



A journal's dilemma

Some years ago, I was working with a graduate student who was interested to research issues of transformation in a South African institution. The student was an insider to the institution and was aware of many of the strides the institution had made towards change but also knew the many challenges and disappointments along the way. I met with colleagues of the student, who were enthusiastic about the study. All that remained in terms of access was the go-ahead from the non-executive chair of the board of the organisation.

When the student and I met the chair of the organisation, the chair informed us that she was in support of the study in principle, but she could not approve the study as the methods were so bad. The student had chosen to use qualitative methods with an ethnographic component; according to the board chair, these methods were inappropriate as they were not scientific and the qualitative sampling would lead to skewed results. The board chair (who was not a researcher, and, as far as I know, had never completed any graduate research training) informed me that only quantitative methods were scientific and that proper sampling was required. My own suspicion about this response was that the concerns were not actually methodological but, instead, based on a fear of reputational damage to the organisation as a result of the research. I was proved right in this suspicion when we presented the board chair with a revised proposal which comprised a substantial quantitative component and a commitment to survey every single person who was part of the organisation. At this point, the board chair said that any research done on the organisation could cause damage, and that she would not allow us to proceed. The student had to abandon this particular project.

There are many issues in this story which are relevant to considering the functioning of science in the public domain. Some, for example, have to do with the problems of the permeable boundary in community-based research between, on the one hand, community representatives who, as far as is possible, speak on behalf of stakeholder groups, and, on the other, gatekeepers who may block access for a range of reasons not necessarily fully aligned with a careful consideration of what the best interests of a community are.¹ For the purposes of this discussion, though, I want to point to the conflation between methodological concerns and criticisms as first expressed by the board chair, and other concerns which were not initially expressed. The question of method here seems to have been used as an acceptable smokescreen for worries about possible reputational damage to the organisation.

As a science journal, our commitment is to publish work which, to borrow terms from our mission and vision statements, is 'excellent' and 'high quality'. Traditionally, and in our journal, the assessment of the quality of research articles depends heavily on methodological considerations, as our *reviewer guidelines* reflect.

But we have a further commitment, and this is a commitment to publish, as we say on our website, 'for the benefit of scholars, educators, the general public and policymakers'. We also promise to provide 'a forum for discussion of news and developments in research and higher education'. These criteria are not methodological in the narrow sense, but ideological. We commit ourselves to exercise judgement about whether research is 'of benefit'. This means we can decide, within our remit,

not to publish work which may be methodologically and theoretically sound in a narrow sense but is also, in our view, for example, racist, sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, or disablist. We make no apology for this commitment, especially in light of the many past shameful abuses of science to oppressive and even murderous ends.² We also believe that discussion and debate is important for the development of science and the academy more broadly – through dissent and argument, ideas develop and grow.

All of this looks quite simple, but there is an implicit contradiction. As a journal, and especially as a journal funded by the public purse in South Africa, we strive to promote views which are in line with our view of what may be best for society. But it would be arrogant of us to suggest that we are arbiters of the public good, simply by virtue of our being a science journal. Indeed, one of the values we espouse as scientists is that debate is to be encouraged as a necessary part of the development of ideas. But we cannot have proper debate unless we publish views which are not fully aligned with our own. We may have our own beliefs about when authors are wrong, mischievous, or even destructive in their submissions, but we are not censors. We are aware of how the concept of 'free speech' has been abused by right-wing activists and how difficult and entangled discussions of 'free speech' can be^{3,4} – just google the words 'your right to say it' to find distasteful examples. So these issues are not simple or uncontested.

As a journal, as are other journals, we are committed to what we believe is good for science and society – a part of which is the tolerance of and engagement with dissent. This faces us with the oft-cited dilemma of giving platform for views with which we disagree, or may find abhorrent.

We do not have a solution to the dilemma we face – we cannot hide fully behind the argument that our decisions are made on the basis of an incontrovertible standard of what constitutes sound methods and argument. Nor can we escape the challenge that values play in making our decisions. We are aware that we will have readers who question the motives of some of our authors and who are angered by our decision to publish material with which they (and we) may disagree. But our current approach to this is to err on the side of allowing discussion, and encouraging readers to engage in debate. There may well be those who will ask how we came to publish certain contributions as they see them to be not in the public interest. We encourage these interlocutors to submit their own views and debates for publication. We appeal to all our readers to help us navigate these complex issues.

References

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