out 40% of my time from my home university where I continued to work for the remaining 60%.

The next decision involved the only other position attached to the Journal – the editorial assistant, who was also responsible for tracking the manuscripts and chasing up reviewers. My department in Stellenbosch offered us office space (as it had done for other staff members who edited journals), and my own preference was for the incumbent to work under my supervision there. ASSAf declined this suggestion on the grounds that as this position was a permanent one, it would be better for the incumbent to work at their offices in Pretoria with their other staff. So provision was made for me to make quarterly visits to the Pretoria office. We advertised the position and were lucky enough to appoint Linda Fick. Rather than being a secretary, I asked her to take responsibility for copy editing the Journal (a task my predecessor had undertaken himself). She has remained with the Journal ever since, and has indeed provided an important source of continuity (and much else besides) to successive editors.

Not being a polymath myself, I had never understood how my predecessor had made decisions on manuscripts in every field of science from theoretical physics to molecular biology. So I came up with a list of broad fields, largely on the basis of past content of the Journal, and we advertised 10 Associate Editor positions in different disciplines, including one in humanities and social sciences. Historically, the Journal had not published much outside of the natural sciences, but as ASSAf was an academy encompassing all areas of knowledge, we needed to encourage more submissions in this area. I was delighted that we ended up being spoiled for choice in choosing associate editors, and in the first issue of 2009 we announced what turned out to be an outstanding new team.¹ I remain grateful to them for sharing my vision for the niche which the Journal should occupy, and tackling it with commensurate enthusiasm. The vision I outlined in the first leader: “We aim to publish original work of importance in any field, which will interest readers from more than one discipline. In particular, we are keen to publish work that has a regional focus on Africa.” We called for three categories of peer-reviewed contributions: reviews, articles, and research letters, and emphasised that these should be relatively brief compared to that of more specialised journals.

Our second important function, I felt, was to serve as a forum for debate about recent developments in research and in higher education. The front section of the Journal had in the past covered news, news features, book reviews, obituaries, commentaries, letters, and news and views articles. (The last category comprises articles which opine on important recent developments either in the published literature or at conferences.) Based on my experience working on a freelance basis for *Nature* for the previous 20 years, I was eager to expand this section of the Journal, and unlike in the past, not to avoid controversy if at all possible. In order to ensure timely publication of current material, these contributions were not formally peer reviewed, and potential authors were encouraged to liaise with the Editor-in-Chief before submitting work of this nature to the Journal.

I hoped that the new model – combined with the use of an online submission system from 2010 – would lead to much more rapid publication of peer-reviewed manuscripts, typically three to four months after receipt. In the context of reviewer fatigue, this hope appears to have been a vain one – If anything, turnaround times have become slower over the past decade.²

In addition, we made the important decision that the Journal would be open access through a new portal established by ASSAf: www.scielo.org.za. Unlike most other open-access publications, we decided – crucially – not to charge publication fees in an effort to make SAJS a flagship African journal in which the continent's scholars could publish important multidisciplinary work without this financial stricture. This meant that ASSAf was paying for this from their parliamentary grant. I was grateful to the ASSAf Council for their support in this matter, and in retrospect I feel that this decision proved to be a wise one.

Our Associate Editors went about soliciting articles, and it is interesting now, more than a decade since my term ended in 2012, to be able to reflect on the impact of the work published during this period. Of the 50 articles published in 2009–2012, the six most-cited articles were – unsurprisingly – all reviews, with Wits geologist Terence McCarthy's ‘The impact of acid mine drainage in South Africa’ topping the list.³ The second was a review of marine phylogeography in South Africa with lead author Peter Teske, then at Rhodes (and a former PhD student of mine at Stellenbosch).⁴ And the third was a review by Timm Hoffman, Adam West and others from the UCT Botany Department on Drought, climate change and vegetation response in the succulent Karoo.⁵ The most-cited (original) article was from Andrew Venter and collaborators of North-West University, on air quality assessment in the industrialised western Bushveld Igneous Complex.⁶

I was particularly delighted that we published an article with the late Bob Brain as lead author on *The first animals: ca. 760-million-year-old sponge-like fossils from Namibia*, which made a splendid cover story.⁷ It has been well cited, and I expect will continue to be for a long time. I first met Bob in 1982 when, as a national serviceman in the SA Air Force, I attended seminars at the former Transvaal Museum, an institution which he directed and which I had perceived as an oasis in the intellectual desert of Pretoria at the time.

We struggled at first to break into the market in humanities and social sciences, and only 4 of the 50 most-cited articles published during my tenure were in this category. We published a fascinating (and well-cited) article by the

UCT historian Elizabeth van Heyningen on the Boer concentration camps in the South African War.⁸ It in no way attempted to deny the tragedy of the high mortality of people in the camps – her grandfather had not only fought on the Boer side in the war, but was a “bittereinder”! But her thesis that attempts to solve the problem of health conditions in the camps had had serendipitous positive spin-offs, was mischievously misrepresented by elements in the Afrikaans press. I was infuriated when our publisher at the time, AOSIS, apologised publicly on our behalf without consulting me or the author, as anyone who had bothered to read the article would have understood this. Another favourite cover story (and also in the top 20 for citations during my tenure) was Rhodes anthropologist Michelle Cocks’ account of Xhosa cultural perceptions of the thicket biome.⁹

At my request, I was given a modest budget to commission contributions for the front section of the Journal, in an effort to stimulate debate about current developments in research and higher education in the country. Craig McKune did some excellent reporting on the crises at UKZN and the NRF and on the pebble bed modular reactor, in particular. In terms of expanding our brief beyond the natural sciences, we published a commentary by the eminent language scholar Neville Alexander¹⁰, which was based on a lecture he had given at the University of Johannesburg – sadly, he died on the day that I finished editing the article. Peter Anderson and Bill Nasson wrote memorable obituaries for Stephen Watson; and Richard Dudley and Stan Trapido, respectively, as well as contributing book and exhibition reviews of high calibre.

By the time I finished my term at the end of 2012, the Journal’s impact factor had risen from 0.5 (when I took over), to 0.8. Impact factors are calculated by measuring the average number of citations in a year to peer-reviewed articles published over the previous two years, so this factor related to citations in 2011 of articles published in our first two years as an editorial team (2009 and 2010). In July 2014, the impact factor relating to the last two years of my term was released, and it had reached 1.03, having doubled in four years. In practice, turning a journal around takes time. But the trajectory was in the right direction, and consequently my successors have had to handle many more manuscripts each year than I did. Over the next decade, the impact factor continued to climb and has more than doubled again – it is currently 2.1.

With hindsight I took over the Journal at the beginning of a new era in the history of our young democracy. On a direct level, South Africa had survived the financial crisis relatively unscathed, but had not really benefitted to the extent to which it should have during the resources boom of the noughties. In April 2009, a new President was elected who presided over a regime intent on looting state infrastructure, arguably the most valuable asset we had inherited from the colonial and apartheid eras, and our biggest advantage over other African countries. Consequently, we have had little chance of attracting investment on the requisite scale as global economic recovery proceeded. In a leader in November 2009, I lamented the decision to build the Medupi coal-fired power station, and bemoaned South Africa’s commitment to a 34%

reduction in carbon emissions by 2020 and 42% by 2025, as a case of “too little, too late”¹¹. If only – the tiny reductions we have achieved to date relate only to Eskom’s dysfunctionality.

In conclusion, I was lucky enough to serve as Editor-in-Chief during a relatively optimistic period in South Africa’s history. The despair which has characterised the state-capture era did not yet prevail, and I was naïve enough to believe when I sat down to write a leader, that someone might take note of what I wrote. I hope that this at least served to stimulate interest within the academy, if not among the political class.

Declarations

There are no competing interests to declare. There is no AI or LLM use to declare.

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