



Foreword

Jannie Malan

Recently, I was startled when realising that most of the forewords I have written thus far were mainly *reader*-oriented. That prompted me to write an *author*-oriented one, for a change. More than that, it made me realise that it is indeed an editor's responsibility to share some important thoughts with prospective authors. Apologies, therefore, for having neglected this duty.

The most important thought I feel urged to communicate is one that comes from my experience during the processes of peer reviewing and editing. It is about something that is emphasised at the very beginning of the *National Code of Best Practice in Editorial Discretion and Peer Review for South African Scholarly Journals*, namely '*new findings and/or insights*' (ASSAf 2008:2, my emphasis). According to this Code of Best Practice, this is perhaps the most fundamental principle of research publishing.

When reading this five-word phrase, '*new findings and/or insights*', in the context of an important paragraph in the Code, one tends to respond with 'Yes, of course'. Which is a good response, but needs to be taken seriously and implemented properly. From my experience, therefore, I wish to annotate the phrase with three paragraphs.

The first is about *acknowledgement*, which is duly emphasised in the Code. As researchers we have a treasury of already existing printed and electronic information at our disposal, which contains the new findings and new insights of researchers who have preceded us – in the more distant and the more recent past. When making use of their work, it is therefore incumbent

upon us to recognise and duly reference their findings and insights, and to present ours in a way which precludes any appearance that we are claiming credit for the achievements of a predecessor.

Secondly, there is the factor of genuine *innovation*. While we are privileged to build on previous research in our field, and are indeed entitled to do so, we are supposed to avoid mere rehashing, replicating, rearranging or reformulating. We are expected to come up with our original findings and/or insights. According to the Code, the question is ‘whether the context and/or detail of the new findings and/or insights are sufficiently different to merit addition to the matrix of knowledge through publication’ (ASSAf 2008:3). And, very correctly, the Code calls this ‘a frequently vexed question’. Indeed, peer reviewers and editors often have to ponder over whether their assessment takes full regard of the ‘sufficiently different’ criterion. They may have to guard against subjective impressions, and try to be as objective as possible. They may have to remember that as knowledge and insights grow, sometimes with explosive increases or quantum leaps, the probabilities for stunning new discoveries may be decreasing. We may have to learn to be satisfied with smaller, incremental bits of newness.

Thirdly, there is the option of attention-attracting *emphasis*. As academic researchers we are probably not on the show-business wavelength, and may even frown upon such propagandising, but we may have to acquire some degree of showmanship/showwomanship. After all, we have to remember that our ‘learned’ articles are usually labelled by the reading public as ‘dry, boring stuff’. We should therefore give heed to ways of attracting the attention of colleagues and readers to what we regard as a contribution which is *new and significant*. (Please note how I use a few tricks of emphasis.) Some innovations are clever and cute, but not necessarily very meaningful. Our challenge is to make it clear – from title and abstract, through headings, sub-headings and body, to the conclusion and recommendation(s) – that our articles are disseminating currently relevant and significantly applicable messages.

Once again, please remember that answers to the question about sufficient newness are possibly always arguable. But to the best of our own insights, our peer reviewers and editorial teams have used it in the past, and will keep using it in future. We therefore encourage prospective authors to bear this criterion in mind and plan their articles accordingly. Such articles should make a significant impact, and should be, not only reader-friendly, but also reader-inspiring.

Source referred to

ASSAf (Academy of Science of South Africa) 2008. *National Code of Best Practice in Editorial Discretion and Peer Review for South African Scholarly Journals*. Pretoria, ASSAf.