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EDITORIAL

Thank you, Voluntas Community

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It is my privilege to write this goodbye as co-editor-in-chief to *Voluntas*, the official journal of the International Society of Third Sector Research (ISTR). *Voluntas* is a leading academic outlet for research on the third sector, publishing on topics related to civil society, nonprofit organizations, social enterprise, volunteering, and philanthropy. I have finished my five-year term (2020–2024) on the editors' team at the journal.

During my time as co-editor-in-chief at *Voluntas*, I had the benefit of working with several teams of editors. First, I joined Taco Brandsen (Radboud University, The Netherlands) and Ruth Simsa (Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria) who had been running the journal since 2016. From my start as co-editor in 2020, we focused on commissioning strong special issues and conducting several workshops related to publishing, particularly targeting the ISTR community. Ruth and Taco effectively built on the past editors' successes and shared a commitment to building a strong, global community around the study of civil society and the third sector.

With several years under her belt of excellent service to the journal, Ruth rolled off at the end of 2020. Taco and I took the reins for 2021 and then he, after a job well done, finished his term at the end of that year. Fredrik O. Andersson (Indiana University, Indianapolis, USA) and Galia Chimiak (Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland) joined me for the past three years, and they will lead the journal for three more years, with Marlene Walk (University of Freiburg, Germany) adding to the team. Fredrik and Galia have been great partners in running the journal and will continue to steward the aims and scope of *Voluntas*. Marlene served on the *Voluntas* editorial board since 2022 and was critical in getting *Voluntas* on social media. Now Bruna de Morais Holanda (Getulio Vargas Foundation, Brazil) will join the editorial board and serve as social media editor. Our trusted book review editor, Marc Jeger (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium) will continue his work on the team. My warmest welcome to this newly configurated editors' team at *Voluntas*.

Indeed, *Voluntas* will be in good hands. In light of my service to *Voluntas* as co-editor-in-chief ending, I want to reflect on *Voluntas'* accomplishments over the past five years, infusing what I have learned from journal leadership, and where I think we need to focus our energies around knowledge production in the field.

Voluntas at a Glance (2020–2024)

During the five years, we handled on average 580 submissions (new and re-submissions) a year; an average of one to two submissions a day.

The work of *Voluntas* is not possible without our editorial board and our cadre of hundreds of reviewers. *Voluntas* has consistently shown a commitment to a diverse editorial board, based on several metrics. Editorial members are experts on volunteering, civil society-state relations, international development, and social enterprise, among many other topics. They conduct qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research, build theory about civil society/third sector, apply critical and interpretive approaches, and use experiential research designs. *Voluntas* currently has 30 members on the editorial board (including the editors' team), with representation from 18 countries. I am so grateful to this group of scholars who

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review multiple articles a year, engage in discussions about the journal's continuous improvement, and spearhead new initiatives, including, for example, leading special issues and directing several virtual issues, an initiative started in 2022 (see below).

We also in the past five years increased our presence on social media, first on Twitter (now X) and more recently on LinkedIn. I anticipate that we will continue to assess where *Voluntas* should have a voice to promote the field and its authors and reviewers when possible. As mentioned, Bruna de Morais Holanda will lead this effort, and I am excited to see what is next.

Special and Virtual Issues

During my time at *Voluntas*, we stewarded several special issues from volunteering (e.g., "Paradoxes within the Management of Volunteers," guest edited by Anders la Cour, Lesley Hustinx & Nina Eliasoph) (la Cour, Hustinx, & Eliasoph, 2023) to running two full issues about methodology in civil society and third sector scholarship, guest edited by Mirae Kim and Paloma Raggo (Kim & Raggo, 2022, 2023). We also continued with region-specific special issues, with "Civil Society in Latin America: Experiments, Resilience, New Utopias" which was guest edited by Humberto Muñoz Grandé and Patricia Maria E. Mendonça (Mendonça & Grandé, 2023).

The Latin America special issue was recognized by colleagues in the field in a recent piece in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Pallas et al., 2024). Pallas et al. (2024) highlighted the special issue in *Voluntas* as an exemplary approach for promoting equity in scholarship. *Voluntas* has dependably taken concrete steps to support our colleagues outside of the Anglo-sphere and Europe. In this case, with the backing of ISTR and our publisher, we translated original articles written in Spanish and Portuguese into English to be considered for publication. Translation, coupled with a 2-day virtual workshop, resulted in an outstanding Latin America special issue.

We also rolled out virtual issues. We want these virtual issues to keep the scholarly conversation going in the journal and remind our community of the great work published in *Voluntas*. As noted, the topics were often selected based on the expertise of our editorial board and highlight the aims and scope of the journal. To date, we have commissioned the following virtual issues (found under "collections" on the *Voluntas* website):

- Organizational Change in Nonprofit Organizations, December 2024 (Fehrenbach, Walk, & Greenspan, 2024).
- Philanthropy, October 2024 (Doan, Patil, & Williamson, 2024).
- Civil Society and the Spread of Authoritarianism: Institutional Pressures and CSO Responses, March 2024 (Chimiak, Kravchenko, & Pape, 2024).
- Comparative Civil Society and Third Sector Research in Voluntas, December 2023 (Holanda, Kim, & Appe, 2023).
- Critical Scholarship on Global Civil Society: NGO-Funder Relationships, May 2023 (Eikenberry, Dodge, & Coule, 2023)
- Social Enterprise, February 2023 (Searing et al., 2023)
- The Previous Editors' Selection of Well-Recognized Papers, December 2022 (Simsa & Brandsen, 2021).

Notes from a Now Past Editor

Please indulge me to share some words of encouragement to the *Voluntas* community (followed by some words of alarm!). These comments are my own and represent what I would like to see for *Voluntas* and also for the field more generally.

The Use of and Building on Theory

Surprisingly, at *Voluntas*, we see too many manuscripts submitted that do not use nor build on theory. The field being young (*Voluntas* started in 1990) is no longer a viable excuse. *Voluntas* alone has an archive of over 2000 articles spanning from 1990 to today. Other sister journals, whose numbers are growing, together have thousands of articles that can inform our research, not to mention the social sciences more broadly given the interdisciplinary of our field.[1] There are no legitimate reasons to not engage with theory in the field, while still also making room for methodological rigor and innovation as well as practical and policy implications as appropriate. Many articles that are desk rejected are due to an insufficient use of theory that leads to a weak paper and one that we suspect will not make it through peer review. It also indicates a paper that does not make the effort to engage in conversations with research on civil society and the third sector. This leads the editors' team to decide a paper is simply not a good fit for *Voluntas*. Desk rejects can be avoided if authors more deliberately framed their work around important questions and research in the field and used theory more

[1] For an excellent recent take on interdisciplinary research, see Reinecke et al.'s (2024) *Academy of Management Journal* article titled "Advancing Management Theory through Interdisciplinary Research: Challenges and Opportunities." Ma and Konrath's (2018) *Voluntas* article about the interdisciplinary knowledge production specific to civil society and third sector research is also an excellent, relevant read.

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effectively—by building, developing, expanding, and/or testing theory.

Write It More Concisely

An additional note is about word count—and in the spirit of conciseness, I will try to keep it short! Until my last day on the job as an editor I was getting push back from authors about word limits. To be fair, the exact optimal length of an academic paper was never fully reconciled among the *Voluntas* editors' team. It was discussed a lot but we did not reach a consensus. I understand the challenges for authors with word count. As a qualitative researcher myself, I especially understood this concern, as most of my data are indeed words. I am certain that discussions on this will continue among the new editors' team. There might be less pressure from the publishers for word counts given print versions are being phased out (*Voluntas* will not be "in print" starting in 2025, rather only published online moving forward).

My personal view, and the research shows, that there are diminishing returns of increasing article length/word count with respect to readership and impact. This has also come into conversation about the challenges of recruiting good reviewers (see below), and the role of article length in this (e.g., for a commentary on this, see Spector, 2024). A compromise put forth by *Voluntas* (and done by several journals) was offering space online for supplementary materials. We accept supplementary files (e.g., appendices, additional tables, etc.) to be published online should the article be accepted for publication. However, I encourage the field (myself included) to work toward more conciseness.

Comparative Study

When Taco Brandsen and Ruth Simsa wrapped up their editorship, they published an editorial that among other observations, lamented that comparative work, specifically cross-national research, in *Voluntas* was still "rare" (Simsa & Brandsen, 2021, p. 2). I think we made some headway in the past five years, but this is a direction *Voluntas* will and should continue to encourage. With two doctoral students taking the lead, I co-guest edited a virtual issue for *Voluntas* on this very topic. Our introductory editorial to a selection of 10 comparative articles published in *Voluntas* sought to highlight that *Voluntas* is a key outlet in the field for comparative approaches since its start in 1990 (Holanda, Kim, & Appe, 2023). We were inspired to do this virtual issue due to Helmut Anheier's keynote speech at the 2022 ISTR conference in Montreal, which was later published in *Voluntas* Anheier (2023). *Voluntas'* commitment to comparative work is in the spirit of fostering a global community of scholars who study civil society and the third sector. Please submit your best comparative work to *Voluntas*!

Sound the Alarm?

While encouraging better theory building and testing, concise writing, and comparative approaches in *Voluntas* are important ways forward, I also will share some concerns, as I see them, that have developed over the years at *Voluntas*.

(Lack of) Systems of Accountability

One of the clear trends across the five years, and I think many of the editors in our subfield would agree, is the growing difficulty to finding reviewers. There are four points during the peer-review process where reviewers are nothing shy of critical. The challenges for an editor in the review process are:

1. Having a solid roster of potential reviewers (diverse perspectives, geographic locations, expertise, methods, etc.)
2. Getting colleagues to accept an invitation to review
3. Getting the now reviewers to submit their reviews on time
4. Receiving a constructive, helpful, high-quality review (for me the editor and the author[s]).

Should the paper go on to a round of revisions, #5 on this list would be keeping those reviewers engaged and having them accept to review the revised version(s). I was regularly surprised when reviewers did not accept reviewing a paper they suggested deserved a revise and resubmit decision. It is not a favor to the author, nor to new reviewers, when a manuscript is being reviewed by someone new midway in the process.

I call for systems of accountability here because I am worried with how many reviewers ignore or decline invitations to review; even those who regularly submit to and publish in *Voluntas.*

Posted on then-Twitter, Amanda Murdie (Professor in Department of International Affairs at University of Georgia and past editor-in-chief of *International Studies Review*) provides an honest take, from the perspective of an editor, about the peer-review system being in "trouble" (her word) in a series of posts on August 16, 2022. She wrote: "I asked 21 people to review the piece, and 20 turned us down (most of whom didn't even bother to hit accept/decline)" (Murdie, 2022). For *Voluntas,* our record is 26 declines before getting two reviewers to accept.

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Though Murdie does not just describe the problem, rather she made some suggestions as well, and many of them resonated with me. She posted: "So, what do we do? … We need a formal tit-for-tat system. You can't submit until you do three reviews, for example." She also wrote "… We need to train people to be good/efficient peer reviewers" (Murdie, 2022).

I tend to agree that we should uphold a suggested rule: for every submitted article, you accept to do three reviews. We should promote this in the field, however, I am not sure how we can enforce this as editors and journals. But it should be a professional practice that is, well, actually practiced. Another important path to solving these problems (namely, that the system of reviewing is on the brink of crisis) is training our colleagues and PhD students coming into the field about the significance of reviewing. It is not only crucial to the entire enterprise of academic publishing but also to their own development as scholars. We must socialize our colleagues and PhD students to be reviewers. For example, for PhD students, by their 2nd year, they should be signed up as reviewers for at least three journals. When we train people to write good and efficient reviews (as Murdie notes), editors will be more confident about managing the 1–5 critical points of the peer-review process listed above. We will have better scholarship published on the pages of journals like *Voluntas*.

In my post-editor life, I have committed to help socialize and train the field to do better in regard to reviewing. I look forward to having good conversations and teaming up with other colleagues in the field who also share this interest. At the 2024 ISTR conference in Antwerp, Dyana Mason (University of Oregon, USA, associate editor to *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*) and I teamed up to conduct a professional development session about reviewing. To my delight, it was well attended and had a high level of participation. It was a great discussion. This gave me some hope, hope I needed as the day-to-day tasks of securing reviewers and the challenges bring me great worry for the field.

The Golden Rule

As the face of a journal, editors receive the brunt of the dissatisfaction about academic publishing. We experience this when authors are frustrated about editorial decisions or the length of time in which those decisions are taking. We hear from reviewers when they think papers should not have passed a desk review. In addition, the *Voluntas* email account has a lot of activity around authors and reviewers alike complaining about the functionality of manuscript submission system. I would ask you to remember that editors across most all journals are doing the best they can. They juggle a lot with the day-to-day of running a journal while also expected to be entrepreneurial and strategic about increasing quality scholarship in the field. Since being an editor, as an author and reviewer, I have gotten a lot more gracious toward editors.

Indeed, one of the most effective ways I employed for turning down the temperature around annoyances of the publishing process, was to remind colleagues that editors are also authors. We all have our stories of at least one paper not going the way we wanted with a journal we were targeting. Sometimes it was for valid reasons, other times arguably there was some human error, or likely unintended, bad judgment by reviewers and/or editors. Fortunately, there are other journals, and we have all had to retool and move on. I have been there. My hope is that as a field we understand the shortcomings of the peer-review process but also understand that this is the process we have for now, and we need to participate in it to continue to make it better.

I also remind people that editors are also reviewers, for many journals outside the journal they edit. While it is fair to say when you are editing a journal, you have a good excuse to not accept invitations to review for other journals. In my case at least, I was experiencing so intimately how hard it is to get reviewers, there was a perverse incentive for me to accept, even as I was desk reviewing sometimes up to a dozen of articles weekly for *Voluntas*. Moving forward I will continue to review given I know how central it is to our knowledge production.

And That's a Wrap

In sum, I have learned a lot. In addition to the everyday tasks, editors have to learn and understand the publishing industry. Larger trends have impact on our journals, from open access and open science movements to Large Language Models and their current (lack of) guardrails in publishing. Editors have to balance all this.

I thank ISTR for the confidence in me to do the job and all the support along the way. A very special thanks to Margery Daniels (former ISTR Executive Director) and Megan Haddock (current Executive Director) for always listening to the editors' team and helping to put forth good ideas to make *Voluntas* the best it can be. I am grateful for the experience of leading *Voluntas* with excellent, top-notch colleagues. Most importantly, I look forward to continuing to read (and cite!) the diverse and rigorous scholarship in *Voluntas*.

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