



Academic Publishing at a Crossroads: Advocating for Structural and Epistemic Transformation

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Abstract

Academic publishing, once intended as a vehicle for disseminating collective knowledge, has become a commercialised and exclusionary system. This paper critically examines the structural and epistemic inequities embedded in the current publishing model, arguing that radical change is necessary to realign scholarship with the public good. Guided by knowledge equity theory and critical political economy, the study analyses how corporate concentration, profit-driven access models, and impact-factor hierarchies distort the production, evaluation, and distribution of academic knowledge. The current findings reveal that oligopolistic publishers extract substantial profits from publicly funded research while restricting global access, thereby perpetuating what has been described as “knowledge apartheid.” Moreover, open-access alternatives often replicate inequalities through prohibitive article processing charges, shifting economic exclusion from readers to authors. The discussion emphasises the necessity of decommodifying academic publishing, reforming research evaluation systems, and decolonising epistemic practices to promote inclusivity and fairness. Policy recommendations include public investment in open infrastructures, multilingual publishing, and the adoption of equitable licensing frameworks. The paper concludes that meaningful reform must extend beyond institutional restructuring to encompass a cultural transformation in how academic value is defined and rewarded. Reclaiming knowledge as a public good requires dismantling profit-centred paradigms and embracing open, collaborative, and decolonised modes of scholarly communication.

Keywords: academic publishing; knowledge equity; open access; critical political economy; decolonisation; scholarly communication.

Introduction

Academic publishing plays a central role in validating, legitimising, and disseminating scholarly knowledge (Aksom, 2018; Bergquist et al., 2001; Brabet et al., 2021; Ohmann, 2003; Oparinde et al., 2024; Peters et al., 2016; Rao et al., 2024). It serves as the primary vehicle for communicating, peer-reviewing, and archiving discoveries for future generations (Fyfe et al., 2017; Padmalochanan, 2019). However, over the past three decades, the sector has evolved into a

highly commercialised system dominated by a small number of multinational publishers that extract vast profits from unpaid academic labour (Larivière et al., 2015). The commodification of knowledge has transformed a once collaborative enterprise into an exclusionary marketplace, where access to information is governed by the ability to pay rather than intellectual curiosity (Fleissner, 2009; Imrie, 2016; May, 2005; Peters, 2011; Rotta & Teixeira, 2019). Scholars, universities, and taxpayers fund the research process; yet, access to the findings is frequently restricted behind expensive paywalls (Cook et al., 2024; Day et al., 2020; Gershenson et al., 2020; Schroeder, 2021; Suber, 2012). The contradiction is profound: research intended to advance public knowledge has mainly become inaccessible to the very public that finances it.

The tension between the public purpose of research and the private interests of publishing corporations represents one of the most pressing paradoxes in contemporary academia (Fyfe et al., 2017; Schroeder, 2021; Taylor et al., 2025). Universities and governments invest billions in research annually, but the dissemination of this knowledge remains constrained by the economic imperatives of a few dominant publishers (Altbach, 2007; Feller, 1990; Geuna, 1999; National Research Council, Global Affairs, Board on Higher Education, & Committee on Research Universities, 2012). These institutions rely on a business model that limits distribution to maximise profit, thus undermining the principle of universal access to knowledge. The result is a system that privileges elite institutions and well-funded scholars while marginalising researchers in less affluent contexts. This structural imbalance reinforces global hierarchies in knowledge production and perpetuates epistemic inequalities between the Global North and the Global South.

Traditional publishing models have also proven increasingly misaligned with the digital era's potential for open and democratic access (Ahmed, 2005; Green, 2019; Kalmykov, 2024; Senftleben et al., 2017). In an age of digital connectivity, where instantaneous sharing and collaboration are technologically feasible, academic publishing remains trapped in an analogue logic of scarcity. Journals continue to charge exorbitant subscription fees and article processing charges (APCs), effectively transferring costs from readers to authors (Borrego, 2023; Budzinski et al., 2020; Jayaraj et al., 2022; Limaye, 2022; Pinfield et al., 2016). These financial burdens disproportionately affect researchers in developing countries and underfunded institutions, who often lack the resources to publish in high-impact outlets (Tennant et al., 2016). As a result, the academic voice becomes skewed toward those who can afford to participate, rather than toward those with the most original or contextually relevant insights.

Equally problematic is the persistence of metric-driven evaluation systems, such as the impact factor, which have distorted academic incentives and perpetuated narrow definitions of excellence. The reliance on journal rankings as proxies for scholarly worth has intensified competition, reinforced institutional hierarchies, and discouraged interdisciplinary or critical research that may not align with mainstream paradigms (Moher et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2010; Özbilgin, 2009; Wongvorachan, 2025). This metric obsession has fostered a culture of conformity and productivity, where the quantity of publications often outweighs their social or intellectual significance. Such an environment is antithetical to the pursuit of genuine discovery and intellectual risk-taking, which should be the hallmarks of academic inquiry.

Moreover, the traditional peer review process, once conceived as a safeguard of academic integrity, has become increasingly opaque and exclusionary (Anderson et al., 2021; Jin & Jiang, 2024; Lee et al., 2010; Özbilgin, 2009; Welsh, 2019, 2021). The anonymity of reviewers and lack of accountability in decision-making processes allow bias, favouritism, and conservatism to persist unchecked (Smith, 2006). Early-career researchers, independent scholars, and those challenging dominant paradigms frequently encounter systemic barriers in gaining recognition and publication (Drosou et al., 2020; Gasson, 2023; Khanijou & Zakariah, 2023; Lee, 2024; Locke et al., 2022; Mula et al., 2022). As a result, the diversity of perspectives within academia is constrained, and innovative or radical ideas are filtered out in favour of those that reinforce established disciplinary orthodoxies (Cooper, 2013; Darbellay, 2015; Krishnan, 2009; Lloyd, 2009; Shinn, 2005; Weber, 2014). Reforming peer review to enhance transparency, inclusivity, and accountability is, therefore, a critical component of any radical transformation of the publishing ecosystem.

This paper, therefore, argues that academic publishing necessitates radical and systemic change, one that goes beyond incremental reforms and addresses the structural inequities inherent in current practices. The transformation must involve redefining its economic foundations, restructuring the peer review process, and reimagining access frameworks to align with the ideals of equity, transparency, and public service. Academic publishing should evolve from being a profit-oriented industry to becoming a global public good, where knowledge is freely accessible, collaboratively produced, and socially relevant. The pursuit of open, inclusive, and ethical publishing practices is not merely an institutional necessity but a moral imperative, ensuring that knowledge serves humanity rather than corporate interests. To frame the perspectives and conclusion of this paper, the researcher employs knowledge equity theory and a critical political economy guided by a critical-analytical research design.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings of this critique are grounded in knowledge equity theory and critical political economy, which together offer a robust lens for interrogating the inequities embedded in the global academic publishing system. Knowledge equity theory posits that knowledge production, distribution, and access must be governed by fairness, inclusivity, and the dismantling of structural bias (Chan et al., 2019a, 2019b; Kruschick & Schoch, 2023; Malin & Shewchuk, 2024). It questions who has the right to produce knowledge, whose voices are amplified, and who benefits from access to research outputs. Under current publishing conditions, inequities persist at multiple levels: wealthier institutions dominate production and dissemination, while scholars from the Global South remain marginalised in both authorship and readership (Santos, 2014). Applying this framework to academic publishing reveals that the prevailing paywall model systematically privileges affluent researchers and institutions, thereby reproducing epistemic injustice.

Critical political economy complements this perspective by situating academic publishing within the broader context of capitalist production and accumulation. This framework analyses how economic imperatives, rather than scholarly values, increasingly determine what is published, how it is distributed, and who profits from it (Mosco, 2009). The concentration of publishing

power within a handful of corporations, such as Elsevier, Springer Nature, and Wiley, exemplifies the commodification of knowledge (Larivière et al., 2015). These firms operate under oligopolistic conditions, allowing them to set exorbitant subscription prices and exploit unpaid labour from authors and reviewers. When viewed through this lens, knowledge becomes a tradable asset rather than a public good. In this paper, critical political economy is applied to expose how the commodification of scholarly communication undermines the democratic and collaborative ethos that academia purports to uphold.

The intersection of knowledge equity theory and critical political economy illuminates the contradiction between academia's universalist mission and its exclusionary practices. While universities and researchers claim to pursue truth and collective advancement, the publishing apparatus often enforces scarcity, hierarchy, and dependency. This theoretical synthesis highlights that reform cannot be achieved solely through technological innovation, such as digital platforms or open-access repositories, but requires a structural realignment of power and ownership. Applying these frameworks to the present study, the analysis critiques how current publishing models perpetuate epistemic hierarchies and proposes an alternative vision grounded in social justice and the democratisation of knowledge.

The frameworks also justify the paper's call for a decolonial approach to knowledge dissemination. Western epistemologies have long dominated academic publishing, marginalising indigenous, regional, and alternative ways of knowing (Connell, 2019a, 2019b). Knowledge equity theory demands that the global system of scholarship recognise epistemic plurality, valuing diverse research traditions, languages, and methodologies. Within this paper's argument, decolonisation of publishing means dismantling the hegemonic structures that privilege Euro-American paradigms and instead creating platforms where Caribbean, African, Asian, and Latin American scholars can engage on equitable terms. The practical application involves encouraging multilingual publishing, supporting regional journals, and developing collaborative South-South research networks.

From the standpoint of critical political economy, such decolonial transformation requires economic restructuring. The monopolistic control of large publishers must give way to cooperative or publicly funded models that redistribute ownership and control of scholarly infrastructure. Applying this framework to the Jamaican and wider Caribbean academic context, this paper argues for investment in regional open-access repositories, university-led journals, and publicly subsidised publishing initiatives. These reforms would reclaim knowledge from the commercial domain and restore it to the academic commons. By grounding reform in both equity and economics, this paper demonstrates that sustainable change must address both structural exploitation and epistemic exclusion.

In synthesis, these theoretical frameworks shape the analytical and prescriptive dimensions of this paper. Knowledge equity theory provides the normative foundation, asserting that access to knowledge is a right, not a privilege. In contrast, critical political economy provides the explanatory mechanism, detailing how current systems perpetuate inequality. Together, they anchor the paper's central argument that academic publishing must undergo radical transformation to realign with the ethical imperatives of openness, inclusivity, and collective

benefit. This theoretical foundation not only critiques the existing publishing order but also guides the formulation of practical pathways for reform, from open-access policies and public ownership models to epistemic diversification and participatory peer review systems.

Literature Review

The academic publishing industry has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past four decades, evolving from a primarily scholarly enterprise into a profit-driven global industry (Fyfe et al., 2017; Larivière et al., 2015; Stoyanova, 2025). Historically, universities and learned societies managed journals with the primary goal of advancing knowledge dissemination. However, beginning in the late twentieth century, commercial publishers increasingly monopolised academic communication, creating a system where access to research depends on institutional wealth and market dynamics (Fyfe et al., 2017). Scholars have described this evolution as the “commercial capture” of academic publishing, wherein publishers such as Elsevier, Springer Nature, and Taylor & Francis extract high profit margins through subscription models and restrictive licensing agreements (Buranyi, 2017). This shift has redefined knowledge as a commodity, sold back to the very institutions and taxpayers who fund its production. Consequently, the economic model of publishing is now at odds with the academic ethos of universal access and public good.

A significant body of research highlights how the paywall model impedes equitable access to scholarship, particularly in developing nations. Suber (2012) argues that the subscription-based system effectively excludes researchers, practitioners, and the general public who cannot afford access to high-cost journals. Studies show that even well-funded universities face increasing budgetary strain from escalating journal prices (Tennant et al., 2016). For institutions in the Global South, these costs create a significantly steeper barrier to participation in global knowledge networks (Chan et al., 2019a, 2019b). This exclusion perpetuates epistemic inequality, as researchers from less developed regions often rely on outdated or incomplete data, thereby hindering their ability to contribute to international scholarly debates. The result is a two-tier system: one of access and influence for the wealthy, and one of exclusion and marginalisation for the rest.

The dominance of journal impact factors has further distorted the purpose and practice of academic publishing. Originally intended to measure journal influence, the impact factor has become a proxy for individual academic merit, influencing hiring, promotion, and funding decisions (Moher et al., 2018). This metric-based culture incentivises scholars to publish in a narrow set of elite journals, reinforcing the prestige of commercial publishers and discouraging innovation or interdisciplinary research. Critics argue that this has led to a “publish or perish” environment, where quantity is prioritised over quality and conformity is valued over creativity (Brembs et al., 2013). Moreover, the impact factor does not reflect the real-world value or societal relevance of research, leading to the undervaluation of critical, community-based, or regionally focused studies. The literature consistently calls for alternative evaluation systems that recognise open-access contributions, replication studies, and diverse forms of scholarly output.

The open-access (OA) movement has emerged as a key response to the inequities of traditional publishing. It seeks to make scholarly outputs freely available to all, removing financial and legal barriers to access (Suber, 2012). OA initiatives, such as the Budapest Open Access Initiative (2002) and the Plan S mandate by cOAlition S (2018), represent efforts to reorient scholarly communication toward inclusivity and transparency. Empirical evidence suggests that open-access articles tend to achieve higher citation rates and a wider readership than their paywalled counterparts (Tennant et al., 2016). However, scholars note that OA has also been co-opted by commercial publishers who impose article processing charges (APCs), shifting the financial burden from readers to authors (Poynder, 2019). This model inadvertently reproduces the same inequalities it seeks to overcome, as only well-funded researchers or institutions can afford to publish in prestigious open-access journals.

Recent scholarship has called for structural reform beyond open access, focusing on issues of epistemic diversity, data sovereignty, and decolonisation of knowledge (Santos, 2014; Connell, 2019a, 2019b). These perspectives argue that meaningful change must address not only access but also representation in global academic discourse. Western epistemologies and English-language dominance marginalise non-Western scholars and undervalue regionally grounded research. Initiatives such as *SciELO* in Latin America and *AJOL* (African Journals Online) demonstrate the potential of regional platforms to democratise knowledge dissemination (Chan et al., 2019a, 2019b). However, despite their success, these platforms often struggle for recognition in global ranking systems dominated by Western metrics. The literature emphasises the importance of pluralistic, multilingual, and culturally responsive publishing frameworks that validate diverse epistemologies and modes of expression.

Emerging discussions on the future of academic publishing emphasise cooperative, community-owned models that align scholarly communication with public service principles (Tennant et al., 2020). Institutional repositories, preprint servers, and scholar-led journals offer promising alternatives to commercial publishing. Studies advocate the establishment of publicly funded infrastructure that decentralises control and prioritises open peer review and transparency (Eve, 2020). This matter aligns with the argument of the present paper, that radical change must be systemic, integrating economic, epistemic, and ethical dimensions. The literature therefore converges on a central insight: the transformation of academic publishing is not merely a technical or financial issue, but a moral imperative grounded in the democratic right to knowledge.

The commercialisation of academic publishing has created an unsustainable economic model. Major publishers report profit margins exceeding 35-40%, far surpassing those of most industries (Larivière et al., 2015). These profits are derived from subscription fees charged to libraries and APCs levied on authors. The resulting “double payment” paradox means that institutions fund both the production and the consumption of knowledge. This structure restricts access for independent researchers, practitioners, and the general public. Even within well-resourced universities, library budgets are strained by rising subscription costs, leading to cancellations that further limit access (Suber, 2012). Such exclusionary practices directly contravene the public mission of higher education and stifle innovation.

Equally troubling are the systemic biases embedded in the peer review process. While intended to ensure rigour, peer review often operates as an opaque gatekeeping mechanism favouring elite institutions and Western theoretical frameworks (Smith, 2006). Reviewers' anonymity and journals' lack of accountability can perpetuate bias and discourage methodological diversity. The overreliance on journal prestige, measured through the impact factor, incentivises "safe" research that conforms to dominant paradigms rather than innovative or socially engaged scholarship (Moher et al., 2018). This matter not only limits intellectual diversity but also delays the dissemination of important findings, particularly in urgent fields such as climate science or public health.

The Open Access (OA) movement emerged as a response to these crises, seeking to make academic work freely available online. OA represents a transformative opportunity to democratise knowledge, allowing broader audiences, including policymakers, educators, and citizens, to engage with research (Tennant et al., 2016). Numerous studies have demonstrated that OA articles receive higher citation rates and broader public visibility, thereby enhancing their scholarly impact (Piwowar et al., 2018). However, the implementation of OA has been uneven and often co-opted by commercial interests. Many publishers have adopted "gold OA" models that shift the financial burden to authors through high APCs, creating new barriers for scholars from low-income regions (Lawson, 2019).

True reform requires moving beyond profit-driven OA models toward community-owned and cooperative publishing infrastructures. Platforms such as SciELO in Latin America and Africa Journals Online exemplify sustainable alternatives grounded in regional collaboration and open metadata sharing (Chan et al., 2019a, 2019b). These models demonstrate that equitable OA is achievable when guided by principles of public good rather than private gain. Furthermore, adopting open peer review, where reviewers' identities and reports are made transparent, can enhance accountability and foster constructive dialogue (Ross-Hellauer, 2017). In sum, open access must be reimaged not as a market adjustment but as a structural transformation that redistributes power within scholarly communication.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative, critical-analytical research design, grounded in the traditions of critical political economy and knowledge equity theory. The purpose of this approach is to interrogate the structures, power relations, and epistemic hierarchies embedded in the global academic publishing system. Unlike positivist methodologies that rely on empirical quantification, this study adopts a conceptual and interpretive framework, synthesising theoretical perspectives, policy documents, and scholarly discourse to construct a comprehensive critique. The critical-analytical design is particularly suited to exploring complex social systems where economic and ideological dimensions intersect (Fairclough, 2013). It enables the examination of how publishing practices both reflect and perpetuate broader socio-economic inequalities, and it proposes viable pathways for reform grounded in equity and accessibility.

Data for the analysis were drawn from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy statements from academic publishers, reports by open-access advocacy groups,

and global databases on publishing economics. Key documents include reports by UNESCO, the Budapest Open Access Initiative, and the cOAlition S Plan S framework. These materials were selected for their relevance to the economic, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of academic publishing. Additionally, scholarly works by Suber (2012), Larivière et al. (2015), Connell (2019a, 2019b), and Tennant et al. (2020) were used to provide empirical grounding and conceptual depth. By triangulating academic literature with institutional reports and public policy texts, the study ensures both theoretical rigour and contextual accuracy. The method thus integrates textual analysis with critical theory to interpret systemic patterns and contradictions within the academic publishing landscape.

The analytical process followed a structured thematic approach. First, literature and policy texts were reviewed and coded according to recurring themes, such as the commodification of knowledge, access inequality, impact-factor dependency, and the decolonisation of scholarship. These codes were then organised into higher-order analytical categories, including economic exploitation, epistemic exclusion, and institutional reform. Thematic synthesis enabled the identification of causal linkages between corporate control and the erosion of academic autonomy, as well as between open-access initiatives and evolving forms of resistance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process facilitated the development of a coherent argument demonstrating that inequities in academic publishing are neither incidental nor temporary but structurally embedded and ideologically reinforced.

A critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective was applied to interpret the language and framing used by major publishing corporations and open-access initiatives. CDA examines how power and ideology operate through institutional discourse (Fairclough, 2013). In this context, the analysis focused on publisher statements, mission declarations, and public communications to reveal how profit motives are often disguised in the rhetoric of “innovation,” “quality,” or “excellence.” Similarly, open-access discourses were scrutinised for evidence of co-optation, in which emancipatory ideals of accessibility are undermined by commercial appropriation via article processing charges (APCs). This discursive dimension adds depth to the critique by exposing the symbolic and linguistic strategies that sustain the current publishing regime.

The rationale for this methodological approach lies in its capacity to combine theoretical critique with empirical insight. A purely descriptive or econometric study would fail to capture the cultural and ideological forces shaping academic publishing. Conversely, a purely theoretical exposition might overlook the material realities faced by researchers and institutions. The critical-analytical design bridges this divide by situating textual evidence within historical and structural contexts. It allows the study to address not only what the system does but also how and why it operates as it does, revealing the nexus between capital accumulation, epistemic authority, and access to knowledge. Through this approach, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how academic publishing sustains systemic inequality and of the structural changes necessary to overcome it.

Ethical considerations were integral to the research process. As a secondary data study, no human participants were involved, eliminating risks of personal harm or confidentiality breaches. However, the study remained attentive to intellectual ethics, ensuring that all sources were

accurately attributed, critically evaluated, and contextualised. The researcher maintained reflexivity throughout the analytical process, acknowledging positionality as a scholar operating within—and therefore partially constrained by—the same academic system under critique. By maintaining transparency in analytical procedures and citation practices, the study aligns with the very principles of openness and accountability that it advocates for in academic publishing.

Findings and Discussion

The findings reveal that academic publishing has evolved into a structurally inequitable system, sustained by corporate concentration and institutional complicity. The dominance of major publishers-Elsevier, Springer Nature, Wiley, and Taylor & Francis-illustrates an oligopolistic market in which five firms control over 70% of global journal output (Larivière et al., 2015). This concentration enables the extraction of monopolistic profits while limiting access to publicly funded knowledge. Universities and libraries, particularly in the Global South, face prohibitive subscription fees, leading to what has been termed “knowledge apartheid” (Chan et al., 2019a, 2019b). Researchers in developing regions experience exclusion from both authorship and readership, reinforcing North-South asymmetries. The findings thus substantiate the theoretical proposition that capitalist market dynamics have subordinated the public good of knowledge dissemination to private economic interests.

Further analysis highlights how the impact factor regime perpetuates epistemic inequality by privileging publication in elite Western journals as the primary metric of scholarly worth. This system marginalises alternative epistemologies, discourages interdisciplinary collaboration, and reinforces linguistic hegemony (Connell, 2019a, 2019b). Journals with high impact factors often favour topics aligned with Western scientific paradigms, while critical, regional, or applied research is devalued. The findings also show that citation-based evaluation has institutionalised a culture of academic competition rather than cooperation, leading to “publish or perish” pressures that distort scholarly priorities. This emphasis on metrics over meaning produces a self-reinforcing cycle in which prestige determines visibility, visibility influences funding, and funding perpetuates structural exclusion. The discussion, therefore, underscores that any meaningful reform must dismantle the epistemic hierarchies embedded in the evaluation system.

A related finding concerns the commodification of open access, which, although designed to democratise knowledge, has in many ways replicated the very inequities it sought to overcome. The rise of article processing charges (APCs), often exceeding USD 3,000 per paper, has created new economic barriers to authorship (Tennant et al., 2020). Wealthy institutions and well-funded scholars can afford visibility, while those without resources remain invisible. This shift represents the transformation of access inequality from the reader’s side to the author’s side, preserving the financial gatekeeping function under a different guise. The data suggest that open-access platforms owned by commercial publishers exploit the moral legitimacy of openness while maintaining control over intellectual property. Consequently, the promise of a democratised scholarly commons has been compromised by the intrusion of neoliberal logics into the open-access movement.

The discourse analysis also revealed that publishers employ rhetorical strategies to conceal profit motives beneath the guise of academic excellence and innovation. Corporate mission statements frequently invoke ideals of quality, transparency, and global reach; yet, these terms often serve as ideological cover for financialisation and control (Fairclough, 2013). For example, claims of “peer-review integrity” are juxtaposed with reports of exploitative pricing, restrictive licensing, and aggressive copyright enforcement. Such contradictions reveal the ideological nature of publishing discourse: it constructs a moral narrative that legitimises economic domination. This finding reinforces the value of critical discourse analysis in uncovering the symbolic dimensions of power that underpin the academic publishing industry.

Notably, the findings point to an emerging movement of resistance and transformation. Grassroots initiatives such as SciELO, AfricArXiv, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) exemplify community-driven efforts to reclaim scholarly autonomy. These models demonstrate the feasibility of non-profit, decentralised publishing systems that prioritise accessibility and knowledge equity (Biagioli&Lippman, 2020). Similarly, initiatives such as Plan S and UNESCO’s Open Science Recommendation (2021) signal institutional shifts towards transparency and inclusion. However, these efforts remain fragmented and face significant pushback from commercial interests. The analysis shows that without structural policy interventions, such as public funding for open infrastructure and the decommodification of publication, these reforms risk being absorbed into the very system they seek to change.

Overall, the discussion illustrates that radical change in academic publishing must address both economic and epistemic structures. Economically, reform requires redistributing control from private corporations to academic consortia and public institutions through open, cooperative platforms. Epistemically, reform demands decolonising knowledge production by promoting multilingualism, valuing non-traditional outputs, and recognising diverse intellectual traditions. The intersection of knowledge equity theory and critical political economy thus offers a holistic blueprint for reimagining publishing as a global commons rather than a market commodity. True transformation depends on aligning publication practices with the ethical imperatives of equity, accessibility, and intellectual plurality, ensuring that the pursuit of knowledge once again serves humanity rather than profit.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study confirm that the academic publishing system has deviated significantly from its foundational mission of disseminating knowledge for the public good. What was once a collaborative, scholarly enterprise has been transformed into a commercialised industry marked by monopolistic control, exclusionary access, and epistemic inequality (Larivière et al., 2015). The commodification of knowledge has created an environment in which academic prestige, rather than public benefit, drives its production and dissemination. Consequently, this paper concludes that the call for radical change is not simply a reaction to rising costs or limited accessibility; it is a call to restore intellectual integrity and epistemic justice. The reform of academic publishing is both a moral and structural necessity, ensuring that knowledge returns to its rightful place as a global public good rather than a private commodity.

A central recommendation is the decommodification of knowledge production and dissemination. Publicly funded research should remain in the public domain, accessible without financial barriers, ensuring transparency and accountability. Governments, universities, and funding agencies should adopt open licensing models, such as those under the Creative Commons license, to prevent corporations from capturing publicly funded outputs (Suber, 2012). Furthermore, academic consortia can establish non-profit publishing cooperatives that reinvest surplus into scholarly infrastructure rather than shareholder dividends. By aligning ownership with academic communities, these reforms would reduce dependency on commercial publishers and ensure a fairer distribution of costs across institutions. Decommodification thus represents a fundamental realignment of academic publishing with the values of equity, collaboration, and shared intellectual advancement.

Equally essential is reforming research evaluation systems, which currently sustain elitism and exclusion through overreliance on impact factors and citation metrics. As noted by Moher et al. (2018), such indicators distort scholarly priorities, favour well-resourced institutions, and marginalise innovative or interdisciplinary work. National research councils and universities should instead adopt broader evaluation frameworks, such as the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), which values qualitative contributions, societal impact, and open science practices. A pluralistic approach to evaluation would encourage diversity in scholarship, legitimise regional and community-based research, and foster epistemic inclusion. Reforming academic metrics is therefore inseparable from democratising knowledge itself.

From an epistemic perspective, decolonising academic publishing is integral to achieving accurate knowledge equity. Western epistemologies and linguistic dominance continue to define the boundaries of legitimacy within global academia (Connell, 2019). To counter this imbalance, institutions must promote multilingual publishing, support regional journals, and recognise indigenous knowledge systems as valid and valuable contributions. This approach aligns with knowledge equity theory, which demands inclusivity across geography, language, and epistemic traditions (Chan et al., 2019). The creation of equitable editorial boards, inclusive peer review mechanisms, and regional funding streams would dismantle hierarchies that privilege Global North scholarship while neglecting Global South perspectives. Decolonisation thus broadens not only access but also authorship and intellectual authority.

At the policy and infrastructure levels, governments and international organisations must invest in open-access repositories, public data archives, and community-managed peer-review platforms. Initiatives such as UNESCO's *Recommendation on Open Science* (2021) and Plan S demonstrate viable models for transparent, publicly accountable publishing ecosystems. However, these must be supported by national legislation that mandates the open dissemination of taxpayer-funded research and provides grants to cover publication costs for under-resourced scholars. Universities should also provide institutional repositories and promote open educational resources (OER) as complements to traditional publishing. Such systemic support ensures sustainability and prevents the re-emergence of inequities within open-access systems.

Finally, the transformation of academic publishing requires a cultural shift within academia itself. Scholars must resist the prestige economy that equates impact factors with intellectual

worth and instead embrace principles of collaboration, transparency, and social relevance. Academic training programmes should equip emerging researchers with ethical publishing practices, open science norms, and an understanding of the political economy of knowledge. Peer review should evolve from gatekeeping to mentorship, fostering constructive engagement across disciplines and contexts (Biagioli & Lippman, 2020). The radical change envisioned in this paper is therefore not merely institutional; it is cultural, calling for a redefinition of academic success based on contribution to humanity rather than citation counts.

In conclusion, academic publishing stands at a crossroads between corporate entrenchment and collective emancipation. The choice before the global academic community is whether to perpetuate a profit-driven model that excludes and exploits or to reimagine a system grounded in fairness, accessibility, and epistemic justice. Guided by knowledge equity theory and critical political economy, this paper asserts that genuine reform must integrate structural, epistemological, and cultural dimensions. By reclaiming knowledge as a public good, supporting open infrastructures, and decolonising epistemic hierarchies, the academy can rebuild a publishing ecosystem that serves scholars, societies, and the broader pursuit of truth. Radical change is not only possible but imperative.

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Appendix A: Major Commercial Academic Publishers and Their Market Share

Table A1 presents the estimated market concentration of major academic publishers between 2015 and 2023. The data illustrate how a small number of multinational corporations dominate the global scholarly communication market. Collectively, Elsevier, Springer Nature, Wiley, Taylor & Francis, and Sage control over 70 per cent of the journal market, reinforcing monopolistic pricing and access barriers (Larivière et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2022). This concentration exemplifies the commodification of knowledge production and dissemination, creating a system where research accessibility is primarily determined by institutional wealth rather than scholarly merit or social need.

Table A1

Estimated Market Share of Leading Academic Publishers (2015-2023)

Publisher	Estimated Market Share (%)	Headquarters	Notable Journals	Business Model
Elsevier (RELX Group)	28	Netherlands/UK	<i>The Lancet, Cell</i>	Subscription + APC
Springer Nature	17	Germany/UK	<i>Nature, Scientific Reports</i>	Hybrid OA
Wiley-Blackwell	14	USA	<i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i>	Subscription + APC
Taylor & Francis	10	UK	<i>Social Identities</i>	Subscription
SAGE Publications	6	USA/UK	<i>Sociology, Criminology & Criminal Justice</i>	Hybrid OA
Others (including University Presses and Independent Journals)	25	—	—	Mixed

Sources: Larivière et al. (2015); Johnson et al. (2022); UNESCO (2021).

Appendix B: Global Open Access Models and Their Characteristics

Appendix B outlines the three primary open-access models-Gold, Green, and Diamond-and their implications for equity and sustainability. While open access promises to democratise knowledge, its implementation often replicates inequalities through high article processing charges (APCs), which can range from USD \$3,000 to \$10,000 per paper (Suber, 2012; Tennant et al., 2016). The Diamond model, supported by non-profit and institutional funding, represents a more equitable alternative aligned with knowledge equity theory, as it removes both reader and author paywalls.

Open Access Model	Description	Typical Funding Source	Equity Implications
Gold OA	Articles are freely available online upon publication; they often require APCs.	Author or institution.	Excludes unfunded scholars.
Green OA	Authors self-archive accepted manuscripts in repositories.	Institutional repositories.	Accessible, but delayed and inconsistent.
Diamond/Platinum OA	No APCs; funded by institutions or consortia.	Public or collective funding.	Most equitable and sustainable.

This typology supports the argument that open access alone is insufficient without economic reform. True accessibility requires structural reallocation of resources and cooperative publishing infrastructures.

Appendix C: The Political Economy of Knowledge Flow between the Global North and South

This appendix visualises the asymmetrical flow of academic knowledge production and consumption. Empirical bibliometric data indicate that over 80% of indexed research output originates from the Global North (OECD, 2023). In contrast, the Global South contributes less than 10 per cent of publications in high-impact journals, despite representing the majority of the global population. This disparity reflects both linguistic hegemony and systemic exclusion, reinforcing Santos’s (2014) concept of *epistemicide*—the silencing of alternative knowledge systems.

Region	Share of Global Publications (%)	Dominant Languages	Primary Access Barrier
North America	38	English	Subscription paywalls
Western Europe	32	English, German, French	APC costs
Asia-Pacific	20	English, Mandarin, Japanese	Language exclusion
Latin America & Caribbean	6	Spanish, Portuguese	Journal recognition bias
Africa	4	English, French	Infrastructure and cost

This data underscores the urgency of decolonising academic publishing by investing in multilingual platforms, regional indexing systems (e.g., *SciELO*, *AJOL*), and South-South collaborations.

Appendix D: Proposed Framework for a Decolonised and Equitable Publishing Ecosystem

Appendix D presents a conceptual model derived from Knowledge Equity Theory **and** Critical Political Economy, illustrating how structural, epistemic, and cultural reforms interact to create a more inclusive publishing landscape.

Figure D1 below describes the framework in textual form:

1. **Structural Dimension** - Advocates for the decommodification of academic publishing through cooperative ownership, public funding, and fair licensing.
2. **Epistemic Dimension** - Calls for decolonisation through multilingualism, validation of indigenous knowledge systems, and regional editorial leadership.
3. **Cultural Dimension** - Promotes academic values based on collaboration, mentorship, and ethical citation rather than prestige metrics.

Appendix E: Policy Action Plan for Reforming Academic Publishing

This appendix presents a strategic, multi-level policy framework designed to operationalise the reforms proposed in this paper. The plan addresses structural, epistemic, and cultural dimensions of the academic publishing ecosystem. It identifies key actions, responsible stakeholders, expected outcomes, and implementation timelines. The framework emphasises collaboration between governments, universities, research funders, and publishing consortia to achieve sustainable transformation aligned with the principles of knowledge equity and critical political economy.

Table E1: *Policy Action Framework for Academic Publishing Reform*

Policy Dimension	Strategic Objective	Key Actions	Lead Stakeholders	Timeframe	Expected Outcomes
1. Structural Reform	Decommodify academic publishing and ensure equitable access to publicly funded research.	- Mandate open-access licensing for all publicly funded research. - Establish publicly managed, non-profit publishing cooperatives. - Negotiate fair national agreements with major publishers to	Ministries of Education and Science, National Research Councils, UNESCO, and Public Universities.	Short-Medium term (1-3 years).	Reduced publication costs, open dissemination of research, and reduced corporate dependency.

		cap subscription and APC costs.			
2. Epistemic Reform	Decolonise and diversify knowledge production and dissemination.	- Fund regional and multilingual journals in the Global South. - Support indigenous knowledge databases and community-based peer review. - Require inclusive editorial board representation across gender, geography, and discipline.	Regional academic associations, development agencies, UNESCO, and research funders.	Medium term (2-4 years).	Broadened epistemic inclusion, reduced linguistic bias, and empowerment of local scholarship.
3. Cultural Reform	Transform academic incentives and research evaluation practices.	- Replace impact factor-based assessments with qualitative, open-science-aligned criteria (e.g., DORA principles). - Introduce open peer review and mentorship-based evaluation.	Universities, Accreditation councils, Global research alliances.	Medium-Long term (3-5 years).	Rebalanced reward systems valuing collaboration, innovation, and public impact.

		- Recognise alternative outputs (datasets, policy briefs, community projects).			
4. Infrastructural Development	Build sustainable, inclusive, and interoperable digital publishing infrastructures that foster a culture of innovation and collaboration.	- Create national and regional open-access repositories. - Develop open-source publishing software and shared metadata systems. - Provide digital literacy and editorial training.	ICT ministries; Libraries; OpenAIRE; University consortia.	Ongoing (1-5 years).	Stable, interoperable open-access systems that support long-term knowledge preservation.
5. Policy Integration and Monitoring	Ensure accountability, transparency, and measurable progress.	- Establish national Open Science monitoring bodies. - Create annual equity audits of publishing participation and access. - Publish progress reports in open repositories.	Governments, UNESCO, and the International Science Council (ISC).	Continuous (annual review).	Transparent monitoring and global benchmarking of publishing equity and reform outcomes.

Implementation Overview

The proposed policy framework is designed for multi-level coordination and management. At the national level, governments and research councils should legislate open-access mandates for publicly funded research. At the institutional level, universities should revise promotion and tenure policies to align with open science principles. At the global level, UNESCO, the International Science Council, and other multilateral agencies should facilitate equitable South-South and North-South partnerships to develop publishing infrastructure. Collective negotiation mechanisms, such as national consortia or cooperative journal platforms, can enhance bargaining power against commercial publishers, mitigating excessive profit extraction and ensuring long-term sustainability (Johnson et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2021).

Furthermore, capacity-building is critical to ensure that scholars from under-resourced contexts can fully participate in the reformed system. This matter includes training in open peer review, editorial management, metadata curation, and multilingual communication. Collaborative funding models-such as library consortia, crowd-sourced research funds, and state-university partnerships-should underwrite these initiatives. Importantly, a robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework must accompany implementation. Indicators such as publication diversity, cost per article, and access rates should be tracked annually to measure progress toward equity and inclusivity.

By integrating structural, epistemic, and cultural dimensions, the policy framework operationalises the theoretical foundations of knowledge equity theory and critical political economy. It provides a practical roadmap for dismantling monopolistic control and restoring the public mission of scholarly communication. The successful execution of this action plan would mark a paradigm shift in global academia-from commodified knowledge to open, participatory, and decolonised scholarship-anchored in justice, accessibility, and collective benefit.