



Check for updates

Reflections of an Editor-in-Chief: 2019–2021

AUTHOR:

Jane Carruthers¹

AFFILIATION:

¹Department of History, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

CORRESPONDENCE TO:

Jane Carruthers

EMAIL:

J.carruthers@mweb.co.za

HOW TO CITE:

Carruthers J. Reflections of an Editor-in-Chief: 2019–2021. *S Afr J Sci.* 2024;120(Special issue: Celebrating 120 years), Art. #20108. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2024/20108>

ARTICLE INCLUDES:

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

KEYWORDS:

South African Journal of Science, journal publishing, marketing, strategy, management

PUBLISHED:

07 November 2024

On 26 February 2019 I was honoured and delighted to be informed that I, an historian by training and with a specific interest in the history of the natural sciences, had been appointed to the part-time position of Editor-in-Chief of the *South African Journal of Science (SAJS)*, a publication with a long history and a high reputation. I knew, of course, that for almost a century it had been the most important multidisciplinary journal in the country providing items of scholarly news as well as publishing original research in a manner that could be understood and appreciated by non-specialists. It was a publication with which I was familiar and that enlightened me on topics beyond my disciplinary field, so I accepted the post with several specific objectives in mind and these are explained below.

During the initial months of my tenure, my predecessor, John Butler-Adam, was of enormous assistance with wise advice and guidance. So too was the staff of the Journal. Managing Editor Linda Fick and Online Publishing System Administrators, first Nadine van der Merwe and then Nadia Grobler. This team, who produce and publish the Journal, manage design and layout, general appearance and despatch with technical expertise and experience, could not have been more patient and helpful.

Before I could get to my main objectives as Editor-in-Chief, however, I found a full inbox of submissions demanding my attention almost every day. Evaluating their initial suitability for publication, in terms of subject, novelty, importance, geographical and disciplinary focus, writing style, and interest to a wide range of readers was a tremendous learning experience. Working closely with the Associate Editors and their mentees who handle manuscript acceptance, peer review assessment and readiness for publication, was extremely satisfying and among them I made many personal friends.

I had been an ASSAf Member since 2012 and it was a pleasure to be integrated into the ASSAf community, interacting with the President, Jonathan Jansen, and Council Members as well as the Executive Officer Himla Soodyall and others. It was rewarding to be included in the numerous initiatives run by the Scholarly Publishing Unit under the expert direction of Susan Veldsman. Within a few months, I became familiar with the workings of the Journal and ASSAf and began to feel comfortable about suggesting future direction and activities for the publication.

The first objective to which I gave attention was to institute a strategic plan to provide a clear framework for the editorial function. This had been under discussion for some time but never finalised. Beginning in July 2019, we held a series of consultative meetings with the publishing team, with the Executive Officer, and with the Editorial Advisory Board. The draft strategic plan, which I presented to the ASSAf Council and senior managers at a meeting in February 2020, was approved. It offered a clear vision and mission for the Journal to align more closely with ASSAf's own updated strategic plan. It also expanded and strengthened the Editorial Advisory Board to include scholars who were world leaders in their fields and thus to raise the stature, profile, and expertise of the Journal, both in South Africa and internationally. After being approved by the ASSAf Council, the first meeting of the expanded Board took place in September 2020.

My second strategic aim was to broaden the readership and contributions, particularly among younger scholars. But I also wanted the many ASSAf Members, SARChi Chairs, and highly rated National Research Foundation researchers, as well as officials in the Department of Science and Innovation, the CSIR, NRF, and other research bodies to submit material. I had envisaged giving personal presentations at conferences and on university campuses to explain the merits of publishing in our outstanding multidisciplinary Journal as well as in specialist outlets. To this end, in December 2019, the Journal hosted a successful round table of senior scholars in a panel to deliberate on the topic 'Pure or applied science in the Age of the Anthropocene: which does South Africa 2030 need more urgently?' at Science Forum South Africa (CSIR Conference Centre, Pretoria) where it, and the Journal, attracted considerable attention. This particular subject had arisen in a previous issue of the Journal and the panel was the suggestion of Kevern Cochrane of Rhodes University. Around this same time, I visited North-West University to speak to postgraduate biology students about publishing in the Journal. Regrettably, after March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic intervened with restrictions that made personal contact impossible. In June 2020, I represented the SAJS as a (virtual) panellist at the European Conference on Research Ethics at the University of Aveiro (Aveiro, Portugal), but the face-to-face marketing opportunities were lost.

My third goal was to reconsider Associate Editor portfolios. This was necessary partly because of the complexity of the humanities and social science disciplines and we also needed to ensure that ASSAf Members were appointed in these roles. The question of peer review was another matter that required attention because it was becoming more difficult to find willing peer reviewers and the review process frequently took far too long. This frustrated good authors and discouraged their willingness to publish in the Journal. There were additional matters to which we, as a team, needed to give attention. For example, improving our statistics and monitoring to gain more knowledge of authors and readers and actively to fill gaps in diversity of disciplines and authorship. I was also keen to see all the back issues of the Journal digitised and, as an historian, I would like to have been able to make a stronger case for working within a different referencing system that would be more user friendly for the humanities and social sciences than Vancouver; one that allowed for explanatory notes as well as sources and references.

During my term of office, five issues of the Journal highlighted specific themes. One explored the challenges of dealing with marine plastic waste and pollution and was the suggestion of, and guest edited by, Linda Godfrey, Manager of South Africa's Waste RDI Roadmap Implementation Unit at the CSIR. Other issues had special sections devoted to COVID-19 and to peer review, both highly topical at the time. It was a particular pleasure to share, with Teresa Coutinho, our Associate Editor for Agriculture and Forestry who was the Guest Editor, the celebration of 2020 as the International Year of Plant Health with an issue full of landmark articles on this subject. Owing

© 2024. The Author(s). Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.



to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, we were unable to launch this issue as planned at the large congress of the South African Society of Plant Pathologists that was to be convened at the end of 2020, but we did so, virtually, in January 2021. The use of specifically themed issues, especially on topics of immediate public interest is of immense value.

An unusual compilation issue that appeared in 2020 on the theme 'Intellectual and social critique: The role of the *South African Journal of Science*', was precipitated by vituperative – even libellous – social media attention created by a commentary authored in a previous Journal issue by Professor Nicoli Nattrass, one of South Africa's leading social scientists. Her article on the study choices of black students triggered fierce controversy and exposed the vulnerability of a mainstream scholarly journal such as the SAJS to undisciplined populist pressure and unacademic conduct. With strong support from ASSAf, and the work of the publication team who shouldered additional burdens at

very short notice, a special issue was published that contained an extensive rejoinder from Nattrass flanked by a variety of responses to her original contribution. The purpose was to frame disagreements responsibly within the parameters of academic freedom and scholarship in appropriate fora for academic debate.

After two years in the Editor-in-Chief position, I took the decision to return to my home discipline and concentrate on personal projects. My period in office was hugely rewarding; I had been exposed to some extraordinary and varied research in different fields and had interacted with interesting professional teams at ASSAf and beyond.

Declarations

There are no competing interests to declare. There is no AI or LLM use to declare.