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# Publishing as knowledge clubs: ASSAf Statement on the Recognition of Editors and Peer Reviewers

## Significance:

Editing and reviewing powers the academic enterprise. Editors are conceptual shapeshifters implementing the national research framework. These activities are now recognised in the 'ASSAf Statement on the Recognition of the Work of Editors and Peer Reviewers of Academic Journals and Books in South Africa'. This article calls on universities to include such work in performance appraisals. It also proposes a dynamic knowledge club model of editing to co-exist with the conventional discrete product format. Knowledge does not arise from the sum of all articles published. Rather, it emerges out of the interactive potentialities that arise from journals as living documents that circulate meaning-making between editors, authors *and* readers.

A panel discussion at the 2021 National Scholarly Editors' Forum (NSEF) examined the question of why academics edit and/or peer review journals and books. The flipside of the question was why these tasks are underrecognised by many institutions in which editors and peer reviewers work.<sup>1</sup>

To address these questions, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) liaised with editors of South African scholarly journals in developing a consensus statement on the matter. The preamble of this 'ASSAf Statement on the Recognition of the Work of Editors and Peer Reviewers of Academic Journals and Books in South Africa' observes that:

*These roles are essential for upholding research quality and ensuring the integrity of scholarly discourse, yet current academic reward structures often overlook their value. ASSAf highlights the need for university and science council administrators to formally acknowledge and support editorial work, proposing specific recommendations to enhance recognition within performance appraisals. By strengthening the recognition of these roles, ASSAf aims to sustain a credible and effective scholarly publishing ecosystem that supports knowledge dissemination and contributes to national and global research development.*<sup>2</sup>

The 1.5-page Statement encourages universities to acknowledge the work done by editors and peer reviewers, and to note the key roles that they play in sustaining research quality. The compilation of the document, led by Phillip de Jager, ironically, took two years to formulate, review, revise and approve in a digital world that is developing at breakneck speed. To summarise, the Statement's conclusions and recommendations are:

- Good peer review is crucial to significant intergenerational research.
- Universities, beneficiaries of scholarly journal work, should support editors and reviewers with time and recognition in performance appraisals.
- Reward systems should recognise editors and reviewers who maintain and build their disciplines.
- Editing, review and active editorial board work should be recategorised from 'academic leadership' to the 'research' category.

The first part of this contribution elaborates on these conclusions and recommendations by focusing on editor–author relations. The second deals with editor–regulator–administrator relations. The third describes editing as tactically enabling group formation.

## Editor–author relations

In 2023, journal editor Gerhard van den Heever's open letter<sup>3</sup> addressing scattergun authors who swamp his journal illustrates some of the frustrations experienced by editors:

*Dear Author,*

*I would like to believe that you submitted to this journal because you have been impressed by the quality of its articles, and because it is the best venue from which to communicate with your envisaged academic audience,*

*Why, then, did you not read the aims and focus of the journal?*

*Moreover, you ignored the instructions for authors ... you create the impression that your article is just doing the rounds... [shortened and edited]<sup>3</sup>*

Van den Heever's satire admonishes authors whose pre-submission apathy complicates the workload of editors. It also indicates that many inexperienced scholars are floating aimlessly outside national and international disciplinary associations. His letter reminds us that editors collaborate with peers to produce new knowledge and facilitate exchange between authors and readers. Such exchange is facilitated by publishers who provide the necessary technical, administrative, production and distribution systems, thereby enabling both scholarly and public benefit.

South Africa sports a unique research and publication value chain that is much debated in scholarly circles. Administrative emphasis, however, mostly focuses on a single component – the publication incentive scheme administered by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

## Editor–regulator–administrator relations

The Bureau for Scientific Publications that operated from the late 1970s onwards provided centralised editorial, production and marketing for 20 journals whose impact factors nevertheless remained low.<sup>4</sup> Following the closure of the Bureau in 1994, ASSAf and the then Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology devised a new community-responsive strategy to address the unfolding post-apartheid political, ideological and technological policy environments. This strategy aimed to:

- promote the local and international standing of South African journals;
- improve productivity/efficacy via new digital platforms; and
- popularise knowledge for public benefit.<sup>5</sup>

Outcomes of the work of the Bureau included the stabilisation and professionalisation of journals, measurably enhancing the exposure of South African research globally after 2005. The number of journal titles increased from 236 in 2005 to 337 today, while the volume of accredited articles skyrocketed from 6661 in 2005 to 26 017 by 2022. During this period, 76 journals licensed themselves, many via Unisa Press, to the Taylor & Francis multinational that has an office in Cape Town, and which embraces a wider consortium that includes MedPharm and National Inquiry Scholarly Services.<sup>6</sup> This homegrown business partnership that emerged from an initiative by the National Research Foundation (NRF) from the early 2000s soon catapulted these journals into the global arena, securing them long-term sustainability. While some firms are criticised for making excess profits, income and improved capacity results from considerable capital investment in their publishing infrastructures, including in South Africa, to enable them to select, augment and internationally magnify their authors' content. Journals and legacy publishers take a risk as they invest in evaluation and production, distribution and marketing, and hosting in perpetuity. As the 2006 ASSAf report suggested<sup>6</sup>, working with professionals frees editors to conceptualise and edit and to not have to deal with the many expensive technical, administrative and legal tasks that publishers need to do to keep the presses rolling (so to speak).

The founding ASSAf strategists presciently warned of emergent electronic publication enabling easy journal proliferation and an associated “avalanche of published rubbish”<sup>5</sup>. Digitisation, feared ASSAf, could act as a “lifesaver” for weak titles. Indeed, the current overprovision of local journals in disciplines like law, religion and education strains available funding. In management studies, for example, plagiarism within the 17 journal titles is calculated to have cost the Treasury ZAR7 million in just one year.<sup>7</sup> The ASSAf report<sup>5</sup> also cautioned against a ‘publish or perish’ culture underpinning appointment, promotion, recognition and institutional budgeting.

Internal reward systems devised by different universities drawing on the DHET incentive for publications need to keep in mind the procedures that characterise the conventions of normal science.<sup>8</sup> A consequence of institutional economies predicated, for example, on ‘billable units’ discourages early career academics from editorial endeavour and the writing of critical engagements such as rejoinders, commentaries and book reviews. Overproduction in pursuit of incentives is questioned by the NRF and ASSAf evaluation panels as seriously stressing quality management, while the burden of review falls to a shrinking pool overwhelmed by the tsunami of submissions. Moreover, the just-arrived ‘elephant in the room’, artificial intelligence (AI), enables machine-mass-produced output, portending the final de-centring and even the ‘death’ of autonomous human authors.

Because editing and peer reviewing are the engine of the entire scholarly enterprise, the ASSAf recommendation is that university performance indicators formally recognise editorial activities. As backroom professionals, editors mostly perform after-hours work pro bono so that others can benefit. While the journals *are the conduit for DHET annual publication incentive transfers (ZAR3.4 billion) to universities*, it is the journals (and, less so, authors) that are subject to periodic ASSAf auditing because it is their accreditation status that confers value on outputs (both symbolic and financial). The paradox, therefore, is that authors – no matter the quality, impact or use-value of their articles – are rewarded via their universities, while it is the journals (i.e. the editors, reviewers and publishers) that, overall, shape, produce and disseminate the published product.

The Statement is a call for recognition of the fundamental work that is done by editors, editorial boards, peer reviewers and publishers. No longer can their work be inexplicably obscured, with editors assumed by authors, administrators and auditors to be simply filing clerks.

## What do editors do?

A wonderful blog called *The Scholarly Kitchen* published ‘102 Things Journal Publishers Do’.<sup>9</sup> This ever-lengthening document, like hundreds of other websites addressing this question, however, elides the bigger picture of *the conceptual in relation to the logistical*. Journals are phases in iterative processes; they are not objects, products or consumables. Finding truth involves the accumulation of discrete case studies and connecting the dots within the wider scope of the journal itself, with reference to other networks of collaboration in which editors, authors, reviewers and readers are embedded.

Most submissions come from inexperienced authors.<sup>10</sup> Responsive editors thus:

- Shape disciplines, change paradigms and lead the academic enterprise.
- Recruit interpretive communities and connect them with each other.
- Mentor successive generations in researching, writing and peer review.
- Generate knowledge clubs of authors, readers and policymakers, consolidating problem-solving around pressing issues.<sup>11</sup>

In addition:

- Editors obtain a bird’s-eye view – both the good and the bad – as they plot conceptual routes while keeping sight of historical epistemological roots.
- Good editors and reviewers nurture, enable and educate rather than vetoing, policing or excluding simply because they can.
- Good reviewers and editors point a manuscript in new directions, ask interesting questions and generally are unacknowledged co-authors (De Jager P 2024, personal communication, 13 September).
- Good editors work with authors in developing their manuscripts and inserting emergent scholars into the journal’s wider scholarly community.
- Reviewers protect against junk science, AI opportunism and predatory authors.

The ASSAf discussions noted that, while universities sometimes support editors, editors reciprocally support universities in terms of the ‘knowledge project’, which is the original purpose of the university.<sup>1</sup>

## The third dimension: Group formation

The ‘transmission product display model’ basically involves a one-to-many linear dissemination of packaged information. In contrast, the ‘knowledge club model’ constitutes publishing as dynamic, multifaceted scholarly group formation, often also grounded within disciplinary associations and particular, institutionally led, schools of thought. Knowledge club members thereby form self-constituted communities of interest to confer unpriced, symbolic benefits on associates of the wider community who both produce and consume pooled products.<sup>11</sup> One assessor of this Commentary asked how the ‘knowledge club’ could wrestle power [and profits] from the big publishers. The DHET scheme is, however, historically predicated on national and international publication, public, private or hybrid value chains. A specific study testing this assumption about publishers’ excess profits would be welcome.

The community of interest club model balances the positive externalities of shared resources (readers, citations, referees, reviewers and commentators) against the negative externalities of overcrowding, congestion and overproduction, massification and predator behaviour. A tactical illustration of such practice is the rigorously evaluated, guest-edited thematic number that arises out of a multicampus team project or topic that generates knowledge that is always in motion, building capacity,

critical mass and neural networking. The two models can subsist in the same journal, but there can be creative tension between them.

The knowledge club model encourages self-reflexive analysis and participation in each other's dialectically grounded intellectual action with evidence-led practices. The club or scholarly community mediates debates, negotiates epistemological differences and manages conceptual contestations. It achieves these by embracing intellectual cultures and member benefits and by shaping publishing institutions to suit their own needs. Joint production and consumption by the scholarly community create viable mini-economies of team production and consumption.

Such management and interaction are crucial in the current alienated environment of industrial-scale mega-journals and mass (author) markets that gobble up and frame research outputs as atomised 'products' paid for by the author's institution but 'free' to the dispersed reader or consumer.<sup>12</sup> As Umberto Eco<sup>13</sup>, the Italian philosopher argues, information oversupply silences the relevance of necessary information. He adds: "To make a noise, you don't have to invent stories. All you have to do is report a story that is real but irrelevant..."<sup>13(p.36-42)</sup>. The entropic transmission model favoured by mega-journals – whether publicly or corporately owned – mutes synergetic group formation and often creates noise as scholars with redundant stories to tell lose themselves in the rolling digital textual mass.

Recentring scholarly communities of interest would focus on transdisciplinary (self)-identity, contribution and benefits to specific communities with the re-emergence of local commons.<sup>11(p.4)</sup> The club model participation includes reading, commenting, book reviewing, research letters and editorialising as key components. Indeed, these elements underpin the highly promoted and very successful *South African Journal of Science* model.

Guidelines offer shortlists of preferences, nothing more. Best practice technicalities should include the club dimension of a journal's living conceptual phases. The periodic ASSAf journal panel evaluations can track continuous reorganisation, rebirth and revitalisation, such as reported, for example, by *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*<sup>14</sup> amongst others<sup>15,16</sup>. Such semiotic dynamism is insufficiently recognised by one-size-fits-all best practice statements that need to connect the conceptual with the administrative, the theory-building with the self-identified constituencies (authors/readers, users), and knowledge creation with dialogue beyond the discrete, stand-alone article.

The instrumentalisation of editorial practices in over-prescriptive injunctions and policies based on positivist frameworks of doing and interpreting needs to be reassessed. Editors should be understood as innovators, creators and conceptual capacity-builders operating within special interest knowledge clubs. Such clubs enable interpretive communities to dialogue with each other and be geared now to saving humankind from its own self-induced extinction – the message of the 2023 ASSAf Members Meeting.

## To conclude

The ASSAf Statement repositions editors and reviewers as the enablers of public conceptual innovation. It recognises editors as navigators towards new symbolic worlds. Crucially, the Statement inserts editor value within an official value chain that currently undervalues them. It valorises editor knowledge as a fundamental intellectual cognate that, while embracing technical journal administration, is not reduced to those technicalities.

Editors and reviewers are co-guardians of the "Earth's thinking envelope"<sup>17(p.30-31)</sup>, dealing daily with the impatient not-so-hypothetical author who is the recipient of Van den Heever's<sup>3</sup> caution, expressed thus:

*... before you fire off angry letters of demand to know when you can expect publication of your submitted article ... just spare a moment to think of the immense amount of work that goes into the making of each issue of this journal ...*

*... research is not the impressionistic stitching together of references, citations, reports, and opinions.*

This is why the ASSAf Statement is needed. Editors are the heart of the enterprise, and they also need to be nurtured, recognised and acknowledged by both authors and institutions.

Editors as conceptual shapeshifters are perhaps what the founders of the mid-2000s national research framework had in mind. Relational club organisation that enables intensive scholar interaction and self-management is adeptly supported through infrastructure provided by the globally unique ASSAf Scholarly Publishing Programme. We have the philosophy and the well-managed organisational structure to support the various publishing models.

Knowledge is not the sum of all articles published. Rather, it arises out of the interactive potentialities that arise from them as living documents in constant negotiation with each other that circulate meaning-making between editors, authors and readers.

## Declarations

I am the Chair of ASSAf's Committee on Scholarly Publishing in South Africa, which commissioned the Statement to which this article refers. I have no AI or LLM use to declare.

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