



Journals editing, editor recognition, and impacting disciplines

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“Why edit (a journal)?” When asked this question, some have responded thus: “To get promoted”. This anecdote underpinned a panel discussion at the 2021 National Scholarly Editors’ Forum (NSEF) on “Whether research (and editing) should be fun”. Organised under the auspices of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), this annual meeting involves editors from all 320+ journals registered in South Africa, though thanks to electrical loadshedding and other considerations, less than 100 could participate at any one time. The panel was organised and chaired by Phillip de Jager of the Department of Finance and Tax, University of Cape Town. He is associate editor of *Meditari Accountancy Research*, the *Journal of Accounting in Emerging Economies*, and the *South African Journal of Accounting Research*. This is a discipline where its professors tend to show greater allegiance to the profession than to the university, with attendant implications for (lack) of research and publication (Venter and de Villiers 1246).

The editor of the Australian *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* wrote in a special issue dedicated to its two recently deceased founders that she was advised not to expend her energy editing a journal, as she is “sacrificing” her own time “to support others” (Allmark 330).

In light of uncollegial Key Performance Indicator (KPI) crassness, de Jager hoped that the NSEF panel would generate discussion on academic citizenship. That is, why editing should be valued and encouraged by both academics and professionals in contributing to the greater goals of the common good. But as Herman Wasserman, editor-in-chief of *African Journalism Studies*, observes: publishing is a passion and even a “form of activism to a contemporary environment where the enterprise has become much more pragmatic and ‘professionalised’”. In today’s publishing environment, he continues, “there is such a proliferation of journals that sometimes their individual identities, histories and characteristics become obscured or flattened out”. He concludes that “Archival work is an important resistance against this flattening” (Wasserman and Tomaselli).

In South Africa alone the proliferation of journals in disciplines like law, management, education, and religion to mitigate overcrowding page allocation is a notable feature of an overtraded environment (ASSAf, “Twelve Years Later: Second ASSAf Report on Research Publishing in and from South Africa”), not to mention alarming tendencies towards textual recycling and plagiarism (Thomas I). The shift to supply open access publishing (in contrast to demand-led publishing where journals themselves take the risk and absorb the costs) is a feature of the current publishing environment where the author pays (from funders, via institutions, and from DHEF incentives). This inversion might see a rebalancing with less overcrowding across bona fide publishers.

My own colleagues sometimes ask why I edit the self-funded *Critical Arts: North-South Cultural and Media Studies*, particularly since my own Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) publication incentives have largely sustained the journal’s administrative office for decades, along with some support from the universities in which the journal has been housed, thereby subsidising the authors published in its pages.¹ Some authors, however, still complain about being invoiced for even minimal page charges which they can access from their own, or their institution’s, research funds.

The early radical *Critical Arts* arose from a particular moment before the DHET system was instituted. The well-designed popular culture literary magazines *Speak* (1977–1979) and *Staffrider* (1978–1993) coincided with the *Critical Arts* planning stage in 1979 (see South African History Online).² *Critical Arts* was offered the defunct *Speak*’s subscription list by its outgoing editor, Eve Bertelesen. To my astonishment, most of *Speak*’s subscribers

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enthusiastically renewed prior to the first number of *Critical Arts* actually appearing, indicating loyalty to an epistemological cause. *Critical Arts*' pedestrianly-designed first 1980 number, produced on a golf ball typewriter and printed in A5 reduced stapled format, attracted immediate global attention. This impact was primarily thanks to the influence of the inherited *Speak* readers and *Critical Arts*' promotion by the subversive De Jong's Bookshop opposite Wits University, the Market Theatre Bookshop in Johannesburg, Open Books in Cape Town, the international subscription agencies, and the nascent indexing facilities. Crucially, the exhausting foot stepping work done by individual board members such as Susan Gardner, Trish Gibbon, and Ian Steadman in particular in promoting the journal on their respective campuses and at conferences underpinned *Critical Arts*' exposure and reach through global disciplinary networks. The backing of then co-editor John van Zyl, one of the founders of the Wits School of Dramatic Art where I then worked, had cemented the publication's stability and potential reputation within the academic enterprise.

The second number attracted articles by André Brink, Nadine Gordimer, and J. M. Coetzee. One could not have asked for a more propitious launch. In due course, Njabulo Ndebele, Stephen Gray, Nick Visser, David Maughan Brown, Tim Cousins, Peter Horn, Eve Bertelsen, Joe Muller, and internationally, Ntongela Masilela and Stuart Hall, amongst others, joined the early editions as guest editors, authors, and/or editorial board members.

The experience for me as a then unknown novice editor was exhilarating, as our editorial board and authors shared a foolhardy desire to change the world, or at least, South Africa.³ They enabled 'group formation', a form of association through which members conferred externalities on each other. Such a group experience is implicitly described by Hein Willemsse in discussing the phases and political and administrative challenges through which *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* has travelled (5–8). Such self-reflection and critique are perhaps all too rare in academic publishing.

If a journal is a self-constituted group, endeavouring to create new knowledge, then it operates like a club. As a knowledge club, this model balances the positive externalities of a shared resource (readers, citations, referees) against the negative externalities of crowding (decreased prospect of publishing in that journal) (Potts *et al.* 75), which has indeed come to pass in today's publication-obsessed world, and which has seen the alarming rise of predatory journals offering immediate publication—for a price (both financial and reputational).

At *Critical Arts* we were on a heady roll, though differently to *TL* that—by its own admission—did not always respect "critical distance" from "political powers of the day" (Stander 13). We recklessly took on epistemic hegemonies, institutional gatekeepers, and holy cows. Intellectual dissidents found a space and our authors fundamentally contributed to the re-shaping of the disciplines allied with the journal. One trajectory of 'de-colonisation' in academia started with *Critical Arts* authors from its first 1980 numbers with sustained critiques of received Enlightenment-derived high culture and positivist paradigms in literature, drama and theatre, education, and media studies. This trajectory was initially documented in a multiple-authored occasional paper titled *Retrospective* (Tomaselli *et al.*).

With reference to de Jager's comment about editing for the sake of promotion, my editing work did actually threaten to *impede* my promotion within a few months of first publication, as it had transgressed my line manager's Arnoldian epistemological preference. He was, however, over-ruled by the dean. Thirty years later, a particularly irritated 'line manager'—a self-proclaimed (anarchic) postmodernist literary scholar—alleged that producing the publication constituted a distraction from teaching. His actual intention was to hijack the journal—unsuccessfully—during the heady 2004–2005 days of the University of Durban-Westville/University of Natal merger when a culture of lawlessness had permeated the entire institution (Chetty and Merrett).

Producing the journal largely exhausted us as we were also the typists, typesetters, layout artists, proof-readers, and envelope and stamp-lickers who made personal deliveries to local book shops. However, the journal was a key factor in my being head-hunted first by Rhodes University (1981), then Natal (1984), and finally the University of Johannesburg (2015). Promotion was not my objective, but a most welcome by-product of publishing and editing. The founders of the journal are now handing over to the younger cohort who are just as enthusiastic as were we originators, but they are facing manic managerialism that sometimes impedes unfettered creativity and conceptual risk-taking (Tomaselli, *Contemporary Campus Life: Manic Managerialism, Transformation and Academientia*). The open-ended self-regulatory environment that characterised the 1980s has been systematised via DHET and ASSAf oversight of the total South African journals environment. While a necessary degree of instrumentalism is always present, ASSAf has in recent times revealed an openness to flexibility of publishing paradigms and peer review approaches. These were particularly on display during the de Jager-led panel discussion in November 2021.

Though our universities nowadays seriously undervalue the pro bono backroom work often done by editors who are the conduit for the R2.4 billion of DHET funds annually, it is unclear whether the crucial work they will be doing in our increasingly metrics-obsessed world and journals expansion will pay off in similar extraordinary ways.⁴ *TL* survived a rough patch in the early 2000s (Pieterse 147–9), while the predatory journals vitiate the environment for everyone (Mouton and Valentine 2). According to Mark Gibson (366), a previous editor of *Continuum*, scholarly journals would be in much greater trouble were it not for the ‘tempered radicals’ who are prepared to support them despite this undervaluing of editorial work. He adds: “it is hard to see where the obsession with ‘billable units’ is going to end up. I would hesitate to advise young academics today to take on editorial work. Too much time taken away from publishing their own ‘outputs’”. However, where will individuals publish if new generations of editors, like Allmark Panizza, are discouraged from taking on unrecognised work? “It’s a perverse cultural economy”, concludes Gibson (Gibson and Tomaselli).

In South Africa open access platform support via SciELO is offered via ASSAf. But the journals themselves rely mostly on their own production, editing, design, journal web pages, marketing, and financial resources. These are much appreciated by, for example, the 85-year-old *TL* that now publishes in four languages (Afrikaans, Dutch, English, and French) and which had survived earlier rough patches (Van Niekerk 126–7).

What struck Gibson is the disjuncture between the impressive fronts presented by the commercially-published journals—in relation to the fragility of the human infrastructure on which they depend (356–8). Editorial work like commentaries, book reviews, and research letters—what ASSAf describes as “added value” sections—draw few institutional benefits and allocations to editing are begrudging (“Twelve Years Later” 35). The central problem is amplified by the DHET reward criteria that exclude journals, editorial work, and value-added items from publishing incentives and KPIs. As Gibson emphasises, an editor’s opportunity costs subtract from the time available for generating measurable units of ‘performance’—the discrete article (356–8). The contradictions that ensue from this form of “academic capitalism” (Striphas 9), enhanced by the well-intended and highly successful DHET incentive system, sometimes results in the unethical leveraging of DHET funds—as has been reported at every recent NSEF meeting.

Other than the National Research Foundation’s scientist rating criteria that valorise publication in top journals, whether accredited or not, the peer reviewed article, legitimised in South Africa by DHET accreditation, is the local gold standard, the basic unit of currency in the contemporary research economy. The labour that supports journals—editors, referees, editorial boards—is, however, still relegated to the realm of the hidden and unappreciated.⁵ Yet, as American editor Ted Striphas suggests, editorial work often feels not so much princely as proletarian (4–5). The “hyper-visible products that calibrate our value” (Coetzee 102) where just a few volunteers are solely responsible for all editorial activities often results in erratic publication, as is described by Henning J. Pieterse of *TL*:

In 2002 het daar geen uitgawe van Tydskrif verskyn nie. Die redes daarvoor was finansiële oorwegings en die feit dat dit heelyd basies net ek en Piet was wat alles moes hanteer—keuring, saamstel, finale proeflees, ens. Ek gaan nie ’n apologia pro vita mea hier probeer gee nie. As ek reg onthou, was ek teen die einde van 2002, na 24 uitgawes van die blad, redelik op moedverloor se vlakke en op die punt om die blad eiehandig te sluit. (148)

The consignment of editorial work to invisibility “removes the need for the beneficiaries of such labour (us) to appreciate or acknowledge the labour—part of the effect of invisible labour is precisely to delete traces of itself” (Coetzee 18). Yet, one of the enduring instrumentalisms proposed by some at ASSAf is that editors should not publish in their own journals as they risk allegations of self-interest and misconduct with regard to the DHET incentive. While policing excessive and opportunistic self-publication of the kind that has been continuously identified by the Centre for Research, Evaluation, Science, and Technology (CREST) in a minority of named journals is absolutely necessary, it also needs to be recognised that editors themselves shape paradigms and disciplines via their work, especially when they compose guest edited volumes on specific topics. My own field of cultural studies emerged from one such experiment led by the British *New Left Review* where the editors dialectically and vigorously battled out their positions between structuralism and culturalism. In many instances these germinal scholars drawn from multiple disciplines were themselves the publishers, the editors, the authors, and the readers (see Hall 184–5) and they generated a huge publishing industry in the UK that significantly impacted the Humanities across the Anglo-Saxon, South African, and Scandinavian academic worlds. Since DHET-style financial reward was not on offer the only policing required was integrity, rigorous peer review,

and the extraordinary energy of dialectical argument and debate. These occurred within the participating knowledge clubs. Editing was considered a fundamental activity, whether or not it was measured by performance management calculations.

The professional support that editors receive from their multinational publishers is often vitiated by the lack of recognition, let alone support, from their own institutions, though this seems to be changing at some universities responding to the open access environment.⁶ For many legacy journals, however, partnering with corporate publishers has proven one way to secure long-term sustainability, not to mention tactical global exposure for their authors. Hustling for resources is one of our tasks which comes with its own contradictions and considerations in balancing commercial and scholarly interests.

In addition, the populist allegation is that editors, the seniors in academia, often deny entry to emergent scholars, being the supposed inheritors of closed networks claimed to narrowly dispense academic largesse (see Tomaselli, “Perverse Incentives and the Political Economy of South African Academic Journal Publishing”). So, the predatory journals are seen to be one way of breaking with this supposed exclusionary hegemony, as was discussed at the NSEF meeting. ASSAf journals evaluation panels recurrently ask about mentoring of emergent scholars and editors, often asking for ‘student sections’. *Critical Arts* prefers not to segregate papers on a hierarchy of value, but we did during 2021–2022 manage a year-long National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences-sponsored training programme for post-doctoral fellows that took the 20 selected abstracts for a special issue to submission, and for those that made the peer review cut, to publication within 18 months.

So, where is the fun? In the frisson, in the action, in making a difference, anticipating the future. And, in facilitating successive generations of scholars in the *Critical Arts* pages who were to become international thought leaders, including two Nobel Prize winners, NRF-rated researchers, professors and deans, vice chancellors, deputy vice chancellors, and even a cabinet minister. As Lauren Dyll, *Critical Arts* editor designate, explains:

stepping along the way to group formation and a knowledge club becomes part of the fun. A sense of belonging is key, as on an individual level is a feeling of one’s own connectedness in communication with a group (be it a special issue or the actual *Critical Arts* editorial team). And more, in a world of many feeling ‘isolated’ (Covid, or even the thrust towards people more inclined to pursue mediated or online social groups/relationships), being part of a publishing group or club can be rewarding (Dyll and Tomaselli).⁷

Dyll adds that “It may sound idealistic but to be part of the ‘movement’ to facilitate, promote, and curate good research (critical, innovative publications) is to be part of that ‘club’ kick-started by previous generations of authors who became literary giants in their own rights”.

That’s the fun, that’s the task, and that’s the future. The epistemological troublemakers of today are the sage editors and institutional capacity builders of tomorrow. Editorials like Jacomien Van Niekerk’s on 85 years of *Tydskrif* are imbued with enthusiasm for a conceptual cause, a discipline, and knowledge generation—not just the facilitating of DHET incentives to their universities and authors. As Robin Crewe, who previously headed the ASSAf publication committee, observes, another “‘benefit’ of an editorship is the overview of a segment of scholarly work; both the good and the bad—I sometimes think that this insight is valuable for the editor’s own scholarly development” (Crewe and Tomaselli). Enhancing professional exposure and scholarly stature should indeed be the objective.

As with the experience of the cottage industry process that characterised the inaugurations of both *Continuum* and *Critical Arts*, and during different periods of *TL*, at the core of their respective successes was the “daily, nightly, joyful and serious physical effort that was [their] initial impetus: a genuine delight in bringing published media and cultural exchanges to those who happened to care” (McHoul). Similarly, founding editor Arnold de Beer wrote about another initially “small” in-house journal, *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies*, of the journal’s beginnings around his family’s kitchen table in the late 1970s, with his family doing all kinds of work: “my mother-in-law writing up subscription cards and my 12-year-old daughter placing the journal in envelopes to mail and doing general filing” (qtd in Wasserman 106–13).⁸

It’s been a great ride from the small to the global. Our protégés who do care can now continue the breathtaking experience of riding the editorial roller-coaster into the choppy future. We are committed to the institution of academia, within the framework of accounting principles in both senses of the word.

Endnotes

1. *Continuum* and *Critical Arts*, as is *African Journalism Studies*, mentioned below, are all licensed to Taylor & Francis. The two South African journals are additionally served by UNISA Press and National Inquiry Scholarly Services. Both have benefitted along with the 50 South African journals that this public-private partnership has elevated into the global arena.
2. The current editor of *South African Journal of Science* (SAJS), Leslie Schwartz, once worked on *Speak*, speaking of hybrid knowledge clubs and interests. The creative ‘contradictions’ are that he, a humanities scholar, has published in SAJS, and a scientist (a psychologist, actually) once worked on a radical culture magazine.
3. Ntongela Masilela wrote, for example, that some issues like “English Studies in Transition” (vol. 3, no. 2, 1984), edited by Nick Visser and “Recuperating the San” (vol. 9, no. 2, 1995) “were defining moments in South African academic studies. They either opened or re-opened in a fresh way unfamiliar epistemological territory; they redefined in a new way historicity in relation to the present; they narrowed in a consequential way the space between intellectual struggle and political struggle” (40–1).
4. The total sum paid out between 2012 and 2019 was R16 billion, according to Chief Mabizela, Johann Mouton and Marthie van Niekerk during a presentation at the National Scholarly Editors’ Forum (NSEF) on 11 November 2021.
5. ASSAf breaks this mould as its five yearly journal evaluations by discipline do assess editorial performance, but not once have any of its reports admitted to the contradiction that it is editors who are institutionally undervalued while they are ones who are thoroughly assessed by ASSAf panels of peer reviewers (see ASSAf, “Peer review panels”).
6. A caveat: while *Critical Arts* is a self-funding operation, periodic support has been provided by the institutions in which it has been housed.
7. In thanking his team on his retirement as editor of the *South African Journal of Science*, John Butler-Adam comments tongue-in-cheek: “And then, of course, there are the Journal’s readers who even read Leaders. No Editor-in-Chief could survive without the consideration of such an interdependent community—of which it has been an honour to be a part” (1).
8. Sometimes small journals arise to address specific moments and then fade. *Con-text*, edited by Butler-Adam and Gibbon from the University of Durban-Westville, produced only two issues (1989). Butler-Adam, who served as editor of the *South African Journal of Science* between 2013 and 2019, reports that “a lack of interest from staff members, in what was still a predominantly right-wing institution (few contributors), brought publication to an end. Our friends and colleagues in the ‘left wing’ had too many other battles to fight, as did we. It was, perhaps, the product of a premature optimism” (Butler-Adam and Tomaselli). While the journal is lost, academic sharing sites give the articles published in it a new lease of life.

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