



Impact

As we reach the end of this celebration year for the *South African Journal of Science*, we have received many congratulations from readers and contributors about our Journal. We thank everyone who celebrates with us.

The SAJS came into being before the Union of South Africa. Those of us who work for the Journal cannot ourselves claim any special credit for the unbroken 120-year history of the Journal, but we do have a responsibility to take into account what it means to be part of this history. We are also very aware of our privilege as the flagship journal of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), funded through the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation – most South African journals do not have this luxury, or the kind of infrastructure which enables us to do what we do.

When we examine our recently published special issue celebrating our 120 years as a journal, and especially the central contribution by Jane Carruthers, historian of science and immediate past Editor-in-Chief, we can see strong evidence of many tensions in our history. The founding of any academic journal is not just an academic milestone in the narrow sense, but also a statement of identity and a projection about the future. Regardless of discipline or range of disciplines, founding a journal instantiates an imagined community and is part of the construction of that community. In our Journal's case, the identity work, conscious or otherwise, has been and continues to be centred around the central questions of what science is in South Africa and who the scientists are. Early on, it was important to establish from South Africa that there was indeed a community of scientists doing good research, and, although the audience of the Journal was partly, or even largely, South African, there was inevitably a gaze northwards to what was perceived to be the centre of scientific excellence. At the same time, and quite early in the history of the Journal, as Carruthers shows, many believed that the primary function of the Journal was to create, and maintain, a sense of home and identity for South African science and scientists. There was also, in the early history of the Journal, less uniformity than we have today in the style of presentation of scientific ideas, and a less clear distinction between 'amateur' and 'professional' scientists.

It is something to celebrate that our journal, along with others, became more professionalised, and that what readers see today in each issue is a set of contributions which have gone through an exacting process of assessment and copy-editing to produce a product with certain standard features. Our Journal does well when assessed against local and internationally used metrics, although we are aware of the limitations of these. Standard measures of journal strength and impact tell a story, but they are not designed to measure other features of a national journal which we value – features which, in the main, are more difficult to measure. Questions with which we continue to grapple include:

- To what extent is our science inclusive, and are we working harder to ensure that all aspects of the scientific process have a wide range of voices and expertise?
- What are the best ways to assess critically the extent to which our work has a positive and lasting impact?
- Whom do we leave out when we do scientific work and assess its impact?

These questions are by no means new for South African scientists, and many teams are addressing them in a range of ways, as a perusal of our Journal would show. But just as there are limitations of using metrics like Journal Impact Factor as a proxy for the quality of journals, especially interdisciplinary journals in the Global South, there are challenges in assessing broader societal impact. Recently we published a special issue (Vol. 120 No. 9/10) organised around questions of science engagement, what this means and how it can be assessed. We are very grateful to the guest editors and contributors to this volume, and to many other authors who have tackled complex and 'wicked' problems in research reported in our Journal.

Despite these useful contributions, at this time of reflection on the long past and the future of our Journal, we are concerned that we may not have done enough as yet to stimulate and support robust discussions – not just of examples of work which has been shown to have impact, important though this is, but also discussions on the ways in which, from a wide range of perspectives, we should think about and assess impact critically and constructively. As soon as we begin to ask these questions at quite a general level, we are confronted with the realities of both how important scientists are to thinking about these issues, and how constrained scientists often are in what can be achieved in the world on an ongoing basis. We need to understand not only the technicalities of our work but also the social and political context for our work and for how we engage with a range of actors, most of whom have little or no scientific training but who may have skills and expertise to make things happen, skills which we ourselves may lack.

As part of ASSAf and as part of the broader scientific community, we are in the age of intensive work and *thinking about open science*. At our Journal, we want to do as much as we can to support debate on open science and on questions of inclusion and science for all. This is a key part of our current identity as a journal, and we welcome strong and provocative contributions on this subject – we need, together, to strengthen our thinking on broadening the impact of science, building on the excellence that already exists.

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