

EDITORIAL

BUILDING ON A SOUND FOUNDATION

In 1996 Alan Sokal, a physicist at New York University, submitted a paper to *Social Text*, a leading scholarly journal of postmodernist cultural studies. The journal's peer reviewers, whose job it is to ensure that published research is up to snuff, gave it a resounding thumbs-up. But when the editors duly published the paper, Dr Sokal revealed that it had been liberally, and deliberately, 'salted with nonsense'. The Sokal hoax, as it came to be known, demonstrated how easy it was for any old drivel to pass academic quality control in highbrow humanities journals, so long as it contained lots of fancy words and pandered to referees' and editors' ideological preconceptions.¹

Thus opens an article that goes on to show that even hard science has its problems with publication. John Bohannon, a biologist at Harvard, submitted his paper to 304 peer-reviewed journals around the world. He used a different name for himself and made up the academic institution that he purportedly represented. The paper explained how a chemical extracted from lichen appeared to slow the growth of cancer cells. It was filled with clear errors in experimental design, in analysis and in interpretation of results.

How did the journals respond? The article:

- was accepted without question in 157 cases;
- rejected in 98 cases;
- met with responses from among these cases that implied that they recognised the problems with the paper in 36 cases, although 16 of these eventually accepted it anyway.
- The remaining 49 had not responded or had not reviewed the paper by the time Bohannon published his findings—about scientific publication, not cancer treatment—in *Science*.

In this editorial, I explain how we sustain the quality and relevance of the papers that we publish, and I take a brief look at the future of the Journal.

1 Science's Sokal moment, *The Economist*, 5 October 2013, p 73

Weighty responsibility

I should start by acknowledging the obligation that comes with the position of editor of the *South African Actuarial Journal* (SAAJ, “the Journal”), an obligation made no easier by the foundation laid by my predecessor, Prof Rob Thomson, who started the journal as we entered the new millennium and took it through 13 editions. I have acted over that time in the role of author and reviewer; of different papers I hasten to add. Nothing quite prepared me, though, for the challenges of this role and the sense of the significance of the contribution that this publication makes to the actuarial profession in our country.

I start by asking the obvious question. What is the purpose of this publication? At its simplest, it is as it appears, a collection of research papers focused on subjects of interest to practitioners or teachers of actuarial science in South Africa. It follows that it seeks also to attract the attention of those who, not working, studying or teaching in the subject, may nevertheless be interested in the contribution of actuarial thought to their own related area. More broadly, it adds to the pool of quality thinking of the entire academic community in this country, through its membership of the Academy of Science of South Africa, and, I hope, to the world of actuarial science and related fields outside our borders.

I trust that all of our authors, and those that we seek to attract to write for the Journal, recognise this part of its role and aspire to be associated with it in this way. Publication in a quality peer-reviewed periodical represents high aspiration. What we really seek, though, is to make a material contribution to the development of actuarial thought and practice. We would like this publication, in short, to make a difference.

From submission to publication in practice

It should go without saying that the criteria most important to our assessment of submissions received by this Journal are the quality and relevance of the research to the SAAJ and the community that it serves. We assess prospective papers against these aspirations in a number of ways.

Every paper must be relevant to the publication in which it appears. The same applies, of course, to the SAAJ. There is necessarily a degree of subjectivity in this regard and I have little doubt that the boundaries that we define for inclusion will expand over time. The term ‘wider fields’ has a more inclusive meaning now, for example, than it did in days of yore when health-care financing was considered new territory for actuaries and banking a foreign land. Nevertheless, a paper published in the Journal should be of interest and relevance to our readers even if, from time to time, it takes them outside of what they might regard as an actuarial field. If it belongs more aptly in the corresponding publication of a different area of thought, we turn it down, requesting the author to consider that route instead.

The subjectivity involved makes it absolutely critical that we seek and obtain support for our thinking. The editor of this Journal receives such support in four ways.

- The Assistant Editor shares some of the workload and provides another set of thoughts on whether a submission might be appropriate.
- The Editorial Panel provides critical thinking on each manuscript received, helping

to assess whether it might be appropriate for inclusion and providing thoughts on the scrutineers that may be appropriate to review the submission.

- The Research Committee of the Actuarial Society of South Africa, on which I serve as member by virtue of my office, provides oversight on behalf of the profession, and invaluable fraternal support to the editor.
- Readers, authors and the wider actuarial community provide support in the form of their letters, submissions and informal communications that together provide an informal indication of the success with which the Journal is contributing to this community.

The scrutineers are critical to this process and could easily be identified as a fifth form of support. Because scrutineers are identified specifically for each submission, however, I would like to think of this community of contributors differently. When we receive a paper, I send the outline of the manuscript to the editorial panel, requesting their views on appropriate scrutineers. Identifying, approaching and confirming the support of the two scrutineers can take time, but we aim nevertheless always to secure the support of two: the integrity of the peer review process is critical to the success of this journal.

Scrutiny may take a number of weeks. Scrutineers are asked, unless they are convinced that the paper is not suitable for publication, to complete a standard form to facilitate our communication with the prospective author on the status of the paper. If their view is that the paper should be rejected, we make sure that we understand the reasons for this, but we seldom argue the point. Once a scrutineer has been selected, we are strongly inclined to follow the views of these invaluable volunteers.

Quite commonly the opinion of the scrutineer is that the paper should be accepted for publication, but that further work is required before it is ready for release. The hard work begins at this point. The challenge to the editor is to harmonise the thinking of two or more scrutineers and to convince the author of the merit of the thinking of these experts. The journey from this point to publication involves a process of reviewing, editing and typesetting that is seldom without its challenges but critical to the quality of the Journal.

We cannot overstate the importance of our assessment of relevance and quality. We work hard to address the risks associated with the subjectivity, but if we determine that a paper is not appropriate for publication, we do not hesitate to make that call. We have turned down more submissions this year than we have accepted. That is not easy, but quality control is, of course, essential to our efforts to ensure that the publication upholds the standards that it sets and that it continues to attract work of the highest quality.

Thinking for the future

If I have one clear objective for the future, it is to attract a wider range of submissions. There are a number of ways to do this. We could encourage different types of articles, comments on pertinent issues, for example. We could start a second journal or a new section in the existing journal, reserved perhaps for first-time or younger authors, or we could publish a parallel online version with different content.

We haven't ruled any of these out, but they are not attractive options on the face of it.

All of these approaches risk changing the face of the existing high-quality offering and could in consequence alienate the best of authors who may regard the new publication as not sufficiently serious for their work. What I would really like to see is a good mix of papers reflecting both theoretical, academic excellence and helpful application to the real world. My sense is that we have such a mix in this year's papers. I would like to keep that up. I emphasise that, while this may be a goal of the publication, I will not turn down papers in future just because they detract from any such targeted mix.

We have made one significant change to our practice. Papers that have been through scrutiny, editing and typesetting will be made available to the *SAAJ* web site as soon as this is complete rather than waiting for publication of the hard copy. We hope that this will encourage submissions from those who have been concerned about the time it takes for their papers to see the light of day.

We are also quite happy to use the web site for the publication of material not easily included in the paper itself. Authors who may wish to make available voluminous supporting material, such as data or questionnaires, may choose to publish these along with their papers on the site rather than including them as appendices in the paper version.

We are looking as well at the possibilities of changes to the publication itself. I am the first to admit that I found it frustrating as writer to adhere to the requirements of formatting. I sympathise with our authors but it is not easy to get the papers to publication. Nevertheless, we are looking at options for making this process easier.

The font and form will also receive attention. This is also not an easy process. Some would suggest that Times New Roman belongs in the history books. I am probably one of those. Others like the traditional, familiar feel and wouldn't wish to change it for anything. We will have a look at this, but first we'll consider the size and style of the publication itself.

So much for the cosmetics. What matters most is that we keep up the quality. Then it would be good to attract a wide range of prospective papers. An attractive publication would be a bonus.

A road well walked

I cannot complete this editorial without expressing my warm appreciation for the foundation laid by Prof Thomson. The processes are in good shape. The filing system that he has left to me is perfect. But most valuable of all is the legacy. This is a fine publication with a track record of excellence. I hope to be able to keep this up and build on it.

This is also a time for me to bid adieu to Assistant Editor Megan Butler, who has decided that editing takes away time, and thinking space I suspect, from research itself. It is with disappointment that I accept Megan's decision to leave, but with a certain anticipation that she will appear in the publication more frequently as a result. Megan's dedication to the task has been invaluable to me.

Jo-Anne Friedlander, who has been with the Journal from the beginning, is the energy behind the publication itself. I am very grateful for her tireless commitment to excellence and her superb eye for detail.

Thank you also to the members of the editorial advisory panel—you can find their names on the inside front cover of the publication—to the research committee of the Actuarial Society and to the executive and council of ASSA for their support. Colleagues, a challenge that we need to address is defining the contribution of the Journal to the Society.

Might we fall into the trap of the Sokal hoax that John Bohannon so beautifully replicated? We would be foolish to claim that it could not affect us, but we do our best to prevent it.