



Science, truth and power

If ever there was a time when it was clear that scientists, regardless of discipline, cannot ignore politics, it is now. At the moment of writing this piece, it is very unclear what the ultimate impact on science will be of developments in the USA, but clearly what is happening is not good for science.¹ To name but one example, following the transition of presidential leadership, now that Robert F. Kennedy Jr is heading Health and Human Services, and hence the US National Institutes of Health, all those who adhere to scientific methods and principles have reason to be alarmed. We should also be alarmed when social media companies stop fact-checking or actively promote false, and commonly anti-science, views and theories.

In our South African context, we are and should be aware of histories of exclusion from knowledge and science systems on the basis, for example, of race, gender, disability, class, and geographic location. Recognising the realities and challenges of historical and ongoing epistemic exclusion is not the same, as some allege, as saying that all knowledge is equal when it comes to solving problems confronting humanity and our planet. Evidence, contested though it often is and should be, matters. As Hannah Arendt² suggested many years ago, totalitarian and authoritarian regimes and actors are involved, not just in the spread of misinformation, but in an attack on the very distinction between truth and lies. Where there is no such distinction, we lose a key hallmark of science, which is the ability to revise beliefs and opinions in light of new evidence and circumstances. The present dangers facing science in our world today are both practical in terms of questions of funding and so on, but also existential. The survival of science itself as a way of understanding and engaging with the world depends on the search for reproducible truths about our reality.

It is not by chance that, amidst the flurry and chaos of crackdowns on science in the USA, the Trump administration reportedly is attempting to exert control on one of the most cited public health journals in the world, the *Mortality and Morbidity Weekly Report*.³ This is a very serious matter. Some may believe that the *South African Journal of Science*, as the Journal of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), funded by the public purse through the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation, is subject to editorial interference of the kind allegedly now being attempted with scholarly outputs in the USA.⁴ In my time as Editor-in-Chief of this Journal, there have been no attempts at interference in editorial decisions, nor would these be tolerated.

It is part of the editorial responsibility of the Journal to create and maintain a space in which a range of views of concern to South African science and scientists can be aired in a spirit of open, collegial debate, and subject to the rigour of peer review, or, in the case of commentaries and other pieces in the front section of the Journal, assessment by experts. Though as a journal we are guided by our mission and vision and do not offer a free-for-all as a public square for all opinions, we cannot and do not restrict publication only to those who share our own personal views on science, politics, and the relationship between the two.

Open debate on difficult issues is something we should encourage. It is partly for this reason that periodically we host Discussion Series as fora for science-based discussions on issues affecting scientists and academics in South Africa and further afield – issues which have implications for society. One question which has led to a great deal of

debate and discussion in South African higher institutions has been that of how to respond, if at all, to events in Gaza following 7 October 2023. Linked to this question are more general and fundamental questions about academic boycotts and their effects, and about, again, the relationship between science and politics – an issue taken up in many and diverse ways in this Journal throughout its 120 years. We had been planning in 2024 to call for discussions on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict when we received a submission from Nithaya Chetty. We then decided that, were this piece to be accepted after the inputs of expert readers, this would form the basis for a discussion on the issues at hand. Subsequently, we went through a process of soliciting responses to Chetty's Commentary, and we now publish these alongside Chetty's contribution. We approached many more academics with requests to respond than those who elected to submit responses; we also tried our best to approach academics who, we believed, would speak from a range of different perspectives. We are very grateful indeed to all the authors who took the trouble to write responses, and we are gratified by the range of ways in which they engaged. It is also the case, though, that the responses we received cannot be said to be representative in any way of all the views academics hold about the issues at stake. In correspondence we received from people we approached, there were views expressed that it would have been preferable to have made an open call for commentaries rather than soliciting responses specifically to the Chetty Commentary from people we invited. An open call had been our original intention, and we agree that, although there were advantages to our using Chetty's Commentary (which we were grateful to receive) as a point of departure to focus debate, there were also drawbacks to our decision. Given this, though it is always our policy and practice to welcome debate and engagement with anything we publish, and with any of our practices, it is important for us to emphasise that we do not believe the debate we host in these pages is settled or closed. Please do send us your responses, and we will consider these for future publication.

Recently, ASSAf has communicated that it will be organising seminars and debates on issues concerning science and armed conflict. Our publication of the Commentary by Chetty and the responses we received will, we hope, contribute to debate and be helpful in discussions going forward. Finally, we emphasise that none of the decisions made in this regard was at ASSAf's behest or with ASSAf's involvement. As is the case with all articles published in the Journal, neither ASSAf, as the publisher, nor the editors accept responsibility for statements made by the authors.

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