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Editorial reminiscences on the occasion of the SAJS 120th anniversary (1973–2008)

It would be fair to claim that the present era of the Journal's operation – the last half century – began in October 1970 with preliminary negotiations between John (later Sir John) Maddox, then editor of *Nature* in London, and Denys Kingwill, director of Information and Research Services at the CSIR. South Africa's international reputation politically had reached an especially low ebb, but Kingwill had the insight and resolve to invite someone with unusual international clout to see for himself how South Africa's widespread and growing academic boycotts might be addressed. So Maddox, at his own expense, came and visited selected universities, as well as the CSIR, to gauge academic attitudes to the politics of the day. He concluded that research scientists in particular should be supported because he considered that, in the main, they were a force for good and would be needed if the country ever threw off its apartheid legislation to become a democracy. He made these thoughts public in an editorial he wrote on his return to London, entitled 'Science is a Trojan horse'.¹

Maddox had just been appointed managing director of Macmillan Journals Ltd, a position he relished as a man who responded with exceptional enthusiasm and energy to publishing challenges. The *South African Journal of Science* (SAJS) became one of them.

Kingwill had a second reason for inviting Maddox. He had long wanted the SAJS to play a more prominent role in reporting the science conducted in the country. By the early 1970s, however, the Journal had almost run out of both its traditional support and multidisciplinary manuscripts – membership of its founding organisation, the South African Association for the Advancement of Science (S₂A₃), was declining with the steady growth of specialist professional societies – hence his hope that an association with *Nature*, then published by Macmillan Journals, might be able to revive it.

Maddox agreed to lend a hand – which meant funding to pay for an editor and editorial assistant – for a limited period. He told me, though, as a member of his London staff (who were generally opposed to the initiative), that he feared he was “going to lose all my friends” by supporting a South African periodical. Nonetheless, he despatched me to Johannesburg in 1972 to tackle “the South African job”, in the belief that the Journal was still a going concern and needed just temporary intervention, working with a local editor and a more robust editorial policy, to become a “South African *Nature*”. In fact, the SAJS had not appeared for some months, had just three articles in hand, and effectively no staff. As it turned out, it took almost 35 years to appoint that ‘local editor’.

The notes that follow sketch some of the Journal's peripatetic experiences in my time as editor, which are unlikely otherwise to appear in the record. A more formal and comprehensive account is provided by Jane Carruthers' review of the history of the SAJS in this special issue.²

From pillar to post

Within two years of my arrival in 1972, Macmillan Journals announced its withdrawal of funding for the SAJS – understandably, as the Journal was losing money, providing no editorial support for the various Macmillan journals in its stable as had initially been a possibility, and Maddox had (temporarily, for five years) left the editorship of *Nature*. That posed two dilemmas whose consequences muddied the waters for two decades: how to fund the editorial staff, and who would assume formal responsibility as publisher of the SAJS. For the next 30-odd years I subsisted on a series of short-term contracts with various organisations that served as ‘acting’ publishers, and the Journal and I moved office no fewer than ten times – lock, stock and barrel, with the historical archive and my store of print files and subscription lists on metal plates (initially), before computers and the cloud made such events less of a burden.

It was again Kingwill who acted to allow the Journal to survive the initial financial setback. As one of the very first employees appointed by the CSIR following its establishment after World War II, he was a consummate diplomat who, in a disarmingly low-key way and with a wicked sense of humour that made dealing with him such a pleasure, could accommodate the scientific politics of the day in what he saw as the long-term national interest. He knew that the SAJS had its influential opponents, as I soon discovered, and therefore that the Journal “would always need a champion” – a role he was prepared to assume from the moment I arrived. But the way ahead was not obvious.

Macmillan's early generous funding for the Journal was meant to keep us going until the necessary local support was forthcoming, if the locals wanted it to continue. And some did. Initially, the Johannesburg-based Associated Scientific and Technical Societies of South Africa (AS&TS) housed and took on the Journal at their headquarters in Kelvin House (later demolished) in Hollard Street, which prompted us to establish a dedicated typesetting operation that greatly facilitated the Journal's printing requirements and those of some of the professional societies in the building. The CSIR even set up their Science Editing Unit to support the editor, in exchange for publishing services. That relatively stable situation lasted until 1990 – the Journal meanwhile managed steadily to attract just enough subscriptions and publishable manuscripts to keep us in business – when the AS&TS vacated Kelvin House, moved to a new campus and underwent radical restructuring. The SAJS (reluctantly) was obliged to do the same.

The consequence was to start again with a completely new operation at the Foundation for Research Development (FRD) in Pretoria. As the principal source of research funding in the country, this was an obvious location for the editor, even though some members of the FRD's otherwise supportive executive were less than comfortable with



the arrangement. It gave me unequalled access to leading researchers in South Africa, and the Journal was able to broaden its reach.

Alas, this generally satisfactory circumstance did not last, because, in 1994, the SAJS was again obliged to move offices, this time to the Didacta Building in downtown Pretoria, where the Bureau for Scientific Publications (home of a suite of research journals) had its base at the Foundation for Education, Science and Technology. As had been anticipated even before the move, this relocation proved wholly unsuitable – in part because of a management that was antagonistic to the Journal from the start. It represented relics of traditional authoritarianism adopted by a boss with no professional knowledge of academic publishing, who, among other offences, bizarrely disciplined me for using the SAJS letterhead and surreptitiously arranged the destruction of a large part of the Journal's archive. Happily, three years later, in 1997, thanks to the direct intervention of the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, the SAJS was able to return to the FRD (which later became the National Research Foundation).

In 2003, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) took over as SAJS publisher at the instigation of its president, Professor Wieland Gevers. To avoid a return to the misery of the Didacta Building where the Academy had then established itself, I was able to move to the campus of the University of Pretoria on the generous intervention of the rector. (I had previously declined opportunities to move to a university campus, to avoid accusations of possible partisanship.) There followed a happy and productive time – for me as an editor – in a stimulating academic setting. It came to an end when, once again and finally, I was rehoused, this time at the Academy's new offices in the recently opened Department of Science and Technology building.

New trajectories

During my early days with the SAJS in the mid-1970s, there were clearly pockets of good will towards the Journal, yet many leading researchers told me they “would never support it” if their work could be accepted by the better journals abroad. I was afforded the advice of a three-person team for an initial impression of what I had taken on – Professors Phillip Tobias and Nancy van Schaik, of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), who shared their knowledge of the academic landscape, and Enid du Plessis, on Kingwill's staff at the CSIR, who “seemed to know everyone” and could interpret South African cultural mores to a complete outsider like myself. A small group of faithful contributors – notably from Wits and the University of Cape Town – were dominant; the formerly Afrikaans-medium universities were largely absent; and the historically black universities were nowhere represented in its pages. That had to change.

The initial promotion of the ‘new look’ SAJS depended on mailings to members of S_2A_3 – who were frustratingly but understandably slow to respond (a common reaction was along the lines of “your ambition is admirable, and we will support you when you succeed” but not until then). The Journal's objective was to open wider a global window onto South Africa's scientific landscape, and to complement some long-established specialist South African journals – which included fields serving geology, chemistry, zoology, mining, and medicine – but not to substitute for them. We also offered a platform to serve disciplines which South African journals lacked. As time went by, we extended special attention to topics in which southern African research was growing and excelling, notably in animal research, the environmental, health and atmospheric sciences, the southern skies, science policymaking and the rapidly expanding fields of microbiology.

Naturally, the Journal's principal focus had to be on trying to attract unsolicited reports of traditional empirical research and reviews, subject to the usual refereeing processes. Initially, that proved a relatively slow and inefficient means of securing a balance of contributions that reflected good research from the desired diversity of representative institutions. So, in the years that followed, another way to attract such articles in areas where South African research was making notable headway, was by accepting News and Views contributions, based on good papers by South African authors that had appeared in leading journals elsewhere (original research articles were, of course, never directly solicited).

Another route was to invite submissions to multidisciplinary theme issues, which produced papers on topics that would have been unlikely to feature otherwise.

These strategies brought to the SAJS a broad range of material – from South Africa and increasingly from abroad – on emerging subjects such as HIV and AIDS research, southern African biodiversity and materials science, palaeoanthropology, palaeontology and archaeology, even engineering, as well as the occasional festschrift. Contributions came not only from universities but also from our main research institutions, such as the South African Institute for Medical Research and the research councils (including the CSIR and MRC). In the 1980s, two ‘anniversary’ issues, for the University of Natal (now the University of KwaZulu-Natal) and Potchefstroom University (now North-West University), were followed by sets of selected abstracts from the annual proceedings of professional societies, and conference papers on topics of broader appeal. Some researchers who later became eminent heads of leading institutions would claim to have published their first paper in the SAJS – and one article, which was worked on over several months, directly contributed to the author securing a professorship at Yale. South Africa's important archaeological sites became a niche area – and among the world-renowned discoveries at Sterkfontein was the first announcement in the SAJS of Little Foot in 1998³, the year after our series of articles to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the discovery of ‘Mrs Ples’.

A common dilemma for any editor is how to assess reviewers' reports. When they all agree, all is well (usually). At times, when they didn't, I wondered if they had read the same manuscript. And what happens when an unusual submission (that could be a pioneering paper) is, predictably, rejected by eminent scholars because “even the basic textbooks make it clear that cells don't behave that way” ... and yet, a visit to the lab, as in this case, seems to demonstrate the opposite? Sticking my neck out and publishing that preliminary announcement was a risk, but what reward when, a couple of years later, the first international conference devoted to this new direction helped to rewrite the textbooks.

Another kind of dilemma was whether to accept articles on research that we judged as deserving to be in the public record but which, for whatever reason, might not be readily cited. We decided that our role included this kind of archive, even though it might make little contribution to the all-important impact factors with which funding bodies were becoming obsessed. Nevertheless, by the time of its centenary in 2004, the SAJS was ranked eighth out of the 19 multidisciplinary science journals worldwide listed at the time by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) in terms of citations.

Helping to raise the profile of the Journal (and get it more eagerly read) were no fewer than three unusually quirky regular columns that featured personal takes – by academics who went on to high positions – on aspects of psychology and physiology as well as exercises in satire (“Ioca Seria”, subsequently turned into a book published by Elsevier). I am proud to this day that we found space for such delights.

Housekeeping and its rewards

Many submissions to the SAJS needed substantial editing, a process that continued throughout my time. Many (initially most) institutions with a weak research culture could be induced to submit papers in the knowledge that their authors would receive a sympathetic, albeit relatively heavy edit and critical review. That had the benefit of better-written, follow-up contributions. It helped, too, that, at a relatively early stage, the SAJS was the only multidisciplinary Journal in the natural sciences produced in Africa – and indeed in the Southern Hemisphere – that was indexed by the ISI.

Undoubtedly, the single national policy that had the greatest effect on spurring our researchers to write for a South African journal was the introduction, in the mid-1980s, of government subsidy for research articles published in a select list of journals. The practice has become well established today as an essential source of university funding, but initially it was not without controversy – for example, which journals would qualify for ‘accreditation’? And what kind of article should merit subsidy?



Money matters

A recurring problem was how to fund the Journal and its operations after Macmillan withdrew as publisher. Initially, London had picked up the tab for the shortfall – for printing, postal distribution and the salary of the editor and editorial assistant – from the dwindling income from S_2A_3 and other subscriptions. The move to AS&TS helped to secure for the Journal a vital government subsidy, which continues in one form or another to this day. For many years, however, a sustainable business model was the subject of much debate. One early suggestion was to emulate the Australian model, in which a suite of national research journals was managed by the CSIRO – a proposal, however, that the South African CSIR quickly rejected.

Somehow, throughout my time as editor, external funding was never enough to cover more than basic services, and I was under persistent pressure to show that the Journal “could eventually pay its way”. This was attempted – not by page charges in my time, which I considered discriminatory against researchers at poor institutions – by seeking modest amounts of paid advertising, and subsidy from conference organisers for the publication of their proceedings. But fundraising and stretching the available budget as far as it would go was part of the SAJS editor’s job and my way of life.

Broader support

Over the years, the SAJS office provided various editorial and publishing services to other parties with which it was associated geographically, including the AS&TS societies. For example, we produced a series of technical monographs for the South (today Southern) African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy. Most rewarding, perhaps, was our assistance with the launch and initial support for four years of the Academy’s magazine, *Quest: Science for South Africa*, designed to bring to wide public attention the best of the country’s science. A primary focus was to use the Journal’s published articles as a foundation and its network of authors as guides to the latest and most important South African research, presented to great effect by the founding editor, Dr Elisabeth

Lickindorf. The magazine appealed – we were gratified to learn – to readers ranging from learners in their early teens to eminent senior scientists in their retirement.

Those without whom . . .

Inevitably over such an extended period, many people contributed talent and time to the Journal’s progress, and space permits me to name only a few. It is my pleasure to acknowledge the editorial assistants who helped to record manuscripts, maintain subscription lists, and negotiate with reviewers and authors (not always an easy task) – Bonnie Berger, Susan Jack, Vivienne Press and Lyrr Thurston in Johannesburg; then Robyn Arnold, Meg Kemp, Eldaleen Jacobs and Lizél Kleingbiel in Pretoria – and, in Hollard Street, Lily Mitchell’s editorial networking. Dr Hennie Smith’s unfailing moral support was always there, representing the ‘man from the ministry’ in the Kelvin House days and, later, the interests of the Academy. Incomparable production services were provided by Claire Kearney in Johannesburg and Dr Nico Dippenaar in Pretoria.

ASSAf

It is indeed to be celebrated, in this 120th year of the SAJS, that its future is assured now that it has become part of the operations of the Academy.

Declarations

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

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