



REVIEW ARTICLE

FROM PASSION TO PAYWALL: THE EROSION OF ACADEMIC EQUITY IN THE ERA OF ARTICLE PROCESSING CHARGES

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ABSTRACT

The rapid evolution of academic publishing toward open access (OA) models has introduced Article Processing Charges (APCs), shifting the financial burden of publication onto researchers. While OA is often promoted as a democratizing force in scholarly communication, the reality is that APCs have deepened academic inequities, particularly affecting scholars from low- and middle-income countries, early-career researchers, and underfunded institutions. This opinion article reflects on two decades of publishing experience and examines the systemic issues surrounding APCs, including the exploitation of peer reviewers, the inconsistent funding structures for authors, and the growing commercialization of research dissemination. Drawing on recent literature, the article advocates for more equitable alternatives, such as diamond OA models, and calls for policy reforms and greater transparency in APC funding. The central argument underscores the need to restore the core academic value of knowledge as a public good, rather than a commodified privilege limited by financial capacity.

KEYWORDS

Open Access, Article Processing Charges, Academic Inequity

1. INTRODUCTION

I have been publishing scientific research since 2002, with over 400 peer-reviewed papers to my name. In the early years, academic publishing focused purely on the dissemination of knowledge. If a paper was scientifically sound and passed rigorous peer review, it would be published—often without any cost to the author. That was the true spirit of academia: contributing to a global pool of knowledge driven by passion, curiosity, and scholarly impact, rather than financial means.

Today, the publishing landscape has changed dramatically. The widespread adoption of Article Processing Charges (APCs) has turned academic publishing into a business-like enterprise. Many high-impact journals now operate under an open access (OA) model that requires authors to pay thousands of dollars just to make their work publicly accessible. Ironically, this is done in the name of “democratizing knowledge,” yet in practice, it often excludes scholars from underfunded institutions and developing countries who cannot afford the fees (Terlizzi et al., 2025; Jain et al., 2021).

Even more troubling is that while authors bear the financial burden of publication, peer reviewers—who uphold the integrity of scholarly communication—are rarely compensated. Their time and expertise are expected to be offered freely, often under tight deadlines, while publishers profit from a system that charges both ends: authors and readers (in hybrid models), or relies on public research funds to support their revenue streams (Halevi and Walsh, 2021; Ashworth et al., 2014).

Almost every day, I receive requests to review articles submitted to peer-reviewed journals. I accept many of these out of a sense of academic duty and to support the integrity of science. However, I also receive relentless reminder emails—sometimes phrased in ways that feel more like threats than professional communication—demanding that I submit my review by a specific deadline. These messages often come with an implicit assumption: that I have nothing else to do at my university, that my time is

theirs to claim. This approach is deeply disrespectful and mentally exhausting. Reviewers like myself offer our expertise on a voluntary basis. If journals expect free labor, the least they can do is exercise patience and respect. It feels as though I am being preyed upon by an overzealous system that benefits from my work without acknowledging its toll.

This raises a critical question: why are the very contributors to knowledge—the researchers and reviewers—being asked to pay for their own labour? By contrast, it would be far more logical for readers or institutions that benefit from accessing these published works to cover the cost. As I often reflect: “It is as if I planted the paddy field, but I’m forced to pay for the rice in my own bowl.”

2. ACADEMIC EQUITY UNDERMINED BY APCs

The financial burden imposed by APCs is a recurring barrier, particularly for researchers in countries like Argentina and India, where institutional funding does not consistently cover these charges (Terlizzi et al., 2025; Jain et al., 2021). In these regions, scholars are forced to rely on personal funds, often sacrificing personal needs to share their findings with the world. These challenges are not limited to individuals—entire institutions struggle with the cost of open access publishing (Borrego, 2023).

Global inequality in academic publishing is further entrenched by APCs. Scholars from low- and middle-income countries are frequently excluded from high-impact journals, which not only reduces their visibility but also distorts global research agendas. Collaborative research across borders is also hindered, as institutions in the Global North may hesitate to include underfunded partners who cannot afford publishing fees (Beasley, 2016).

Doctoral students face an even bleaker reality. Many of them lack institutional backing or personal wealth and are unable to publish their early work due to exorbitant APCs. This system fosters an elitist scholarly ecosystem where only those with access to financial resources are able to

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contribute to and shape future academic discourses (Wang, 2024).

3. OPAQUE FUNDING STRUCTURES AND INCONSISTENT SUPPORT

Researchers often cobble together funds from diverse sources—grants, departmental allocations, or even personal savings. Despite these efforts, many still find APCs insurmountable (Halevi and Walsh, 2021). At institutions such as the University of Glasgow, APCs are partially supported by block grants from funders like RCUK and the Wellcome Trust, yet the administration of these funds remains complex and inadequate to meet growing demand (Ashworth et al., 2014).

In many cases, there is no standardized mechanism for allocating APC funding, creating a fragmented and inequitable system. Even when funds are available, lack of transparency and data sharing makes it difficult for institutions to effectively manage and negotiate with publishers (Pallares et al., 2022).

4. PATHWAYS TO AN EQUITABLE PUBLISHING FUTURE

To address these inequities, the academic community must prioritize non-commercial OA models, such as the *diamond open access* model, which charges neither authors nor readers (Terlizzi et al., 2025; Borrego, 2023). These journals, often supported by universities or scholarly societies, represent a sustainable alternative and should be incentivized by research evaluation frameworks.

Equally important are policy reforms at both national and international levels. Public research funding agencies must play a more proactive role in shaping publishing practices, moving away from APC-based models and ensuring equitable access to publication regardless of geographic or economic status (Terlizzi et al., 2025).

Transparency is another essential step. Publishing houses must disclose APC pricing, and institutions should report APC expenditures openly to enable better budgeting and collective bargaining (Pallares et al., 2022).

5. CONCLUSION

Although open access aims to democratize knowledge, APCs risk transforming it into a privatized and exclusionary space. For many researchers in under-resourced settings, publication is no longer a right but a privilege dependent on their financial means. If unaddressed, this will lead to the systematic silencing of critical voices—not due to a lack of scientific merit, but due to a lack of money. The scholarly community must return to the founding values of academia: openness, inclusivity, and public

good. Supporting diamond OA journals, empowering library-led publishing, and respecting the voluntary labor of reviewers are essential steps. Research must not be commodified, and the right to publish must not hinge on the ability to pay. The future of academic publishing must be driven by purpose, not profit. As scholars, editors, reviewers, and policymakers, we must work together to rebuild a system where merit—not money—determines who gets published and whose voice is heard. I hope my voice is heard at least, if not to follow.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The author declares no financial interest in any publishing platform mentioned in this article.

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