John M. Virgo: A Career Spent in Service to the Development of the Science and Art of Economics

David E. Ault

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Abstract When John M. Virgo sat at his desk in his office at Virginia Commonwealth University in 1972, it is unlikely that he thought that he would devote his entire career to the development of the International Atlantic Economic Society (IAES), an organization that would publish two journals and hold two conferences dedicated to the development and dissemination of research on and related to the various fields that comprise the science and art of economics.

Keywords John M. Virgo

When John M. Virgo decided to undertake the task of creating the society, he, like most of his colleagues, was frustrated by the lack of opportunities for economists to publish and present the results of their scholarship before their colleagues. While the American Economic Association and its primary journal, the *American Economic Review* had been published for nearly a century, the other existing organizations and journals were still in their infancy. The *Journal of Economic Literature*, for example, had been in existence for just five years.

John's original idea was to create a regional journal and meeting that would provide those who worked primarily in the Middle Atlantic states with another outlet for their work and another forum within which to exchange ideas and seek input on their works in progress. With his decision to accept a position on

John Virgo was on the faculty with David Ault from 1975 to the latter's retirement in 2003. For more than two decades, the Society was associated with SIUE during which the Society, through its publications and conferences, provided the faculty of the department and the school with numerous opportunities to develop and disseminate its research and scholarship. The author would like to thank Kathy Virgo for giving him the opportunity write a reflection on the career and contributions of her husband.

D. E. Ault (✉)

Economics and Finance Department, School of Business, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville,
Edwardsville, IL, USA
e-mail: Dault@siue.edu

the faculty of a university that was almost as new as the society but located in the center of the country, he had to change its orientation. John noted that there was a significant gap in the coverage of the profession's scholarship. While there were journals and societies that were published by institutions in Europe and the United States, there was really no organization that attempted to associate scholars from the two sides of the Atlantic together in the same space. This approach would bring the work of Europeans to the attention of Americans and allow those working in Europe to have greater access to the work of their American colleagues.

Over the next 40 years, John, with the assistance of his wife, Kathy, and a dedicated staff, would expand and refine this original concept and mission to create an organization that permitted his colleagues to participate in two annual meetings, one usually held in North America and a second held in Europe, and two journals, each of which encouraged submissions from the breadth of fields encompassed by the discipline. In so doing, John made a conscious choice to promote the scholarship of others at the expense of the work that he might have done as a principal or co-principal investigator. Being a managing editor and executive vice president/program chair of a scholarly society as well as a dedicated teacher, leaves little time for much else.

The Role of Refereeing the 21st Century

In ways that will be discussed shortly, peer review of papers and manuscripts submitted for inclusion in the programs of professional organizations and publication in the journals and other publications sponsored by those organizations is even more important today than it was in the early 1970s. When John founded the IAES, essentially the only way that a scholar could have his or her work published or presented was to submit a manuscript or synopsis/outline to an editor or conference organizer. After screening by appropriate organization personnel, those prospective pieces were then reviewed by peers in the field to determine if the work would advance our understanding of some aspect of the discipline. Even the working paper series published by many of the Ph.D. granting universities and research institutes were reviewed by the editor of the series before these drafts were circulated among interested parties. This widespread practice insured that virtually no piece was added to the canon of the fields of the discipline without some level of peer review, which diminished the likelihood that readers or members of the audience who were not experts in the field were exposed to concepts and conclusions that were inconsistent with the body of work that preceded them.

With the advent of the Internet and Social Media, this is no longer the case. Anyone can now create a web log, "blog," and post his or her musings, where they will literally float forever. The fundamental issue or weakness with blogs is that they are unsubstantiated opinion. Regardless of the credentials of the blogger and the documentation used to support their arguments, the resulting piece is no more than an opinion. Until that opinion is subjected to some level

of scrutiny by at least one qualified, preferably unbiased peer, the posting is little more than one person's perspective on a particular topic. Bloggers are free to use their expertise in one field to imply that they have equivalent expertise in an unrelated discipline. We find, therefore, Nobel Prize winners in the sciences claiming to hold superior positions on ethical issues such as abortion or transplant lists while Oscar winners hold court on the outcomes of political elections or the proper role of U. S. Foreign Policy in the Far East. Without peer review, it is impossible to know if any of these blogs, tweets, or text messages contribute to our understanding of the issues at hand.

When my wife was pursuing her baccalaureate in Journalism, she was told that she could not submit material attributed to a specific person unless the item had been verified by two additional sources. Direct quotes were permitted only if recorded or confirmed by two independent sources. This created pressure to verify key parts of any story because deadlines loomed. This also led to the discussion of what transpired at a given place and time over a period of a few days as material was gathered and verified. This resulted in far fewer factual errors, misquotes, and manipulation of quotes than is presently the case with the "24 Hour News Cycle." With the pressure to broadcast what is deemed "news" worthy before the competition breaks the story, there is little or no effort to verify the information that is being disseminated. The creation of Twitter, Facebook, and other forms of social media that place immediacy over accuracy leads to an environment in which one is never certain as to the validity of the material that he or she is reading, watching, or listening to.

The coverage of the "Newtown Massacre" illustrates this issue all too well.¹ Within an hour of the initial announcement that that the school had been the site of the murder of an unknown number of persons, including children, the shooter's mother, Nancy Lanza, was misidentified as a teacher at the school. The killer was "identified" as Ryan Lanza, the actual shooter's older brother. Ryan Lanza was not even in the state at the time of shootings, yet reporters sought out and interviewed acquaintances of the older Mr. Lanza before the local authorities were able to identify the remains of the actual shooter, Adam Lanza. Anyone basing their discussion of the Newtown slayings on the information distributed by such organizations as National Public Radio, CBS News, or *The New York Times* within the 24-hour news cycle would likely have transmitted more misinformation than actual facts.

Even refereed publications are not immune to the pressure to publish before being "scooped." The prestigious British Medical Journal, *The Lancet*, is now known more for the mistake that it made with respect to vaccines and autism than it is for the quality of the medical research that it has published since 1823. In 1998, *The Lancet* published an article claiming to have found a link between childhood vaccines or the vaccination process and autism in young

¹ M. Pearce, "Adam and Nancy Lanza, "An Investigation Into Their Family Life: *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 20, 2013, A1; and T. Il-Ghobashy and D. Barrett, "Dozens Killed in Connecticut School Shooting," *WSJ.com*, December 17, 2012. These articles are two illustrations of the nature of the coverage of the Newtown killings, especially the confusion that surrounded the events at Sandy Hook School. There is now a burgeoning body of literature devoted to this incident and its aftermath.

children.² In fact, the article was not peer reviewed, and it was based on a sample of 11 observations that was not created for the purpose of studying autism. Despite objections from some on the *Lancet* staff based on the work not meeting the normal peer reviewed standard, the article was published.³ The damage that this incident has caused to the credibility of the journal will take years to repair and can only be undone by insuring all pieces that appear in the journal are subject to an accepted peer review process.

The role of peer-reviewed publications and conferences like IAES journals and conferences is more important in the Internet age than in previous eras because readers and listeners should be assured that the material being presented is consistent with the body of literature to which the authors wish to add. One cannot expect an audience to develop the expertise to be able to act as his or her own referee in all but a small number of fields. We in the profession as well as those who rely upon our work must be able to demonstrate that the work is consistent with the body of knowledge upon which it is based, that is, something more than simply unsubstantiated opinion. No discipline can advance without a peer review process.

The conferences sponsored and made possible by the IAES staff serve one major purpose in addition to providing the opportunity for authors to present their work, that is, to permit colleagues to assemble in one place to exchange ideas over the course of a few days. The creation of “chat rooms” and other online forums does not substitute for face to face conversations. It is difficult to write notes on napkins and slips of paper while conversing when one is sitting before a computer, smart phone, or electronic reader. Conversations just do not take place in cyberspace as they do when face-to-face. It is hard to get answers to questions on complex topics into 140 characters, even when one knows the code in which the other person is writing.

There is one other attribute that journals and conferences have that cannot be adequately replicated digitally: the library effect. One of the concerns that has been expressed by scholars is that, with the digitization of the materials that used to be disseminated primarily by libraries, the experience of going into the stacks and card catalogs is lost. When one had to go to the library to find materials, one, while looking for a specific work, had to scan other material in the same location. As a result, the researcher frequently found additional material, some of which was better fitted to his or her purposes than the work that was reason for the search. Simply leafing through the cards in a subject index would yield an initial bibliography of a dozen or so works.

However, the publication of several articles, especially the diversity that tends to appear in general purpose journals such as *The Atlantic Economic Journal (AEJ)* or *International Advances in Economic Research (IAER)*, within the cover of a single

² The original article is A. Wakefield, B. Murch, A. Anthony, et al., (1998), “Ileal-Lymphoid Nodular Hyperplasia, Non-specific Colitis, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder in Children,” *The Lancet* 351 (9103), 637–41.

³ The literature surrounding the publication of this article and its retractions is substantial and still growing. See, for example, G. Harris, “Journal Retracts 1998 Paper Linking Autism to Vaccines,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 2, 2010 (<http://www.NYTimes.com/2012/03/health/research/03Lancet.html>) A search will lead to comprehensive discussions of the failures that led to the publication of the Wakefield, et al. article and its consequences, especially the damage done to *The Lancet's* reputation and the continued use of this discredited article as justification for groups to oppose vaccines and vaccination of young children.

issue allows the reader to serendipitously yet efficiently find other articles or entries that may be of interest. In the digital age, even though one can download the table of contents of a given journal, the managing editor and staff of the journal have to put the issue together before one can search its contents. Conferences afford the same efficiency in that one can attend a number of sessions on a variety of topics by spending a few days, usually in a location in which people want to gather, and walking from one presentation site to another. It is easy to add or drop presentations, ask questions of a number of authors, exchange comments with others who are part of the audience, meet with co-authors, or simply to renew old friendships. There is no way to replicate the comprehensive nature of the conference through videoconferencing and other applications in cyberspace.

Scholarly societies that publish journals and organize conferences have, therefore, an indispensable role to play in the expansion of the knowledge base of economics or any other discipline. The peer review process is the key to creation of new knowledge. The publication of journals and the organization of conferences are among the most efficient ways to disseminate that information.

The Place of Organizations in the Creation of Scholarship

A frequent criticism of higher education is that too much time and too many resources are wasted on the creation of “meaningless scholarship,” that is, much, if not most, of such activity does not advance our knowledge in a given field by a sufficient amount to justify the use of resources to create it.⁴ A subset of that argument is that there are too many journals and too many societies holding too many conferences to justify the quality and quantity of scholarship produced. Imbedded within this argument is a ranking, largely implicit, of the quality of the scholarly organizations in a given discipline. The American Economic Association, for example, is generally considered to be the most prestigious economic organization in the United States, if not the world.

The implicit ranking of economics associations is similar to the ranking of the teams sponsored by the nation’s colleges and universities. In basketball, for example, there are major conferences, mid-major conferences, and Division I, II, and III programs, all of which are members of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. There are then schools that belong to the athletic associations other than the various divisions of the NCAA.

Regional economics associations tend to be ranked below the national and international societies and associations that publish the most prestigious journals and hold the largest annual meetings, meetings that attract Nobel Prize and John Bates Clark Winners and at which the major employment markets are held. A “mid-major” society such as the IAES, however, performs two very important functions that tend to be overlooked when valuing the contributions that organizations make to the

⁴ One recent example of this skepticism may be found in A. D. McNaull, “Research and Sciences: Senate Committee Examines Challenges Faced by Research Universities,” *FYI: The AP Bulletin of Science Policy News*, no. 99 (July 12, 2012 (<http://www.aip.org/fyi/2012/099.html>)). The full transcripts of these hearings may be found at 110th Congress: Public Committee Hearing Transcripts. www.judiciary.senate.gov/transcripts/110transcripts.com.

development of a discipline, as well as society as a whole. The IAES provides refereed publications and conferences in which rising scholars can hone their craft and established scholars can continue to develop. The refereeing process provides an external evaluation of the work of those whose manuscripts and proposals are accepted when organizations determine whether or not to retain an individual, especially if the person is being considered for tenure or a similar long term arrangement.

There are approximately 18,000 members of the American Economic Association as well as thousands of undergraduate and graduate students and others who read the professional economics literature. The highest ranking journals publish approximately 6 % of the manuscripts that they receive (Hamermesh 2013). Those manuscripts represent those few that most members of the AEA believe might stand the small chance of being accepted for publication or delivery. While the work published by the IAES in its journals and presented at its conferences tends to concentrate on refinements to and extensions of the current body of knowledge, by providing a forum within which those new to the discipline can submit works for review, the IAES promotes the development of the next generation of scholars, some of whom, as the result of their earlier work that appeared in the *AEJ* or *IAER*, and input and advice received while attending meetings, leads to the subsequent work that appears in the higher ranked journals and is presented at the annual meeting of the AEA.

The mid-majors also provide the platforms from which those who have allowed their scholarship to languish can revive that aspect of their careers. Picking up an agenda that one has not addressed in a few years or starting a new research tack is challenging and has little likelihood of success if one had access only to the small number of slots in the journals and at the annual meeting of the discipline's primary association. Submitting manuscripts and proposals for papers to the IAES allows one to receive feedback more quickly and to begin to publish and present once again more quickly.

Over nearly four decades, John oversaw the publications of 2301 articles in 151 issues of the 40 volumes of the *AEJ* and 1304 articles in the 73 issues of the 19 volumes of the *IAER*. The 72nd Conference in Washington, D. C., offered 47 sessions to 332 registrants over three days. The 74th Conference in Montreal was attended by 310 conferees at 59 sessions over its three days. The scholarship sponsored by the IAES has not only furthered the development of the discipline but has also enriched the educational experiences of thousands of attendees as well as enhanced decision-making at various levels of government and countless firms in the private sector throughout the world, especially in North America and Europe.

John added one other dimension to the concept of the economics society that makes the IAES unusual, if not, at least for two decades, unique. He recruited Nobel Prize Winners and prominent government economists, especially those who lived and worked in Europe, to serve as the president and as executive officers of the society. As a result, economists from the United States, in addition to having personal contact with Nobel Prize winners, had the opportunity to obtain a European perspective on developments in the profession as well as the rationale for the economic policies of the EU, the United Kingdom, and other countries. Those from outside the U. S. had the opportunity to meet and hear Nobel Prize winners, something that would not likely have taken place without the IAES conferences, especially those held in

Europe. Those who served as presidents and senior officers had an additional forum, especially late in their careers, that would permit them to extend their research and to comment upon recent developments related to the discipline, especially the development of public policy. John was one of the first to invite government officials from the former Soviet Union to make presentations after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The Career of an Executive Director and Managing Editor

Editing an academic journal and scheduling and coordinating the activities required to hold a conference in a city different from that in which one lives and works are time consuming and complex tasks. To assume both sets of responsibilities for two journals and two meetings per year while teaching as a full time faculty member consumes virtually all of the time and energy that one has. That is one of the principal reasons that most journals are edited by individuals who are in the latter stages of their careers and hold the positions for only a few years. John essentially devoted his entire working life to the development of the IAES. His faculty appointments served primarily to give him the contacts necessary to develop peer review panels and conference programs.

The initial screening of manuscripts and assignment of potentially publishable ones to referees, who provide key input as to whether or not the manuscript will be published, take considerable time and energy. While the publication staff is responsible for assembling each issue, the managing editor must supervise this process in order to insure that each issue is disseminated as scheduled.

Putting together and holding an academic conference adds to the screening of manuscripts, abstracts, and proposals for sessions, the tasks of finding session chairs and discussants, key note, luncheon, and dinner speakers, and presenters on major topics or themes, identifying potential locations for meetings, and supervising the arrangements for the meals, set-ups, and other support necessary to hold the conference. No matter how many times one does this, there are still issues that arise that are unique to the specific conference. At some point, London, Paris, Rome, New York, and other exotic locations are simply large cities in which one must deal with the various providers of the facilities and services that are required to stage a successful event.

While those of us who have published or made presentations at conferences appreciate the efforts of the managing editors and the conference director, those who fill those positions rarely receive the recognition that they deserve, for they are not the focus of our attention. We are concerned about meeting the concerns of the referees or making certain that we have the contact information from those who would like copies of our papers or have comments that we would like to receive. We tend to think of the managing editor or conference director when things go wrong. Thanking those responsible for making a publication or presentation possible tends to be pushed far down the list to be forgotten more often than not.

Service to the profession tends to be discounted when the performance of a faculty member is being evaluated for the purposes of tenure, promotion, salary increases, or other rewards. Service activities in support of the mission and goals of the department, school or college, or university are easier to see and judge as to their effects on

the unit in which the individual is employed or affiliated than are activities that take place away from that college or university or other organization.

Given the demands placed upon a managing editor or conference coordinator, it is difficult to create and sustain a research/scholarship program. There is simply not enough time to be a principal investigator and supervisor of a group of graduate assistants or post-doctoral fellows while supervising the editing and publication of multiple issues of a journal and the program of an organization's meetings. The managing editor tends to write editorials and, when he or she can, to become a part of a research team often led by someone else. He or she contributes to the work as opportunity and time permit. They tend to be co-authors and secondary authors as opposed to lead authors and grant writers.

John contributed to or edited six books and over 50 articles, book chapters, and other publications. He also made numerous presentations before the IAES and other professional organizations. Most of his scholarship in his later years was in support of the work of other investigators.

John devoted his career to creating opportunities for others to demonstrate their competence and creativity. To perform these services for literally thousands of his colleagues required that he sacrifice those opportunities that might have led to his becoming a luminary in one of the fields of the disciplines. He also had to accept the fact that much of his service would be undervalued by the institution in which he held faculty rank, though the institution hired him with the promise of support for the organization and a reduced course load.

As John grew older, he must have realized that he would not likely receive the recognition or develop the reputation that was more in accord with the contributions that he had actually made as a teacher, scholar, and member of the various parts of the academic community. The nature of the profession is such that those who make it possible for others to pursue their goals tend to be overlooked when the accolades are distributed. This is one of the prices that one pays for devoting his career to the creation of opportunities in order to contribute to the development of economics, especially when much of that work is external to his or her home organization and almost always for others.

Conclusions

John M. Virgo devoted his career and more than one half of his life to the development of the International Atlantic Economic Society, an organization that he worked to establish in 1973. At a time when the discipline of economics needed more outlets to validate and disseminate the research of its growing numbers, he found a niche that made his organization unique. The IAES would promote research and scholarship by economists located primarily in North America and Europe. Not only would the *Atlantic Economic Journal* and, later, *International Advances in Economic Research* encourage submissions by scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, the Society would hold conferences that would alternate between a location in North America and a location in Europe. Such a strategy would promote greater interaction among economists from both sides of the Atlantic, breaking those silos to lead to better understanding of

their approaches to policy formation and the creation of scholarship. He would later recruit Nobel Prize Winners and other prominent economists and public officials to serve as the Society's public face to provide additional opportunities for those individuals to broaden and deepen their influence while permitting those who would otherwise likely never have the chance to meet and talk with such prominent figures the opportunities to do so.

The discipline of economics, as is the case with any field of knowledge, must have refereed journals and a screening process for presentations made to members of the profession and other interested parties. The referee process insures that the work that is published is consistent with the accepted concepts, principles, theory, and research designs and methodologies. In order to add to the knowledge, the authors of a proposed addition must demonstrate to those who have helped to create the canon upon which their work is based that the work is a soundly reasoned and supported extension of what is now accepted knowledge. Without this refereeing process, publications and papers are nothing more than unsubstantiated opinion.

For more than three decades, John Virgo insured that whatever appeared in the *AEJ* and *IAER*, or was presented at IAES meetings met this criteria. In so doing, he provided external validation of the growth and development of several thousand young and maturing economists. While he made direct contributions to the field through publications and presentations with several co-authors, including his wife, Kathy, it is primarily through his encouragement and support of those who submitted manuscripts for review or sought to make presentations before the meetings of the IAES that John contributed substantively to the growth and development of the art and science of economics.

While John is never likely to receive the recognition that one deserves for providing these essential services, he should have had the personal satisfaction of knowing that he has contributed to the development and maturation of others who now command the attention of their colleagues and make appearances on a wider stage. For those who published in the *AEJ* or the *IAER*, we owe John a debt of gratitude that we do not acknowledge often enough for sacrificing some aspects of his teaching, his personal scholarship, and his influence on the development of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and other institutions to serve the profession.

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