CloudPublish

Bridging the Divide: How We Can Make Global Scholarly Publishing Fairer for All

Introduction

Scholarly publishing is the backbone of science and knowledge. It's where new ideas are tested, discoveries shared, and the world's understanding grows. Over the past 20 years, digital tools and open access have promised a more connected, borderless research world.

But beneath this hopeful surface, a tough reality remains: old inequalities from the print age still exist, and some have even worsened online. High article fees, weak technology, and biases in publishing continue to block voices from the Global South and less-resourced institutions. These aren't just minor issues; they threaten the credibility, diversity, and innovation of global research.



For those managing digital publishing, especially at smaller companies, this isn't just a problem. It's a chance. By actively working to fix these gaps, publishers can help build a fairer system where everyone's knowledge is valued and shared.

1. A Closer Look at Global Publishing Disparities

Research publishing isn't equal. About 75% of top research papers come from North America and Western Europe. Meanwhile, scholars in Africa, South Asia, South America, and other regions contribute only a small share, even though they face big local issues.

Why? Several reasons. First, English dominates academic publishing. Non-native speakers often struggle because of language barriers, not because of bad science. Second, funding is a big problem. Producing and publishing research can be very expensive for low-income countries. Lastly, geography matters—being far from main research centres makes it harder to find mentorship, collaborate, and publish, even today.

These barriers don't just stop people from publishing—they limit who gets to participate in shaping global knowledge and policy.

2. The Financial Hurdle: Article Processing Charges and Their Impact

The open access revolution has undeniably democratized access for readers. However, as publishers shifted costs from subscribers to authors, APCs have become the new gatekeeper. These charges usually range from hundreds to several thousand dollars per article, a price tag that can shut out researchers and institutions lacking generous grant support.

The divide is stark. In high-income countries, universities and funding agencies typically cover APCs, weaving them into grants and institutional budgets. But for academics in the Global South or under-resourced settings, this kind of safety net is rare. Even when journals offer waivers or discounts, these programs often come with complex bureaucratic requirements or limited availability. Early-career scholars, independent researchers, and those without strong institutional affiliations are especially disadvantaged.

In practice, the “pay-to-publish” model makes it nearly impossible for many qualified voices to participate. And for the broader community, the result is a growing rift between the well-funded and the underfunded, a gap that threatens to calcify scholarly publishing into a system where prestige and influence hinge primarily on institutional wealth.

3. Systemic Obstacles: Infrastructure and Access Limitations

Publishing research is rarely as simple as uploading a manuscript. It requires digital infrastructure, academic networks, and access to specialized training—all too often, a luxury out of reach for many.

Across vast swaths of the Global South, stable high-speed internet is not a given. Old computers, unreliable power, and limited IT support can make each step of the publishing process far more daunting. Even when technical access is available, many researchers remain cut off from international mentorship and editorial networks, making it far harder to navigate the complex realities and unspoken expectations of elite publishing.

Training is another big challenge. Many scholars don’t have regular access to workshops on writing, sharing data, or open science. These gaps can make it tough for talented researchers to get published and recognized.

Overall, the system favours those with resources, leaving out vital perspectives and ideas.

4. Editorial Gatekeeping and Implicit Bias

Getting your paper accepted is just the start. Even after submission, hidden biases can block voices from less-represented regions or institutions.

Studies show that reviewers tend to favour work from well-known Western universities. Manuscripts from non-English speakers or smaller institutions often face tougher reviews. Editorial boards are mostly from North America and Europe, which can lead to biased ideas about what research is important.

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This bias means regional or culturally specific research is sometimes dismissed as too niche, even if it's valuable. Such biases can distort the global research picture and undermine trust in science itself.

5. The Cost of Inequity: Risks to Scholarly Communication

These imbalances don't just affect individual scholars. The consequences ripple outwards, shaping the direction and quality of the entire knowledge ecosystem.

When only certain voices and topics are elevated, research priorities start to homogenize. Innovative approaches, regionally relevant questions, and alternative methods are often overlooked, stunting global progress. Policy recommendations based on a narrow research base risk being misapplied—or even harmful—across different cultures and contexts. In a world already sceptical of expertise, trust in academic research further erodes if it appears to reflect only a sliver of global reality.

Perhaps most critically, when regional knowledge, from health to climate to local governance, is excluded, the world forfeits a vital source of practical, ground-level wisdom. Without these diverse perspectives, our collective ability to solve urgent problems is weakened.

6. Power Dynamics: The Influence of Major Publishers

Looming over these challenges is the outsized influence of a few major publishers. Industry consolidation means power is concentrated among giants who set APCs, control publication policies, and dictate the business terms smaller or regional journals must navigate.

High fees and exclusive contracts stack the deck against local and community-focused publishers, making it harder for them to secure submissions or carve out visibility. Large "read and publish" agreements usually benefit well-funded institutions, sidelining journals and authors targeting regional or non-English-speaking audiences. Local language journals and fledgling outlets are often left struggling in the shadows.

Business decisions about licensing, redistribution, and open data are typically driven by profitability, with minimal input from the global communities most affected. For early-career researchers, practitioners, and those working outside the Global North, these trends make gaining recognition and distributing their insights an uphill battle.

7. Promising Approaches: Equity-Focused Initiatives and Alternative Models

Despite these headwinds, a growing movement is reimagining scholarly publishing through a more inclusive lens. One standout trend is the rise of "diamond" open access journals, which are free for both authors and readers. These are funded through consortia, philanthropic support, or government grants. Initiatives like AmeliCA in Latin America and African Journals Online (AJOL) are already proving it's possible to amplify local research through these models.

Some publishers have introduced sliding scale APCs or automatic waivers for authors from lower-income countries, hoping to even out the economic playing field. Partnerships such as Research4Life bundle access and discounted publishing for eligible institutions, though how they

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operate, and who they help, can be inconsistent.

That said, scaling these initiatives is not simple. Many depend on external funding or are restricted to particular regions or fields. Added administrative requirements for fee waivers can inadvertently introduce new barriers or biases.

8. Harnessing Technology for Inclusive Access

Digital innovation remains a powerful equalizer, provided it is implemented thoughtfully. Open-source publishing platforms like Open Journal Systems (OJS), PubPub, and eLife's Libero help reduce costs and technical barriers for launching and managing journals. This empowers smaller institutions and local communities to control their own publishing destiny without having to rely on high-priced proprietary systems.

Collaborative digital tools, preprint servers, transparent peer review solutions, and shared metadata repositories, can open the door to greater participation and transparency, particularly when combined with support for multiple languages and open standards. Taken together, these initiatives don't just lower costs; they foster resilience, adaptability, and sustainability, especially when underpinned by local training and capacity-building.

But technology alone won't solve everything. Effective deployment in underserved contexts still requires significant investment in infrastructure and ongoing support. Without this, even the best open-source platforms risk mirroring the access gaps entrenched in the broader system.

9. Practical Steps for Digital Publishing Managers

So, where does this leave digital publishing managers—especially those at small or midsize companies eager to be part of the solution? Here's how you can help make research more inclusive:

- Be transparent about fees and waivers. Make information easy to find and simple to access. Advocate for flexible pricing options.
- Build partnerships with groups that support underrepresented scholars. Co-host events, share resources, or start new open access journals focused on diversity.
- Support local editors and researchers. Offer training, mentorship, and technical help, especially outside the English-speaking world.
- Promote diversity within your organization. Train your team to recognize bias, include different voices on your boards, and foster collaboration across regions.

10. Charting the Path to Inclusive Scholarly Communication

Building a more inclusive publishing landscape isn't a distant ideal; it's a business and leadership imperative for today's digital publishing managers. Start by asking hard questions: Are your organization's policies truly dismantling barriers, or might they inadvertently be reinforcing them? The most effective leaders set clear goals for equity, actively seek feedback from marginalized communities, and aren't afraid to make bold changes for the greater good.

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Innovative publishing isn't just about technology or process. It's about crafting frameworks that reward diverse authorship, recognize region-specific expertise, and deliver sustainable, systemic change. By embracing this mandate, digital publishing managers can ensure that the academic literature truly mirrors the rich tapestry of global thought.

Call to Action

Now is the time for digital publishing managers to step forward and drive meaningful change. Take a close look at your organization's practices, seek out new partnerships to amplify underrepresented voices, and champion the policy and technology innovations that will dismantle old barriers. By choosing inclusion and equity, you're not just supporting your authors, you're strengthening research, inspiring innovation, and advancing collective progress for science and society.

If you're ready to be a catalyst for equity in scholarly publishing, connect with our team. Together, we can ensure that scholarly communication is not only fairer, but fundamentally better for everyone.

Book a Meeting

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