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EDITORIAL

DECOLONIZING KNOWLEDGE WITHOUT BARRIERS: THE ROLE OF INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING IN GLOBAL ACADEMIA

The modern academic landscape is governed by a pervasive "Publish or Perish (PoP)" culture that prizes publication counts and journal prestige above scholarly depth and integrity. Originating in the early twentieth century (Wilson, 1995), this paradigm exerts relentless pressure on researchers to produce frequent, high-impact outputs in order to secure funding, promotions, and tenure (Edwards & Roy, 2017). Nobel laureate Peter Higgs famously observed that his landmark work on the Higgs boson might have been overlooked under such a system due to its modest publication record (Higgs, 2012), underscoring how the emphasis on productivity can overshadow transformative, slow-burning research.

This competitive ethos engenders a range of undesirable practices that undermine research quality. Scholars facing career imperatives may resort to "salami slicing"—dividing findings into multiple papers—or selectively reporting significant results while relegating null or negative outcomes to obscurity (Kassirer & Angell, 1995; Fanelli, 2010). The resulting reproducibility crisis, in which a substantial proportion of published experiments fail replication attempts, threatens the very foundations of scientific knowledge (Open Science Collaboration, 2015; Baker, 2016). Moreover, the high stakes of acceptance in top-tier journals encourage the pursuit of sensational topics over incremental or confirmatory studies, skewing research agendas.

Beyond methodological concerns, the PoP imperative exacts a heavy toll on researchers' mental health. Surveys reveal that a majority of doctoral candidates report overwhelming anxiety tied to publication expectations, with a significant fraction experiencing severe depression or burnout (Edwards & Roy, 2017). Early-career scholars, in particular, lack established networks and institutional support, making them vulnerable to stress and attrition. The result is not only personal suffering but also a narrowing of the scholarly community, as those from underrepresented or less-funded backgrounds struggle to meet the demands of the prevailing system.

The commercial publishing industry has capitalized on these dynamics, consolidating power among a few major entities and forging what has been termed a "prestige economy" (Larivière et al., 2015). Companies such as Elsevier and Springer Nature reap enormous profits—Elsevier reported a 37% profit margin in 2021(Elsevier, 2021). These costs are especially burdensome for institutions in low- and middle-income countries, where subscription fees may eclipse entire research budgets, and APCs of $2,000–5,000 per article effectively bar scholars from publishing in high-impact outlets (Tijssen, 2007; Kwon, 2022).

The dominance of English-language, Western-centric journals further exacerbates global inequities, sidelining locally relevant studies and non-native English speakers (Tijssen, 2007). Such disparities not only distort the global research agenda but also deprive the scientific community of diverse perspectives and insights.

In response to these intertwined challenges, independent scholarly publishing has emerged as a vital counterforce. Characterized by non-profit, community-driven models, this ecosystem includes diamond open access journals—free for both authors and readers—preprint servers, institutional repositories, overlay journals, and scholar-led presses (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2013). By eschewing commercial imperatives, these platforms emphasize accessibility, transparency, and community governance.

A key advantage of independent publishing lies in reducing financial barriers and promoting inclusivity. Regional initiatives such as SciELO in Latin America, Redalyc, and AJOL in Africa offer publishing outlets attuned to local languages and contexts, challenging the hegemony of Anglo-centric research (Saloojee & Pettifor, 2024). Preprint servers like arXiv, bioRxiv, and SSRN allow

rapid dissemination of findings, establishing priority and inviting community feedback without the delays of traditional peer review—a feature that proved invaluable during emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Sever et al., 2019).

Beyond access, these models foster research integrity and reproducibility. Many non-profit platforms mandate open data and code sharing, often integrating with repositories like Zenodo or embedding executable code directly within articles (Rule et al., 2019). Post-publication peer review and versioning enable dynamic, self-correcting scholarly records, moving beyond the static "version of record" that typifies conventional journals (Tennant et al., 2017).

Independent publishing also aligns with contemporary calls for responsible research assessment. Initiatives such as the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) and the Leiden Manifesto advocate for evaluating research on its intrinsic merits rather than on journal-based metrics like the Journal Impact Factor (Hicks et al., 2015; Brembs et al., 2013). Community-led platforms democratize prestige by leveraging alternative metrics—citations, downloads, social media engagement, and policy influence—to gauge impact (Priem et al., 2011). They also recognize diverse outputs often ignored by traditional metrics, including replication studies, negative results, data papers, and practice-oriented scholarship.

Despite their promise, independent models face significant hurdles. Financial sustainability remains precarious when relying on volunteer labor, institutional subsidies, or consortial funding models such as "Subscribe to Open" (Crow et al., 2020). Ensuring rigorous and trusted peer review while scaling operations demands both resources and cultural buy-in. Volunteer burnout, variable funding streams, and the inertia of academia's prestige economy pose formidable challenges (Tennant et al., 2016).

The most entrenched barrier is the conservative nature of academic evaluation: tenure and promotion committees often favor publications in established, high-impact journals, deterring early-career scholars from independent venues (Moher et al., 2018; Alperin et al., 2020). Overcoming this requires decisive action by institutions and funders to adopt DORA and Leiden principles fully, reshape reward structures to value quality and societal impact, and cultivate senior scholars' leadership in championing reform (Moher et al., 2018; Hicks et al., 2015).

Breaking free from the corrosive cycle of "Publish or Perish" necessitates collective effort. Universities must realign evaluation frameworks to prioritize intrinsic research merit and societal benefit, funders must invest in open infrastructure as a public good, and researchers at all levels should embrace and advance independent publishing practices. The growing momentum of the open science movement, evidenced by surges in preprint submissions and editorial board revolts against traditional publishers, signals that transformative change is within reach.

Ultimately, the future of scholarly communication hinges on publishing with purpose, integrity, and a commitment to global well-being. By investing in and legitimizing independent academic publishing, the academic community can foster a truly open, equitable, and rigorous ecosystem aligned with science's core mission: advancing knowledge for the benefit of all.

June 2025

Mustafa Zihni TUNCA

Editor-in-Chief

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