COLLEGIALITY AND COMMUNICATION: THIS TIME IT'S PERSONAL

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ABSTRACT

Relations in university settings are becoming more heterogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, class, and gender. In South Africa, transformation imperatives have radically changed the complexion of the country's university campuses but have also entrenched political imperatives in its universities. As a consequence, the university is a highly politicised space. This is not new. What is new is a communication environment characterised by real-time, global networked digital communication and the uptake of digital media platforms (including social media platforms). We explore the effects of politicisation and new modes of communication using the case of a controversial article published in a South Africa journal and the ensuing polemic. Drawing on both institutional theory and Castells' description of the network society, we conceptualise collegiality along two dimensions: horizontal collegial relations which exist for the purpose of knowledge creation and transfer which, in turn, depends on self-governance according to a taken-for-granted code of conduct; and vertical collegiality which describes collegial relations between academic staff and university management, and which is necessary for the governance of the university as a complex organisation. We conclude that the highly personal nature of communication that is propelled by digital communication has a direct impact on collegial relations within the university. The motivations of both university academic staff and management, as well as the public, extend

beyond stimulating collective debate in the service of knowledge production to serving individual and/or ideological agendas as the communication of science becomes politicised. While issues pertaining to collegiality in South Africa may at first glance appear to be unique to the country, we believe that in a globally transforming academy, the South African case may offer novel insights and useful lessons for other highly politicised university systems.

Keywords: Collegiality; governance; university; communication; South Africa; Network society

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the idea of university collegiality is assumed to be under threat (Moran et al., 2021). Collegiality has been painted as companionship and cooperation among academic colleagues who share responsibility, implying that researchers and teachers are governed by the collective group of professional academics of which they form part (Waters, 1989; Weber, 1922/1978). According to Burr et al. (2017) collegiality can be defined as the relationship between individuals working towards a common purpose within an organisation. They point out that the concept has its origins in the Roman practice of sharing responsibility equally between government officials of the same rank to prevent a single individual from gaining excessive power.

The main culprit undermining collegiality is most often seen to be the phenomenon of managerialism or new public management, which assumes that efficient management can solve almost any problem; and that practices which are appropriate for the conduct of private-sector firms can also be applied to public-sector organisations. Managerialism, in contrast to collegiality, does not provide opportunities for exploring consensus because it promotes responsiveness and compliance with authority (Dearlove, 1997; King, 2004). Collegiality emphasises trust, independent thinking and sharing between co-workers, encouraging autonomy and mutual respect with benefits for organisational efficacy (Donohoo, 2017).

If one thing can be concluded from the international research project on university collegiality that forms the basis of this special issue on collegiality in the university, then it is that the post-modernists were on the money: context (still) matters. To illustrate, it might come as a surprise to some that not all universities have a tenure system for academic appointments. Many universities may have senates and councils, but how they are constituted and their relative authority in relation to other emerging governance structures (such as boards) varies considerably – sometimes even within the same country. The term 'collegiality' in China is anathema; something more akin to 'professorial or departmental governance' is more familiar. And the COVID-19 pandemic exposed a variety of institutional responses by universities to the lockdowns and other restrictions imposed by governments across the globe. The summary dismissals and cutbacks in Australian higher education, for example, were unprecedented. We therefore

open this paper on university collegiality in South Africa with two context-setting events before suggesting and testing a framework for understanding collegiality in contemporary universities; a framework that optimistically draws on two different sociological approaches. We then present a case of a highly politicised South African university where communication related to both university governance and scientific matters take place in the public domain. The consequence of heterogeneous communication spaces such as the social media as a threat to university collegiality is explored.

BACKGROUND

The first context-setting event took place on 15 March, 'the ides of March' – the day on which, in the year 44 BC, 60 conspirators, led by Brutus and Cassius, assassinated Julius Caesar in the Roman senate. On the same day in 2022, we invited 10 scholars – all of whom are familiar with a senate of different kind – to spend a day together in Cape Town to discuss the topic of collegiality at South African universities.

It soon became apparent that there was less interest among the attendees in institutional policy and forms of collegial governance, and a greater appetite for discussions related to issues of communication, interpersonal trust and identity politics, all of which were described as unsettling collegial relations at South Africa's universities. The tone of the conversation resonated with Macfarlane's (2016, p. 31) observation that 'ventriloquizing the values of collegiality has become a performative riff in academic life'. And with Moran's claim of the vacuousness of collegiality as captured by what he calls the Tinkerbell effect: that the collective act of believing in collegiality, sometimes despite the evidence, brings it into being (Moran et al., 2021).

The second event took place in a soulless room in the economics department at the University of Cape Town (UCT). The event marked the launch of a new book on the topic of amnesty negotiations during South Africa's transition to democracy. Jeremy Seekings played host to the prominent political scientist and author. Seekings' wife, Prof. Nicoli Nattrass, was in attendance. During question time, amidst robust deliberations on the concept of amnesty, a sudden attack erupted from the right flank of the room. Seekings was accused of being a racist. An Angolan postdoc calmly and eloquently pleaded with the attacker to follow protocol. Another more vocal attendee implored the chair to silence the disruptor. Security was called. None was at hand. The reason for the unprovoked war of words? Nattrass (2020a) published an article in which she claimed to have established that black South Africans are disinterested in studying biological sciences. Seekings was a proxy target. Clearly, two years hence, the article still stuck in the craw of some academics at the university.

Several key points emerge from the events of March and November 2022. First, the rise of individualism and identity politics in South Africa has led to demands for a renegotiation of the taken-for-granted norms of scientific institutions (including universities) and this, in turn, is undermining constructive communication.

'Transformation' – increasing the numbers and proportions of black South African students and staff in higher education – is presented as a zero-sum policy, implemented by following a top-down management model and a focus on numbers but few actual targets. It could be argued that this makes for an untenable situation in which all university policies and processes must comply with transformation imperatives without a clear idea of what the endpoint might look like, a state of affairs that has been described as 'transformation impossible' (van Schalkwyk et al., 2021). Of direct relevance to the notion of a collegial university, is that transformation is being implemented within an institutional culture of underlying tensions which can and have been described as 'toxic' and have on occasion erupted into open 'culture wars'. The consequence is an erosion of the idea of the collegial university.

While a romantic notion of a collegial paradise lost was squarely rejected by the March group, it would be equally dangerous to resort to a type of 'collegial extremism' in the form of warrior tribalism in universities, of the kind that appears to be taking root at some South African universities.

It remains unclear in South Africa how the tension between the personal and the collective, between identity politics and shared norms, will be resolved, both in the university and in science more broadly. What became clear from the two events is that, in the interim, collegiality is at best under threat and at worst a social relic in South African universities.

From the above background, we identify three key phenomena related to collegiality in changing university systems. The first is that collegiality is both relational and institutional. Relational thinking 'is an invitation to challenge social phenomena, to think in terms of fluid social processes rather than isolated individuals or external and solid structures' (Dépelteau & Powell, 2013, p. xv). Collegiality should be understood as an emergent social phenomenon that cannot be produced by an individual (or by an organisation) itself, but derives through social interaction with others, accumulated in embedded resources in social networks (Lin, 1999). At the same time collegiality flourishes or wilts in the institutional domains of science and the university. Second, relations in university settings are becoming more heterogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, class and gender. In South Africa, transformation imperatives have radically changed the complexion of the country's university campuses over the past 20 years but have also entrenched political imperatives in the country's universities. Third, the university as a highly politicised space is not new. What is new are the consequences of the politicised university in the context of a changed communication environment characterised by real-time, global networked digital communication and the uptake of digital media platforms (including social media platforms). The highly personal nature of political communication has a direct impact on collegial relations within the university. The motivations of both university academic staff and management, as well as the public, extend beyond stimulating collective debate in the service of knowledge production to serving individual and/or ideological agendas as the communication of science becomes politicised.

While the issues raised above and at the Cape Town meetings may not necessarily be unique to South Africa, we believe that South Africa is currently a place where issues of trust and identity politics are experienced most acutely, and perhaps all the more so in a transforming academy. The South African case may therefore offer novel insights and useful lessons in other highly politicised university systems.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: OPERATIONALISING RESEARCH ON UNIVERSITY COLLEGIALITY

Lazega (2020) regards collegiality as one critical dimension that accounts for social change; the other is bureaucracy. In the case of the university, the separation is perhaps not as clear-cut, at least not in historical terms. The university is a different, if not special, organisational case. Historically speaking, the university, at least following the Humboldtian model, constituted an organised space for the practice of science. It was self-organised and, relatively-speaking, chaotic (Clark, 1986). What bureaucratic structures were put in place were occupied and ruled by (former) academics. As levels of investment in universities and, consequently, levels of accountability, increased (particularly in the period following the Second World War), hierarchical organisational structures became institutionalised (Krücken & Meier, 2006; Parker, 2011; Zapp, 2017). At the helm of the university have emerged specialised professionals tasked with managing its performance in order to report to and satisfy external stakeholders' (investors') expectations, while 'below' academics continue to do their academic work in what Clark (1986) called the 'academic heartland'. One outcome of the rise in professional management and administration personnel at universities is that academics are being crowded out from the operational governance of the university.

This development remains partial rather than wholesale. Depending on the national (or provincial) context, senates may still wield some power and the leadership of universities and faculties are still in the hands of academics (Kligyte & Barrie, 2014). Academics, as part of their academic duties, are still expected to participate in committees and other decision-making structures set up to run the university. Whether the objective of these structures is increased efficiency (in economic terms) or the protection of scientific standards (to ensure the truth-seeking objectives of the university), will vary depending on non-academics' participation in the governance of the university and, of course, their own ideas of what the university as an organisation should achieve. In reality, neither financial nor intellectual imperatives dominate, and what plays out is most likely a combination of the two, with varying levels of dominance depending on local and national socio-economic context (see Jansen, 2023, for an extreme imbalance between scientific and economic objectives at selected universities in South Africa; one that results in the plundering of universities to serve the economic needs of impoverished communities).

In line with the above understanding, and following the discussions of the research group, we concur that collegiality can be conceived across two dimensions.

Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist (2023, Vol. 86), set out these two dimensions of collegiality: one arranged horizontally, and which relates to relationships between colleagues (often in the same sub-organisational unit or knowledge field), and the other arranged vertically, and in which relationships within organisational decision-making structures are comprised of both colleagues and other members of the same organisation. Horizontal collegiality is guided by a code of conduct while the vertical collegiality by a code of governance.

Vertical collegiality describes collegial relations between academic staff and university management (some of whom are former academics, although this may increasingly not be the case). Vertical relations exist for the purpose of organisational governance. Horizontal collegiality describes relations between academic staff, typically within faculties, departments or other organisational sub-units home to academics. Horizontal relations exist for the purpose of knowledge creation and transfer which, in turn, depends on self-governance according to a taken-for-granted code of conduct. These collegial relations extend beyond the university, most typically within defined fields of research specialisation and across a growing global network of scientists. Organisational collegiality is therefore place-bound to a greater degree than horizontal collegiality which most-often functions in a space of information flows, in effect, networks of scientific communication.

We present this graphically in Fig. 1. We place two contexts in which collegiality is shaped along the two axes: university–institutional and relational–science. We also indicate different governance outcomes dependent on the relationship between organisational and self-governance at any given university. In other words,
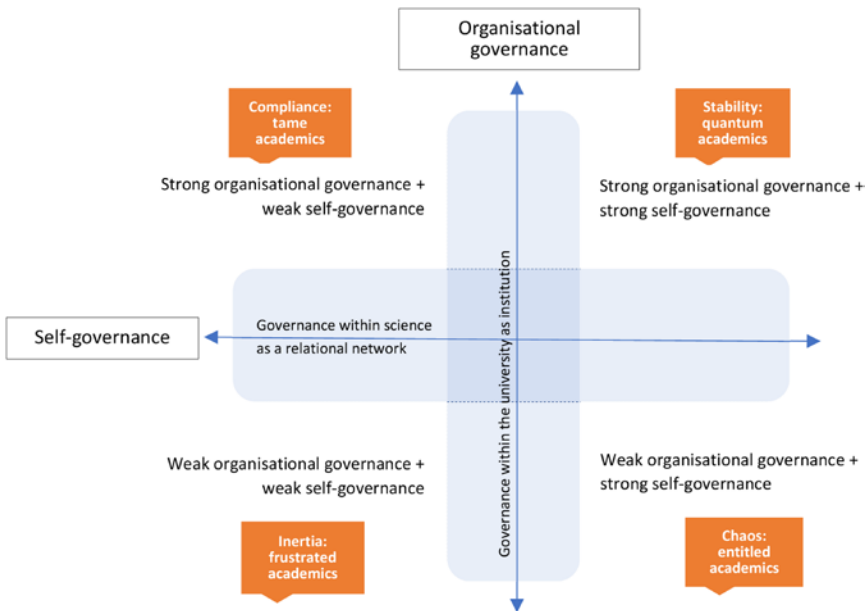

Fig. 1. Horizontal and Vertical Collegiality in the University.

we suggest that different configurations of strong and weak governance along each axis is possible and will result in different types of university collegiality:

1. University collegiality characterised by compliance to the command and control exerted at the level of organisational governance. In other words, strong organisational governance and weak self-governance, resulting in academics acquiescing to demands of university management and leadership. Hence: 'tame academics'. It should not be assumed that organisational governance is necessarily corporatist or market-driven, although this seems more likely than not to be the case.
2. University collegiality as stable – where both organisational and self-governance are seen to be strong, and where academics appear to be able to exist and function relatively comfortably in both governance domains thus exhibiting 'quantum' properties. As with most two-axes frameworks or models, the top-right quadrant may be seen as the ideal state. However, we do not suggest that is necessarily the case.
3. University collegiality characterised by strong self-governance with weak governance of the organisation. Academics in this scenario as seen to operating as relatively chaotic from an organisational point of view, which is not to suggest that they are not able to be productive.
4. University collegiality that is weak both in terms of self- and organisational governance, likely to be characteristic of a university in which both academics and management are frustrated (because of their ability to complete tasks) resulting in inertia.

Collegiality presents as an ideal social phenomenon through which to consider the interaction of relational and institutional social structures (Dusdal et al., 2021) or, more specifically between science as a communication network and the university as an organisation, two social spaces in which academics interact with one another on a daily basis as they pursue their overarching task of making new discoveries to establish new truths about the world.

Science arranged as a relational arrangement (i.e., network) of interconnected truth-seekers first emerged as a consequence of its shift to the public domain and the resultant axial role of communication (lectures, letters, articles and books) in the creation and validation of new scientific knowledge (Eamon, 1985). Communication between scientists gave rise to a formal publication system (academic journals), peer review and other mechanisms for the self-regulation of knowledge production (Eamon, 1985).

In a social system that is largely autonomous (science has carved out a monopoly over the validity of truth claims), self-regulated, and dependent on voluntary participation in many of its core activities (e.g., participation in the assessment of claims and in the formal evaluation of peers), norms are particularly salient and necessary in binding together the community of scientists (Anderson et al., 2007).

Whether the Mertonian norms still have a bearing on the behaviour of scientists may be questioned as their communication landscape has been disrupted fundamentally with the emergence of digital communication technologies and a global network.

Attention-seeking methods – often laden with emotion – have emerged as particularly effective, in a network in which anyone can communicate instantly and globally (Castells, 2009; Williams, 2018). Thinking, reflecting, placing oneself in the shoes of the other – dialecticism – and developing arguments over a period of reflection and revision that do not slide along on blame, slip into personal attributions and are not subject to the *kairos* of the digital world, are largely being lost. In the past, newspaper sub-editors were the gatekeepers: they checked facts, asked for evidence and penned headlines, and implicitly toed the institutional ideological line. The oversight of some journal editors plays an equally important gatekeeping function. The mediating role of these gatekeepers is now largely lost in the media and can no longer to be assumed in the case of academic journals. With it, due caution being applied to what is published is no longer self-evident. This is the democratising promise of open science, but it is not without risk, notably the misuse of unsettled science for ideological or nefarious ends.

In South African universities, identity politics is further destabilising and disrupting relations to the point at which it is no longer supportive of the productive communication. These changes are, as a consequence, undermining collegial relations as communication tends to serve self-interests or, at least, narrow interests, rather than the interests of the collective.

Merton's norms of science point to a particular understanding of the organisation of science – its institutional nature. Institutionalised science mainly assumes its structure in the form of the university. A rich literature exists which explores the institutional nature of the university. The main criticism of neoinstitutional theory is that does not adequately account for the agency of actors that function within institutional domains, and account predominantly for stability rather than for change. This has seen the development of new institutional theories (e.g., institutional logics, strategic action fields). However, attempts to apply multiple theories, including those that account for the new communication landscape in which science operates, are few and far between (Dusdal et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, if collegiality is nurtured and diffused through tacit social mechanisms (Bennett, 1998; Palfreyman & Tapper, 2014), then it seems plausible to persist with sociological theories to best understand its persistence, change or demise. Such theories must account for what Lazega (2020, p. 1) describes as 'our organisation societies [that] create a new of technocratic social order constructed through social engineering in which digital platforms [are] … reformatting individual and collective activities'. He suggests that what is needed is a redefinition of organisations through the joint regulation of 'stratigraphies' of collegial and bureaucratic regulation. Digital platforms are premised on new forms of communication; technocratic social order speaks to organisational structure. Joint regulation and stratigraphies imply the combination of different levels and types of thinking within a social arrangement. And, finally, as noted above, communication cannot be side lined in a study of the university as an organisation ostensibly designed to serve science.

Few attempts have been made to integrate communication into neoinstitutional approaches in organisational studies: attempts that do not cherry-pick

component parts of each theory to create an artificial amalgam. As Cornelissen et al. (2015, pp. 4–5) write:

> [G]reater attention to dynamics of communication has the potential to enhance the richness and explanatory power of our theories and models of institutions … where speech and other forms of symbolic interactions are not just seen as expressions or reflections of inner thoughts or collective intentions, but as potentially formative of institutional reality.

Ocasio et al. (2015) note that while communication in particular contexts has typically been considered as instantiating or reproducing institutional logics, the reverse argument, that communication constitutes logics, holds great potential for advancing our understanding of the durability and change of logics. Ocasio et al. (2015) formalise and elaborate theory on how specific processes of communication demarcate cognitive categories of understanding, help individuals form collective bonds or relationships around those categories, and link these categories to specific practices and experiences. These processes constitute the basis of how cognitive categories become culturally shared and conventional in institutional settings. The assumption is made that the communicative constitution of such categories is central to the establishment of common vocabularies of practice as well as broader institutional logics, or value sets and behaviours that are seen to govern practices in a particular setting.

Cornelissen et al. (2015) introduce the concept of 'communicative institutionalism'. They describe communication as a process through which collective forms such as institutions are constructed in and through interaction, instead of being a conduit for enacting discourses. They argue that attempts to bring communication into institutional theory tend to fall short because they do not account adequately for how communication constitutes the basis for institutional maintenance or change.

Such studies still subscribe to the view that institutions constitute the dominant form in which society is organised. They maintain a separation between institutions as one form of social organisation and, for example, networks as another. The various approaches do not attempt to bring together the two types of social organisation into either a single or complex-relational social structure. Nor do they explore the possibility of new organisational forms and theories, a possibility that is left open by Ashcraft et al. (2009, p. 22) who see communication as

> the ongoing, dynamic, interactive process of manipulating symbols toward the creation, maintenance, destruction, and/or transformation of meanings, which are axial – not peripheral – to organizational existence and organizing phenomena.

And yet, there are many similarities, just as there are notable differences between institutions and communication networks. Cornelissen et al. (2015) and Castells (1996) regard communication as formative of social organisation. The difference is that in the former the social form assumed is the institution and, in the latter, a network. Both networks and institutions are social arrangements consisting of social actors. The behaviour of actors in both institutions and networks are prescribed by logics in the case of the former and by programs in the case of

the latter. Both have self-defined rules for inclusion and, by implication, exclusion. Neither is dependent on individual actors for their survival.

There are differences also. Networks are more adaptable and flexible – they can rapidly delete and add nodes to adapt to external shocks. Institutions are also resilient but because they are risk-averse and slow to adapt. In other words, institutions are cumbersome, their default position is to resist change emanating from external pressures. Control in networks is arranged horizontally or, to be more precise, is determined by the position of some nodes/actors in relation to others. Control in organisations is arranged vertically with actors occupying higher positions exerting control over those below them.

Two sociological perspectives are therefore brought to bear on the collegiality framework: neoinstitutionalism and the network society. These are broad theoretical swathes representing different ways of thinking about the social world rather than neatly articulated sociological theories. They also are 'practiced' in different scientific disciplines. Two specific schools of thought within each approach and with equal explanatory promise stand out from the more expansive approaches: the institutional logics perspective advanced by Thornton, Ocasio, Lounsbury and others (Thornton et al., 2012), and Manuel Castell's work on the network society (Castells, 1996, 2009). They are selected because they are grounded in two key issues directly relevant to collegiality.

Institutional logics speaks to issues of organisational governance within the institutional domain of the university, a domain in which multiple logics (professional, market, corporate) compete. Thornton and Ocasio (2008, p. 101), drawing on their previous work, define institutional logics as the

> socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, including assumptions, values, and beliefs, by which individuals and organizations provide meaning to activity, organize time and space, and reproduce their lives and experiences.

More recently, Haveman and Gaultieri (2017, p. 2), define institutional logics as

> systems of cultural elements (values, beliefs, and normative expectations) by which people, groups, and organizations make sense of and evaluate their everyday activities, and organize those activities in time and space.

Institutional logics are socially constructed, based on a shared, interpersonal understanding of social objects. Each institution has a central logic that can be used to explain relationships on individual, organisational and societal levels. Importantly, 'organizations create constraints and opportunities for individual action, while societies create constraints and opportunities for organizational action' (Haveman & Gaultieri, 2017, p. 11; see also Friedland & Alford, 1991). Because society-level institutions may have contradictory logics, the theory accommodates for agency – individuals and organisations can play institutions off against each other and interpret logics in a manner to achieve a desired goal (Friedland & Alford, 1991).

Castells' theory of the network society speaks to issues of the functioning of science as a global, real-time communication network. It is within this network that the academic professionals employed by universities do much of their work. Castells (2009) proposes the existence of multiple global communication networks that are shaping society. The different communication networks function

according to different programs, programs that are determined for each network by those who exert network-making power (Castells, 2009). Castells (2004, pp. 32–33) describes the creation of network programs and the centrality of communication in this process as follows:

> In the network society, culture is by and large embedded in the processes of communication, […] with the media and the internet at its core. So, ideas may be generated from a variety of origins, and linked to specific interests and subcultures […]. Yet, they are processed in society through their treatment in the realm of communication. And, ultimately, they reach the constituencies of each network on the basis of the exposure of these constituencies to the processes of communication. […] [T]he process of communication in society, and the organizations of this process of communication (often, but not only, the media), are the key fields in which programming projects are formed, and where constituencies are built for these projects. They are the fields of power in the network society.

A network is therefore defined by the program that assigns its goals and rules of performance. A network's program consists of codes for the evaluation of performance and criteria for success or failure in the network. To transform the outcomes of any specific network, a new program emanating from outside the network must displace the existing program of the network, and control over communication is a key determinant in the outcome of any attempted displacement.

To be clear, in conducting academic work, there is no primacy of institutional logics over network programs. The logics of institutional domains co-exist with network programs which, in turn, shape the flows of information in different communication networks. This is analogous to existing in a quantum state – academics are required to navigate the institutional logics that permeate the university as organisation while simultaneously navigating the network programs that define their communication in the global community of university academics. For now, it remains an empirical question how network programs are formed and, of relevance, whether their formation takes shape under the influence of pre-existing institutional domains and their associated logics.

For science, and in the organisational setting of the university, the emergence and entrenchment of digital communication networks in society have had a series of impacts on its communication. The digitisation of the traditional media and the advent of online social networks have further disrupted the communication of science (Brossard, 2013; Scheufele, 2013; Southwell, 2017) and are likely to continue to play a part as the use of social media (or similar future communication technologies) in the general population becomes normalised. As socially constructed space, the relationships between social actors in the networks of communication in the age of information (Castells, 2009) and attention (Williams, 2018; Wu, 2016) is the key to understanding collegial relations within universities that are increasingly part of the global science network.

METHODS

A relatively recent event provides the 'data' for our study. The event relates to the publication of a controversial journal article by an academic at the UCT in the *South African Journal of Science* (*SAJS*). UCT is the oldest university in South

Africa and the most prestigious university in Africa, if the global rankings are anything to go by. It is certainly one of the most research productive universities in South Africa. In apartheid South Africa, UCT was a white, liberal university, often in opposition to the ruling Nationalist government. Any claims that it is a highly politicised university are therefore not new. The journal article in question and the ensuing controversy was selected because it surfaces a number of underlying issues which need to be addressed from a broader sociological perspective and it provides an informative case to explore the nuances of university collegiality in South Africa.

The data comprises the official statements, publications and the public polemics that followed the publication of the paper. These are listed in Appendix 1. We draw on several documentary exhibits to study both vertical and horizontal collegiality, while being mindful of their possible intersection.

The approach of relying on the rhetoric and discourses prevalent in primary source material is an approach aligns with recommendations by Cornelissen et al. (2015, pp. 23–24) that:

> One potential application of studying discourse and rhetoric in connection with institutions is analysis of the communicative construction of institutional logics … [A] promising avenue concerns the study of multi-level phenomena like institutional maintenance and transformation where at macro-levels of analysis logics can be seen as structuring dimensions whereas at micro-level of analysis logics may be more like discursive or argumentative flows.

The word 'flows' here is key. It opens up the possibility of analysing at the macro-level the influence of institutional logics on actors (e.g., the university) and the networked flow of information (communication) between those actors (e.g., in science), while acknowledging that there is both a duality and interaction between macro-level logics and micro-level communication. In this manner, the publication of a single controversial paper (the action), triggers communication events that are likely to leave traces which are informative about the nature of vertical collegiality – in the response of university leadership, management and staff – and about horizontal collegiality – in the responses of university academics primarily directed at their peers. The former takes place within an institutional context governed by logics whereas the latter takes place in a global communication network governed by a program of truth-seeking.

'THE NATTRASS AFFAIR'

The case study under examination is the publication of a controversial journal article – 'Why are black South African students less likely to consider studying biological sciences?' – by UCT eco-economist, Prof. Nicoli Nattrass.

The Nattrass article, labelled an exploratory study and published in the *SAJS* as a 'commentary' in May 2020, claimed that the reasons black students are less likely to consider studying biological sciences are associated with materialist values and attitudes to local wildlife (including pets) (Nattrass, 2020a).

The first salvo was launched by UCT's vice-chancellor who tried to pressure the journal's editor into withdrawing the article. An almost simultaneous

pincer-like attack came from the anonymous Black Academic Caucus (BAC) at UCT (Moosa, 2020). Their letter, published on Twitter, opened with the line 'Racism in the academic space has reared its head once again'. The main intention of the statement was to express cultural and political outrage. The response of the both the university executive and the BAC were framed by politician Belinda Bezzoli and others as a violation of academic freedom.

Nattrass' counter-attack was no less vitriolic nor any more concerned with science than the BAC's criticism. She claimed that the BAC has been transformed from a disruptive movement – albeit one that had had its productive moments – into a clandestine grouping which resembled the secretive, influential and highly divisive Afrikaner Broederbond, a group that had guided the ruling National Party during apartheid (Nattrass, 2020c).

The Nattrass commentary touched a raw historical nerve. According to Cloete (2020), comparing the BAC to the nefarious Broederbond was as outrageous as claiming that 'blacks' don't want to study biological sciences (see also Benson et al., 2020; Morris, 2020). Nattrass' accusations and defence of herself gained some media traction. Her Broederbond analogy was repeated; and she was portrayed as a lone academic, suffering a level of persecution endured by Jewish academics.

The absurdity of these arguments – how they misread power relations and deliberately produced distorted historical analogies – was well argued in a response by a group of progressive academics. They asserted that the unsubstantiated ahistoricisms, with their tendentious inversions of black/white, Jewish/German, represented part of a broader conservative discourse. A discourse that sought to weaponise academic freedom to prevent any threats to white privilege at universities.

Others pointed out that, from a purely scientific point of view, Nattrass' exploratory study broke the basic rules of social science research: generalising to a whole population from a small unrepresentative sample, and linking it to a racial stereotype. Nattrass was accused of doing bad science (see, e.g., Adesina, 2020a; McKaiser, 2020; Mothapo et al., 2020; Seale, 2020). In his review of the controversy, Crowe (2020) stated that 'No academic familiar with conservation biology has endorsed the Commentary as biologically, educationally or sociologically valuable research'.

Others responded in terms of rules of engagement and academic freedom (e.g., Essop & Long, 2020a, 2020b; Saunderson-Meyer, 2020). Nattrass (2020b, 2020c) denied that she claimed the sample was representative, despite referring to 'black' students in the article's title, implying validity for a whole population. She also drew attention to the fact that the article had sailed through the university's ethics review committee. Nattrass' claimed, *inter alia*, that the UCT Executive had 'broken down' and that there were 'inadequate formal channels' (Crowe, 2020). She described its actions as an 'unprocedural and prejudicial witch-hunt' and an 'abuse of power' in its 'public condemnation' of her and her research (Crowe, 2020). The Executive's statement was a 'totally inappropriate public statement of censure in advance of any substantive investigation' (Crowe, 2020). Nattrass chose to respond to the Executive and to her attackers in an open letter (published in the media) (Nattrass, 2020c; also see Plaut, 2020), on radio (Radio 702, 2022) and in

the journal (Nattrass, 2020c) in which her article first appeared (although there was also clearly private correspondence between Nattrass and the university).

The Psychological Society of South Africa and others called for the article to be retracted. The *SAJS* opted not to retract the article amidst the controversy (Kretzmann, 2020). Instead, it published in a Special Issue (July 2020) 12 responses to the Nattrass article. Two responses defended her right to publish, without commenting on the methods Essop & Long, (2020b) and Midgley, (2020), wrote political rather than methodological responses); while the other 10 rejected her article, raising the question of how the journal could publish a 'study' of such poor quality. Criticisms were mounted about the sampling method; the misinterpretation of the data; the lack of knowledge about the literature on career aspirations of black students; and the fact that black students are very well represented in biological and wildlife courses at many other universities. Three responses included the phrase 'bad science' in their titles and a fourth, by a prominent South African higher educationalist, called the study 'intellectual laziness and academic dishonesty'.

The *SAJS* did release a statement that in addition to publishing the special issue, it would review its policy regarding the publication of commentaries, which do not require peer review

> to distinguish more clearly between 'views regarding scientific challenges or opportunities that have arisen out of research experiences' and those that 'present the summarised results of research projects, or comments on such research findings, that have direct policy implications and/or immediate social value'. (Carruthers & Mouton, 2020)

One notable response to the article was penned by two black academics (Essop & Long, 2020a, 2020b). They wrote that the UCT Executive and the BAC do not speak on their behalf. Since universities are, by design, places of 'discomfort' at which academic, political and social boundaries are tested, uncomfortable questions are posed and received truths are challenged, they were 'not offended' by the article. They went on to state that the BAC tweets and the UCT Executive Statement are 'outrage porn' typical of social media that has 'clearly begun to infiltrate the academic project. And that is a prospect that should concern us all' (Essop & Long, 2020a).

DISCUSSION

The case of the Nattrass Affair reflects a fundamental contradiction: attempts by South African universities to create non-racial collegial campuses while at the same time research continues to hone in on racial demographics that perpetuate a discourse of difference, competition and historical categorisation. To provide some structure to a discussion of this inherent contradiction in the light of the Nattrass Affair, we present the insights be gained by considering for each of the main actions during the Affair, how the process may have unfolded differently, that is, in a manner that indicates strong and stable organisational and self-governance. Or, stated in terms of the specific interest of this paper, how could the matter have been handled in a collegial manner?

1. *The publication of the article*

One of the recurrent recommendations from the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) has been that the *SAJS* format is the ideal, that is, it accommodates book reviews, research letters, commentaries, editorials and other short interventions. The objective of this catholic scope is to broaden content in line with the Academy's open science policy. The journal's 'front section' has achieved this goal, evident in the Nattrass' commentary that attracted thousands of views and that generated the non-peer-reviewed special edition in which the merits and demerits of the study were debated.

In an ideal situation, when confronted with the article submitted by Nattrass, one would assume that the editor would have reached out to colleagues at the journal to seek their advice on whether (or how) to publish it. Presumably they would have advised against publication based on the empirical nature of the article which does not appear to be suitable as a commentary (Cherry, 2022), or to give the author the option to resubmit as an article which would then be subject to peer review. A less sympathetic editor may simply have rejected the article based on the generalisations made from a small sample defined in terms of race.

That the article was not peer reviewed lets the academic community off the hook. But it does not account for the decision-making processes of the journal. Of concern are claims of personal networks influencing editorial objectivity, founded on the fact that Nattrass and the editor concerned had previously worked together as co-authors. While this claim may be reaching at straws, it is the first possible instance of personal influence in decision-making in place of a decision taken in the interests of science. In relation to collegiality, it hints at the risk of convivial decision-making in the self-governed community of scientists – and without scientific merit as a shield, the commentary is all the more likely to trigger a polemic of identity politics.

SAJS is a fully open access journal and the commentary was therefore openly accessible via the *SAJS* website. On the one hand, it could be argued that its accessibility increased exposure to the article. On the other hand, it raises questions about the diversity of actors drawn into the polemic and whether this dislocated the subsequent communication into other networks that fed off the attention that the controversy attracted rather than the scientific (de)merits of the article following what appeared to be failed self-governance in the scientific community.

In sum, the publication of a potentially contentious article without peer review and open accessibly, exposed weakened self-governance (horizontal collegiality) in this particular case.

2. *The Cast of Commentators*

Participating in the ensuing debate were university management and leadership; academics from multiple disciplines and universities, in their individual capacities or as representatives of academic organisations; ASSAf and *SAJS* representatives; journalists and politicians. Such a diversity of actors inevitably pushes communication beyond a communication network with a singular program (e.g., truth-seeking; responsible information sharing) into the lowest-common-denominator

communication network: social media (compromised of well-known social media platforms but also the online news media inextricably linked to those platforms). In the social media network, attention is the overarching program (Williams, 2018; Wu, 2016), and attention is more readily corralled by small, highly active groups (van Schalkwyk, 2019). Communication also tends to become highly personal and socially distanced, removing any rules of engagement and potentially leading to a level of brutishness unlikely to occur in face-to-face encounters. Scientists are not spared. Networked digital communications surrounding contentious and sensitive political issues are more likely to creative rifts between academics; rifts that can unsettle collegial relations in the workplace.

The contemporary communication landscape clearly places new and greater responsibility on scientists and their institutions, who are increasingly active in communicating with the 'end user' and who are not always well-prepared to deal with the dynamics and potential risks of such engagement. During the heated debate that ensued about vaccination in Italy in 2016, an immunologist who had committed to engage in discussion through his own Facebook page eventually decided to abruptly cancel all comments by claiming, 'Here only those who have studied can comment, not the common citizen. Science is not democratic' (Bucchi, 2018, p. 892).

And yet scientists are drawn to and are encouraged to participate in the (social) media (Weingart et al., 2021). To some extent, the benefits are obvious. The new media provides a relatively pervasive and user-friendly network with low barriers of entry. Participating in these communication networks makes possible connections across the scientific community, possibly useful in the dissemination and discovery of new truth claims, and for crossing paths with potential collaborators. In effect, the (social) media provides a new mechanism for community-building, for nurturing collegiality. At the same time, however, the (social) media as a global online communication network does not follow the same program as the global science network. It is a space of information flows where organised dogmatism, rather than organised scepticism, flourishes because of the social media's attention imperative.

Again, communication in a network of heterogeneous actors and devoid of any generally established and accepted rules of engagement has the potential to disrupt self-governance and undermine collegial relations.

3. *The Actions of BAC*

The BAC from the outset might have been attuned to the communication dynamics described above by releasing their statement on Twitter. In an ideal situation, the BAC may have chosen to communicate in private with the university executive or with the journal's editor; and resorting to other communication channels only in the event that their initial attempts proved ineffective. Either way, the BAC was probably always more interested in the Nattrass article for its political value rather than as a lesson on the importance of the scientific method. As such, it always stood to benefit more by directing the debate towards a highly heterogeneous, (relatively) unregulated communication network. Journalist Paul Trewhela (2020) points to the possible dangers for collegiality and the university:

> When academics at a university hide their names in a political group before they go on Twitter to condemn a commentary in *The South African Journal of Science* by a professor at the same university … then that university is on a downward slope.

Strategic communication choices aside, the evident non-existence or non-use of existing formal organisational channels of communication between the BAC and UCT's executive, suggests weak or ineffective organisational structures to support the governance of the university.

4. *The Actions of the University Leadership (Executive)*

Ideally, the university would have communicated its response to the BAC, and its position in relation to an article published by one its own, within the organisational communication channels of the university. It may also have instituted a formal review of ethics clearance processes at the university. As it happened, it chose to release a public statement, thereby keeping the debate active outside of the university in the unregulated communication networks with different programs.

The position taken by the university leadership comes across as duplicitous, and therefore typically political rather than scientific. On the one hand, it seeks to placate the BAC and avert any further escalation of the matter by siding with the BAC and distancing the university from the article. On the other hand, it affirms the use of academic fora for robust debate. This position is, however, somewhat weakened given that the statement was made after attempts by the executive to have the article retracted. A similar tactic was followed by the BAC – it sent a letter to a senior *politician* calling on him to withdraw the publication from the *SAJS*. This shows a willingness on the part of the executive (and the BAC) to step outside of organisational governance procedures to meddle in and politicise the established communication practices of the scientific network. It is difficult to see how such action can be construed as strong organisational governance or, at least, governance in the interests of science and the academics of UCT.

5. *The Actions of the Ethics Committee*

One of Nattrass' arguments in her defence was that her research (and by implication her article) had gone through and been approved by the relevant organisational structure within the university responsible for ethical clearance. In simple terms, the ideal would have been for the research ethics committee to have turned down Nattrass' application on grounds of a weak and/or unethical methodology. If it was a preliminary study, as claimed by Nattrass, then final approval could have been subject to a revised methodology after a pilot study. The reality reveals further evidence of ad hominin organisational governance.

What emerged during the Nattrass Affair, with particular reference to the process of ethical clearance, was a vitriolic exchange between Nattrass and the DVC for research at UCT. Their communication was characterised by personal attacks, perhaps again made easier for the anomic nature of the communication. Nattrass accused the DVC of having a 'conflict of interest' and 'hijacking' the investigation into her potentially inappropriate actions. She called for the DVC to consider 'resigning' because the DVC had 'taken the leading role in the flawed process

leading to a flawed statement', 'wrestled control over the Research Misconduct investigation away from the responsible faculty, in violation of the university's procedures' and 'initiated an investigation into me, with what can reasonably be seen as the objective of providing post hoc justification' (all extracts from Nattrass' open letter to Prof. Sue Harrison on 19 June 2020, quoted in Crowe, 2020).

In the relation to the actions of the ethics committee and the ensuing exchanges during the polemic, informal and personal tête-à-têtes and point-scoring are evident in place of depersonalised, constructive communication directed at resolving the issue at hand.

6. *The Decision by SAJS Not to Retract the Article*

Instead of withdrawing the paper, *SAJS*' editor-in-chief and its Editorial Advisory Board chairperson published a special issue of *SAJS* titled 'The Intellectual and Social Critique: The Role of the *South African Journal of Science*'. They argued that publishing a special issue was in 'the interest of fair scholarly discourse' and that it 'facilitated wide participation by publishing this unprecedented special issue' (Carruthers & Mouton, 2020). It remains unclear whether 'widening' debate was in any way more effective than retracting the article. The decision by *SAJS* could easily be read as prolonging a political debate, something one might expect of a news outlet and not of a journal expected to take decisions informed by the scientific merits of the article. Such a strategy invited a diversity of actors and opinions into the debate at the expense of reasoned and reasonable debate intent on reaching consensus based on the scientific merits of the article.

7. *Nattrass' Communication Tactics*

Nattrass claimed that her open letter addressed to the UCT DVC of research (19 June) was necessitated by 'a series of [unanswered] emails and detailed private letters'. She described the executive's actions as an 'unprocedural and prejudicial witch-hunt' and a 'public condemnation' of her and her research (Plaut, 2020).

Seale (2020) questioned Nattrass for responding in the media to criticism of her commentary. Her approach reads as strategic in that it exploits many communication channels – both within and without those of the university. It also often reads as personally charged.

8. *Decision by Some Academics to Speak Out*

Academic rules of engagement suggest that criticism should at first have been raised in *SAJS*: 'If Nattrass' commentary was so ill-informed, it should have been coolly dismantled in the pages of the *South African Journal of Science*' (Essop & Long, 2020a). Science progresses through dialogue, dialectical argument and debate. Essop and Long (2020a) cautioned that 'it is significant that intellectuals now see fit to take their first responses to news outlets rather than academic journals'.

Both examples emerge in the Nattrass Affair. Some academics took up the opportunity to write critical responses in the special issue of *SAJS*. Others – all

former UCT academics – came to Nattrass' defence (Welsh et al., 2020). They were 'deeply disturbed' by the Executive's complaints to the *SAJS* about the Commentary and emphasise Nattrass' caveat that the Commentary is 'exploratory' and its findings 'tentative'. Regardless of the Commentary's scholarly merits, 'the reaction of UCT's executive to the article was extraordinary' because

> it claimed that that it was offensive to black students at UCT, to black people in general and could be inferred as racist in character. Nattrass's academic history argues strongly for rejecting any such characterization. (Welsh et al., 2020)

Their 'principal objection to the executive's action' is the belief that 'it – or an influential group of students or academics can block the publication or circulation of an article'. They 'reject in principle the executive's right to engage in this form of censorship'. They conclude as follows: 'The episode amounts to a violation of academic freedom, which is protected by Section 16(1)d of the Constitution. We look forward to hearing UCT's Academic Freedom Committee's views' (Welsh et al., 2020). The article was published by the academics on the website Politicsweb.

9. *Silent Students*

Tomaselli (2021) notes that in the case of the UKZN merger which resulted in squeezing the academic project between centralising managerialism and an alienated labour force, students were muted. The UKZN merger took place before the (re)mobilisation of students and recurring activism – particularly at UCT – following the protests of 2015. Recent student activism has injected identity politics into university life, destabilised staff relations, and left many a university management uncertain about how and which university constituency to placate. Surprisingly, the student voice is absent from the Nattrass Affair. Perhaps the fact that the affair played out during the COVID-19 pandemic when campuses were closed provides part of the explanation. Not that this would have prevented students from using the event for political gain on social media platforms.

10. *Silent Academics*

As indicated above, some academics did speak out. Few of them were, however, active members of UCT's academic staff at the time. In other words, little was heard from within the academy, either from academics in their individual capacities or via any of the formal organisational structures available to them for doing so. Two UCT deans spoke out against the Nattrass article, and on neither occasion was there the kind of response that one would have expected from academic quarters. As Cherry (2020) observed:

> In universities – which are collegial institutions – executives, deans and departmental heads can make statements […] but they are expected to consult widely before doing so. They are also answerable to the university senate, faculty and department, respectively: any of these bodies could request retraction of a statement which it deemed inappropriate or unfair. But none appears to have done so.

Cherry (2020) concludes his commentary on the response of UCT academics as follows: 'For the silence from Nattrass's own colleagues at UCT is deafening.

Are they really convinced that she acted in bad faith, despite all evidence to the contrary? Or are they petrified of retribution?' Fear may account for the BAC's anonymity. A chaotic and unsupportive response from the UCT executive and a few academics on a highly political topic, may have instilled fear in most academics. It is hard to believe that they would not have been aware of the furore. However, Tomaselli (2022) writes:

> If nothing else, silence is not a characteristic response within South African universities. But we do need to restore or recreate rules of engagement if we are to keep dialogue in play and to strengthen universities as cauldrons of dialectical collaboration as we face down multiple interacting crises that incorporate issues of identity in scientific discourse and practices previously unaccustomed to such discursive insertions.

Silence (and inaction) are not typical evidence of strong and effective organisational governance. On this basis, the case of the Nattrass Affair appears to be indicative of weak organisational (vertical) governance.

11. *Returning to the Collegiality Framework*

In the case of UCT, an analysis of the communications surrounding the Nattrass Affair shows that organisational governance is fractured. A highly politicised academic group chose to engage the university's executive anonymously via a social media platform. The university executive chose to communicate in public fora, as did the author of the article that stirred the controversy. The author claimed that internal communication structures for resolving conflict were engaged and found wanting, and that the organisational structure that approved her research was a space for protecting the personal reputations of the executive while rubbishing her own. The executive also stepped outside of its own lane when it approached the *SAJS* with a request to retract the article, seemingly in a move to protect the university rather than letting the science communication system deal with the matter on the basis of the article's scientific merit.

This situation not only created confusion in the academic heartland, it also created a more widely held perception that the university lacks decisive leadership, effective organisational structures for managing the university, and, as a consequence, that the academic project of the university is under threat. When its own academics publish articles and books about the chaos and demise of their university, they add more fuel to the fire. In other words, the traditionally dominant logic-tensions between the professions, market and the university as corporation (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999) are added to and disrupted by the logic of politics (Friedland & Alford, 1991). This suggests an organisation-level interplay between contradictory logics, and while these logics may place limits on the choices available to individuals, groups and organisations, they also provide the opportunity for actors to construct and reconstruct logics in new ways (Haveman & Gaultieri, 2017). In short, based on the case presented in this paper, organisational governance at UCT is being derailed (or renegotiated) and appears to be highly personal, which is to say, highly politicised.

The picture in the communication network of science reveals greater decisiveness and a lesser degree of politicisation. But it is not without its own problems.

The personal relationship between the author and journal editor raises a possible red flag. Certainly, the decision to publish Nattrass' research as a non-peer-reviewed commentary is questionable. And the decision not to retract the article and to publish a special issue for 'wide' interest could be contested but it did, at the very least, create a moderate(d) space, within the rules of the game, for communication between academics.

The above suggests, at least in the case of the Nattrass Affair, weak organisational governance combined with relatively strong self-governance, although there is some evidence to support weakening self-governance as communication shifts into new communication networks in which information flows are propelled by programs not necessarily aligned with the scientific endeavour. According to the proposed framework, the resulting outcome in terms of collegiality at UCT, is a state of relative chaos characterised by entitled academics, moving towards a state of inertia characterised by academics frustrated by weak governance.

CONCLUSION

Universities are becoming more heterogenous – in post-apartheid South African universities relations are becoming more heterogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, class and gender. This may be beneficial for the global science network if, as Castells (2009) suggests, communication networks are defined by and depend on heterogeneity to function effectively. Without difference, networks collapse into a single, large node to become a collective or a commune rather than a network (Stalder, 2006). A diversity of nodes (or would-be nodes) in the global science network poses a possible threat to science as new social movements (that in effect drive their own political agendas) attempt to introduce new epistemologies (e.g., decolonised knowledge) to challenge the program of the network (i.e., scientific knowledge). As Cloete (2020) writes:

> This episode certainly raises questions about the state of social science at UCT; and, even more seriously, exposes a racial/cultural fault line amongst academics. Within the larger academic corpus there are (presumably) minority groups such as the rather populist BAC which, unlike Fanon and Biko, seem not to concentrate on analysis, but rather on diagnosing and declaring racism. Ensuring desirable degrees of collegiality within such a conflicted late postmodern environment driven by identity politics is a challenge to normal science.

Whether these challenges can reprogram the network, or whether they will ultimately be excluded, is an open question. The possible outcome of just enough diversity to create highly polarised communes is equally concerning.[1]

What this does suggest in terms of collegiality, is that collegiality in the global science communication network is one that is likely to be more diverse and will not resemble communes, collectives or even tribes that minimise difference and value consensus. This also implies that scientists who participate in and contribute to the self-governed global science communication network are to a large extent buffered from the goings on in their local university. Not so in the case of organisational governance.

It certainly emerges that heterogeneity is posing challenges for organisational governance. The Nattrass version certainly paints a picture of an organisation struggling to govern, a concern echoed more recently by others (see, e.g., Benatar, 2021; Davis, 2022). It could well be that greater heterogeneity in a highly politicised climate such as the one that prevails in South Africa, poses a greater threat to existing power structures or to institutionalised cultures within the university. This is reminiscent of Trow's conundrum of advocating for massification and diversity while clearly being anxious about the impact on elite institutions (his own included).

In both cases – self-governance and organisational governance – different communities talk past one another. Rules of engagement, whether those that emerge from expected practice in science or from the prevailing logics steering decision-making in the university, are too readily ignored when the university becomes a highly politised space. One of the attendants at the March meeting once said by way of an urgent reminder to South African universities, their leaders and academics:

> A university is where reason triumphs over rage, where our common humanity matters more than do differences. … When you refuse to meet and engage with your academic colleagues because they hold different opinions from you or are even critical of your work, then you undermine the idea of a university. (Jonathan Jansen, as paraphrased by Swingler, 2019)

Relying on an understanding of the network society and its emphasis on communication networks is a relatively novel approach to explaining a social phenomenon – collegiality – situated within an institutional setting – the university. To avoid unproductive and toxic environments for its academics, South Africa's universities will have to respond more constructively to the contradiction of promoting collegiality within a redress policy framework that promotes (and reinforces) apartheid-era racial and ethnic stereotypes over logics and a program that place at their centre and give rise to communication that supports the truth-seeking endeavours of science rather than the personal gains of politics or the attention-seeking motives inherent in popular digital communication networks. In closing, these are challenges not only for South African universities; universities across the globe must increasingly deal with political intrusions from across the spectrum in a radically altered communication landscape.

POST-SCRIPT

As we were putting the finishing touches to this paper, a new book titled *Corrupted: A Study of Dysfunction in South African Universities* was published in South Africa (Jansen, 2023). The book describes how several South African universities have become wracked by chronic stakeholder conflict, captured councils, ongoing student protests, violent confrontation and campus closures. These universities are typically located in poorer areas of the country, and they are sites of ruthless competition for scarce resources. Presumably under these extreme conditions, the notion of collegiality takes on a completely different meaning.

NOTE

1. See, for example, https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/.

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APPENDIX 1: SOURCE MATERIAL

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