The Evolution of Third Sector Research and the Journal Voluntas: The Editors' Impressions

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More than 5 years ago, we started as editors-in-chief of Voluntas. This was a great honour and responsibility. It also led to an intensive learning curve. With on average three e-mails per day, it meant more than 5000 e-mails between the two of us. Between 2016 and 2020, we received 2200 manuscripts, over one per day (weekends and holidays included). Occasionally, it felt like a hopeless battle against a never-ending stream of texts. But it has also given us a unique opportunity to watch the development of the field, of shifting centres of gravity, surges of interest and downward curves. In this short editorial, we would like to reflect on the development of the journal and third sector/non-profit research in general.

The Development of the Journal

From the mid-2010s, there were years of steep growth, spurred by the growth of international academic publishing. Now submissions seem to have stabilized at around 400 a year. The rejection rate has risen slightly in this time, dampened by an expansion of the number of issues per year. Altogether (including transfer to other journals), it is quite stable now at around two-thirds of manuscripts. The steep growth and high-quality standards forced us towards a greater number of desk rejects (i.e. rejects without reviews, based solely on the assessment of the editors). On

the one hand, desk rejects are essentially against our mission of providing quality feedback to authors; on the other hand, we have to guard the scarce time of our reviewers, by protecting them from having to assess too many hopeless manuscripts. Essentially, more is being written than the academic system of peer review can digest. This is driven by forces beyond journals' control (in particular, academic performance measurement systems). Perhaps the tide is now turning.

We are very proud that the impact factor has risen in these years from 1.09 to 1.538 (2019). This reflects not only the greater visibility of the journal itself, but also how specialized research communities within third sector research have matured, with shared concepts, debates and academic heroes to cite.

In line with the mission of ISTR to be a truly international society, we have pursued the goal of increasing the regional spread of papers (more specifically, a spread of authors less prejudiced towards Europe and North America). Although the number of countries we receive manuscripts from has been continuously rising, we have not been particularly successful in this respect, when it comes to published papers. Generally, contributions from the USA/Canada/Europe/Australia/New Zealand add up to about 80% of published papers. This number has declined slightly, mainly due to more published papers from China and Israel. Asia (excepting China), Africa and Latin America remain poorly represented.

Regarding rejections, an analysis shows the following:

- Predictably, the rejection rate for certain countries (Germany, the UK, the USA and some smaller European countries) is lower than the average (which is about two out of three).

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- China's rejection rate is almost average. However, the new Chinese policy towards academic institutions, moving away from international publishing, may affect submissions from that country drastically.
- Then there are countries that do send in submissions regularly, but which are mostly rejected. These are Brazil, Eastern European countries, Pakistan, Russia and Spain.
- Some countries rarely ever send in submissions.
- Desk rejects and rejects after review follow a similar pattern. In other words, desk rejects do not appear to introduce a significant bias.

Progress towards greater geographical spread has been very slow. The underrepresentation of certain regions is mostly caused by structural inequalities that cannot be resolved by an academic journal in itself. It reflects the establishment of third sector research in different countries, but also the amount of support and training for scholars. Language services, for example, which are financed by most European universities for non-native English speakers, often make the difference between to be and not to be on the academic floor.

The Development of the Field of Third Sector Research

Submissions to *Voluntas*, one of the leading journals in the field, also reflect the more general development of research on the third sector. Here, we can note some interesting trends. For a long time, research on volunteering and classical non-profit management dominated the field. However, in recent years, a diverse range of other topics has conquered the stage or gained greater importance.

As a result of cutbacks in public finance and the drive towards New Public Management, one can see certain topics strongly on the rise. The topic of **social enterprise** in all its facets has become more popular, reflecting both the hybridization of (parts of) the third sector and the search for alternative types of organization. Likewise, the growing number of manuscripts on **philanthropy** may be the result of reductions in welfare expenditure in many countries.

Grassroots activities and social movements have featured more often in the journal, while formerly publications on these topics were mainly to be found in specific journals on social movements. Be it research on right-to-the-city activities, uprisings fighting for democratic rights or against the consequences of economic crises, academic research seems to have followed the wider mobilization occurring in the real world—as it should.

Other, classical topics discussed in *Voluntas* have changed. The topic of **volunteering** is still very timely and important, yet there has been a greater focus on non-

conventional, flexible forms of volunteering. Research in this area appears to have changed with the subject, with more emphasis on unstable, diverse, short-term and spontaneous types.

The relative **decline of classical management research on non-profit organizations** in the journal might have been caused by the shift of such contributions to other journals, but it may also indicate that the novelty of the topic has worn off. Whereas in the 1990s, managers of non-profit organizations were still developing an understanding of their organization as something distinct, with specific challenges, by now professionalization of such organizations is well advanced, and academic research and training programmes are well established in most regions. Another cause may be that big funders have lost interest in the field of non-profit management. For instance, European research funding calls have recently tended to focused instead on social enterprise and entrepreneurship (even if, in practice, it concerns the same organizations).

What still remains relatively rare is **country comparisons**. Most studies focus on a specific national or local context. We would welcome seeing more comparisons in the future.

The **Covid-19 crisis** has severe consequences from the sector, which should be reflected in publications soon (though for now, it seems too early to present firm data). Research on this topic is interesting in itself, but it may also generate more general insights on the crisis management and policies of different governments, the responses of NPOs and civil society, and the effects of shrinking civic spaces. Unfortunately, the crisis might also widen the gender gap¹ amongst scholars. Again, it is too early for reliable numbers, but there seems to be a trend towards falling submission rates from female authors.²

Over the past years, many people have made a substantial effort to help non-profit research and our journal. We want to express our deep gratitude to everybody who has contributed to the success of the journal and its community, not least the reviewers, whose hidden work is essential.

In general, our field is a lively and comparatively friendly one. The pandemic threatens to weaken its coherence, by making it difficult to meet at conferences. If anything, the crisis has shown that digital tools can only partially substitute for classical meetings. Yet we hope and expect that, even in these turbulent times, creativity and intrinsic motivation will help maintain the social capital within our community of researchers.

¹ <https://theconversation.com/how-covid-is-widening-the-academic-gender-divide-146007>.

² <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/08/20/womens-journal-submission-rates-continue-fall>.