

## What became of the SAJS

From the time of the 1973 facelift of the *SAJS*, the editor and his associates knew that the journal had to plan strategically. It needed to build credibility and to maintain it, otherwise it would not survive. This situation is as critical today as it ever was, in the increasingly competitive world of global scholarly publishing.

From the start, the decision was to take a multi-pronged approach. We had to custom-design and set up a methodical and meticulous record-keeping, editorial, and production system. We needed people on board who had the right skills to implement it, and the most systematic transition and handover arrangements we could devise whenever staff changed.

We had, over time, to prove ourselves to three main sets of constituents: authors, who wanted assurance that we were a trustworthy and reputable publication outlet for their best and most citable work; the various people responsible for the national science and technology research effort; and the international community of scholars with whom South Africans wanted to communicate.

The editorial policy we chose was to keep the journal multidisciplinary—this, we believed, would provide the most comprehensive window on the national scientific research scene, and, as traditional disciplinary boundaries kept breaking down, would give scientists the opportunity to keep up to date with developments in different but potentially related fields. For citability, however, we also needed focus, so we chose to concentrate on the range of natural sciences disciplines in which the country offered the finest material: it provided plenty of variety, and our impact started to grow.

Over the years, the *SAJS* has published articles in and related to every scientific discipline from archaeology to zoology (though few in the social sciences and humanities). Special theme issues have created suites of papers by leading South African and foreign scientists, which would otherwise have found no publishing outlet in this country. They represented such fields as: cellular and developmental biology; galaxy structures (an active area of astronomy to which South Africa has made pioneering contributions); palaeoanthropology and palaeontology (in which southern Africa is a unique source of abundant research material); studies of parasitic diseases (of great importance to African health care); microbiology; solid-state physics (there is no recognised physics journal published in Africa); environmental chemistry and atmospheric pollution (of concern to many interest groups in South Africa);

climatology and marine science. And so on ... The *SAJS* also became the only local outlet for peer-reviewed commentary on and analysis of science policy.

Another strategy was to follow a deliberately multi-format editorial approach, publishing full-length original research and review papers, as well as items of news, and commentary on issues affecting the practice of science in South Africa. In this way, the journal would encourage leading scientists to report on their work and serve the needs of local professional readers wanting an idea of the bigger picture and of the evolving context in which they worked. It would also encourage fledgling researchers to develop confidence, to get used to submitting their work to a quality research journal, and to become part of the national science community.

The problem with this policy is that it is editorially more difficult and demanding than looking after a more homogeneous specialist research periodical. It means taking time to mentor and assist. It also means keeping abreast of developments in many disciplines, as well as with the cross-cutting issues that connect them. For credibility, a degree of mastery in all trades was called for, and this remained a challenge to the editor for all the 35 years of his time at the *SAJS*.

At the heart of the problem, ironically, is the remarkably rich laboratory for scientific investigations that southern Africa represents. Researchers working in the subcontinent have ready access to an astonishing diversity of organisms both living (plants and animals) and dead (fossils of many kinds), diseases (human and other) urgently in need of attention, an inadequately understood marine and atmospheric environment that plays a crucial role in the working of the global biosphere, southern skies that have been far less observed by astronomers here than those north of the equator, a sophisticated research infrastructure, and a great diversity of human cultures. The pages of this publication, issued over 104 years, bear vivid testimony to the richness of material and the ingenuity with which it has been probed.

At the micro-level, to maintain world-class credibility and keep the *SAJS* attractive to good researchers, the dominant editorial practice was to offer the best 'packaging' available. Deliberately, we provided high-quality (albeit time-consuming) in-house copy-editing, and offered to authors the kind of personal attention and networking leads that no foreign publication was in a position to provide.

Finally, and most recently, four years ago, the journal originated a further

service to authors—the opportunity to reach out to a wider South African public. The Academy of Science of South Africa accepted our proposal to produce an offshoot of the *SAJS* in the form of the popular science magazine, *Quest: Science for South Africa*, and implementation was made possible with the support of the Department of Science and Technology. In this way, active and reliable researchers could be identified through our pages and invited, along with others, to contribute different kinds of articles for a broader readership. The enthusiasm for the magazine by young school pupils as well as senior professional researchers and decision-makers (the minister declared it was his preferred reading on aeroplanes) testified to the reliability of the science on offer, and the role that research journals can play as a conduit between scientists and their public, and as a generator of new interest in science, countrywide, among young and old alike.

As the *SAJS* moves forward into a new future, many of the challenges remain the same. As conditions change, new ways will have to be found to address them.

### Acknowledgements

Around the time of the *SAJS*'s centenary in 2004, there were over 1000 names of active authors on the *SAJS* database, and a similar number of reviewers. These are the first people to thank for having sustained the publication over the years.

The various publishers have also made their mark. Macmillan Journals of London inherited the *SAJS* from S<sub>2</sub>A<sub>3</sub> in late 1972 and sustained it long enough for the AS&TS (now sadly defunct, an exceptionally well-managed organization) to continue to support it for many years. At different times the FRD (now NRF) provided a welcome home, both before and after a near-calamitous period with FEST (now deservedly defunct). ASSAf assumed responsibility in 2002, with generous financial support from the Department of Science and Technology. The changes brought numerous office moves, involving two cities and six buildings.

The members of the editorial office team serially played their essential but unsung roles in keeping the journal going and growing. It is a special pleasure to mention my principal editorial assistants at different times: Bonnie Berger, Lyrr Thurston, Valerie Dean, Robyn Arnold, Meg Kemp, Eldaleen Hugo and Lizel Kleingebiel; typesetter Claire Jennings (now Kearney), who graduated from manual inputting via punched tape to electronic capture of text onto bromides and then film in Johannesburg—today Nico Dippenaar provides an incomparable service in Pretoria, taking edited manuscripts in familiar electronic format and transforming them into printer-ready CDs with minimum fuss and maximum expertise; and designer Carlo Kaminski, whose creativity and diligence have produced the beautiful *SAJS* covers of the most recent past.

To all who have served the *Journal* as members of its editorial board, and to the many people who have given me their generous personal support, I extend my thanks. To the incoming Editor-in-Chief, Michael Cherry, I extend my best wishes for many rewarding and successful years ahead.

G.B.