

Who Really Benefits From Open Knowledge?

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Open access has fundamentally changed scholarly publishing. According to the [STM Association's Open Access Dashboard](#), the proportion of global journal articles, reviews, and conference papers published through gold open access increased from 17% in 2015 to 44% in 2025. Nearly two million publications were made immediately and freely available through this route in 2025 alone.

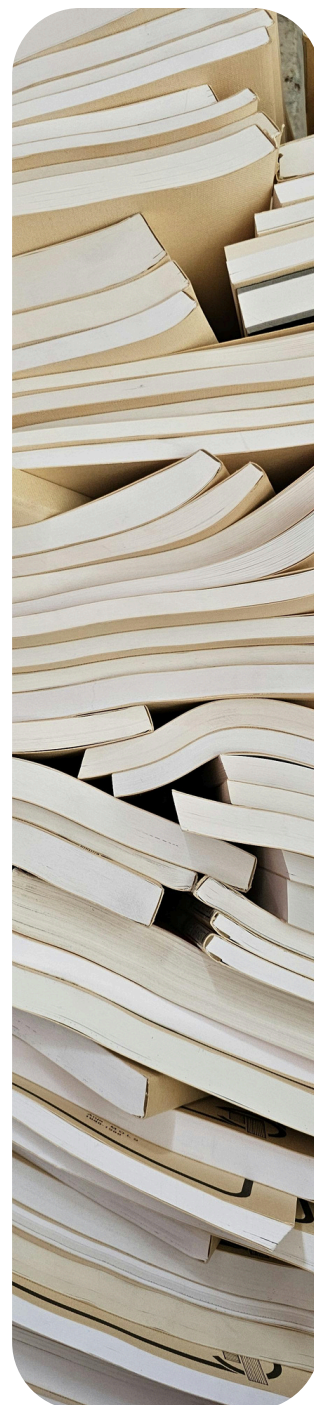
This is meaningful progress. Making scientific knowledge freely available to readers creates opportunities for research to be shared and applied more widely.

But as the publishing model changes, a more uncomfortable question remains: **is open access changing who holds power within scholarly communication, or simply changing who pays?**

That question lies at the heart of [International Open Access Week 2026](#), which takes “*The Cost of Knowledge*” as its theme. This year's campaign asks us to examine the financial and wider costs of scholarly communication, particularly as commercial control becomes increasingly concentrated.

It is a timely opportunity to consider how power operates across the entire research landscape: who can afford to publish, whose research becomes visible, and which knowledge ultimately influences scientific progress.

Because making an article free to read does not, by itself, make the system equitable.



WHO CAN AFFORD TO PUBLISH, AND WHO BENEFITS?

Under traditional subscription publishing, much of the financial burden falls on institutions paying to access research. In many open access models, that burden moves towards authors, their institutions, or funders through article processing charges (APCs). The article becomes free to read, but publishing it may cost thousands.

For researchers at well-funded institutions, publication fees may be covered through grants or institutional agreements. Those working with smaller budgets may find their options more restricted, particularly when seeking to publish in prestigious journals where fees can be substantial.

And there is evidence that these inequalities affect who participates. A 2022 study published in *Quantitative Science Studies* examined more than 37,000 articles across matched subscription and open access journals. The researchers found significantly lower geographical diversity among authors of APC-funded articles than among those publishing through subscription routes. None of the 975 articles examined in the fully open access mirror journals had a lead author based in a low-income country.

Although publication charges cannot explain every difference in authorship, the findings suggest that they can reinforce existing inequalities.

This matters because publishing in well-regarded journals brings advantages beyond the publication itself. Visibility, citation opportunities, professional recognition, and career progression can all be affected by where research appears. Researchers with access to funding may therefore be better positioned to publish in influential outlets, strengthening the advantages they and their institutions already enjoy.

The commercial implications are equally important. Universities, research funders, and academics contribute much of the funding and expertise behind scientific research, including authorship, peer review, and editorial work. Yet institutions also pay publishers and other providers to disseminate, access, and discover the resulting knowledge.

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Learn more about the different open access models with the [IFIS Guide to Getting Published in Journals](#)



Changing the publishing model does not necessarily change that relationship. Established commercial organisations can continue to benefit from their position within the scholarly system, whether revenue is generated through subscriptions, publication fees, publishing agreements, or other services.

This does not mean that all open access involves APCs, or that commercial publishers provide no value. Diamond open access journals and repositories offer alternative approaches, while publishers invest in editorial processes, technology, preservation, and dissemination.

The question is whether different financial models genuinely widen participation and distribute benefits more equitably. If established institutions retain the greatest ability to pay, prestigious outlets retain their influence, and established providers retain their commercial advantages, how much has really changed?



WHO GETS DISCOVERED, AND WHO BECOMES INFLUENTIAL?

The ability to publish is only one part of what determines whose knowledge shapes scientific progress.

Research must also be discovered.

And here, existing concentrations of influence can be reinforced in less obvious ways.

A researcher publishing in a highly visible journal is more likely to benefit from established readerships, journal reputation, recognition within their field, and page one results in tools like Google Scholar. Research appearing in smaller regional or specialist publications may have to work harder for the same attention, even when its findings are equally relevant.

Discovery systems influence this process.

Which journals are indexed? Which countries, languages, disciplines, and publication formats are represented? How are studies categorised? And what determines which results appear first?

These choices help shape the evidence researchers encounter, the studies they cite, and the knowledge they build upon.

In other words, the economics of publishing and the mechanics of discovery can reinforce one another.

Researchers at well-resourced institutions may enjoy greater opportunities to publish in influential outlets. Those outlets may be more prominent in many discovery environments and already have established audiences. Greater visibility can contribute to citations, recognition, funding, and future opportunities.

Meanwhile, researchers whose work appears in less visible publications may struggle to achieve comparable recognition, regardless of its relevance or quality.

This matters particularly in multidisciplinary and globally relevant fields such as food science, nutrition, and health.

Research addressing a single question might span agriculture, chemistry, microbiology, medicine, public health, economics, and consumer behaviour. Valuable evidence may also come from regional journals or research communities whose priorities differ from those of the most influential international institutions.

A study can be freely available online and still be difficult to discover.

That is why **bibliodiversity matters**. A healthy research ecosystem depends on knowledge produced across different regions, languages, disciplines, and publishing models. But diversity in the scholarly record achieves less if the systems researchers rely on make only part of that knowledge readily visible.

If publication opportunities are unequal and discovery systems amplify existing prominence, the same research communities will continue to dominate the scientific conversation.

And when visibility influences citation and recognition, that dominance can become self-reinforcing.

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Explore the relationship between crop diversity and bibliodiversity with [Could Greater Crop Diversity Help Nourish Tomorrow? - IFIS blog](#)



CAN WE SEE HOW KNOWLEDGE IS BEING SELECTED?

The issue becomes more complicated as researchers increasingly rely on AI-powered tools and search engines to navigate the expanding volume of scientific literature.

These technologies can be extremely useful. They make information easier to find, help users explore unfamiliar subjects, and can significantly reduce the effort involved in getting started. But there is an important difference between receiving a convincing answer and knowing whether the evidence behind it is sufficiently comprehensive, relevant, representative and trustworthy.

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Find out more about the effective and ethical use of AI in literature searching in the latest chapter of our [Best Practice Guide to Literature Searching](#)

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Or learn more about searching with Google Scholar with [Google Scholar: a review of literature examining its effectiveness as a search tool - IFIS blog](#)

Google Scholar provides broad access to scholarly material, yet its complete coverage and ranking processes are not fully transparent to users. AI-powered research tools may introduce further uncertainty when their source selection and retrieval processes cannot be inspected or reproduced.

For a researcher exploring a subject, these tools can provide useful starting points. For a systematic review, an evidence synthesis, or research informing policy, the ability to scrutinise the search process becomes essential.

Researchers need to know which sources were searched, how relevant evidence was identified, what criteria were applied, and where gaps might remain. Otherwise, how can they judge whether their understanding of a field reflects the available evidence or the limitations and priorities of the tools used to find it?

The question is particularly important when the scientific record already contains inequalities in publication and visibility. If researchers cannot understand how knowledge is selected and ranked, they may also struggle to recognise when certain research communities or perspectives are underrepresented.



Transparent, reproducible discovery is therefore essential to research quality and scholarly equity.

It provides a means of examining which evidence has been included, identifying potential omissions, and questioning assumptions about which research deserves attention.

This is where specialist indexing, controlled vocabularies, and careful editorial oversight play an important role. Unlike opaque ranking systems, structured literature searching allows researchers to construct and document search strategies, examine source coverage, and understand the relationships between scientific concepts. These approaches cannot eliminate every gap or bias, but they make the discovery process more open to scrutiny.

THE COST OF TRUST

Visibility alone should never be mistaken for scientific credibility. Yet publication incentives, journal prestige, and pressure to produce research can sometimes reward volume and recognition in ways that create opportunities for manipulation.

Paper mills, fabricated research, manipulated peer review, and questionable citation practices exploit weaknesses within the scholarly publishing system. AI-generated content has introduced additional challenges for publishers and researchers trying to safeguard the scientific record.

These problems are not unique to open access, and many open-access journals uphold rigorous editorial standards. However, they illustrate why neither publication in a recognised journal nor prominence in search results should be treated as a substitute for evaluating the underlying evidence.

A trustworthy research environment needs to be inclusive enough to recognise valuable contributions from different research communities and rigorous enough to distinguish credible findings from unreliable material.

Achieving both requires investment.



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Explore the dangers of predatory journals and other unethical practices with our [Predatory Journals Hub](#)



Editorial quality control, transparent publication standards, source evaluation, accurate metadata, specialist indexing, and the maintenance of effective discovery tools all involve expertise and ongoing costs. But these are important costs to consider when evaluating the economics of open knowledge.

If investment concentrates on increasing publication volume and distributing content while the systems needed to establish credibility and support meaningful discovery receive insufficient attention, greater access may not deliver its full potential.

And if commercial incentives disproportionately reward the volume, prestige, or visibility of research, there is a risk that existing inequalities become harder to challenge.

The question is therefore about more than making research available. It is about ensuring that the systems determining its visibility and credibility are accountable to the research community.

BUILDING A MORE EQUITABLE KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

At IFIS Publishing, these questions are particularly relevant to our work connecting people with trusted food, health, and nutrition science. As an educational charity, we believe scientific discovery should support the breadth of research being conducted across the world.

FSTA, our specialist food science database, brings together research from sources across 91 countries, including material published in more than 40 languages. Its content is carefully selected and indexed by subject specialists using controlled terminology designed to connect evidence across disciplines and different ways of describing related concepts.

This combination of international coverage, editorial oversight, and structured discovery helps researchers identify relevant evidence and understand how their searches have been constructed.

No single database can guarantee a complete or unbiased view of the literature, and specialist indexing cannot resolve inequalities in publication funding. But transparent, inclusive discovery can help reduce the risk that relevant research remains difficult to find simply because it appears outside the most familiar journals or research communities.

It also supports the work of librarians and information professionals, whose expertise helps researchers critically evaluate sources, document searches, and navigate complex evidence landscapes.

Our support for [Research4Life](#) reflects the same wider commitment to improving participation in the global exchange of scientific knowledge.

These activities require sustained investment. But their purpose is to help ensure that scientific knowledge is judged on its relevance and quality, rather than primarily on the prestige, resources, or visibility of the institutions producing it.

THE TRUE COST OF OPEN KNOWLEDGE

Open access has made remarkable progress in removing financial barriers to reading scientific research. That achievement should be recognised. But the transition to more open publishing does not automatically redistribute power within scholarly communication.

Researchers with greater financial resources may retain advantages in publication. Prestigious journals and established institutions may continue to command attention and influence. Commercial organisations may retain substantial control over the services through which research is published, accessed, and discovered. And when discovery systems are opaque, these concentrations of influence become more difficult to examine or challenge.

There are alternatives. More equitable publishing models, stronger support for bibliodiversity, transparent editorial standards, and reproducible research discovery can all help create a system in which a wider range of scientific contributions can be recognised and used. But achieving that requires us to look beyond the removal of paywalls.

As we consider *“The Cost of Knowledge”* this Open Access Week, we should ask who pays for the creation and circulation of research, who benefits from those payments, and who retains influence over the knowledge that ultimately shapes scientific progress.

Because a system can become more open while leaving power with the powerful, influence with the influential, and financial rewards with those already best positioned to capture them.

Making knowledge genuinely open means being prepared to challenge those inequalities throughout the scholarly ecosystem, from publication to discovery and beyond.

HOW FSTA AND OVID NUTRIHEALTH CAN HELP

FSTA®, the food science database, and **Ovid NutriHealth™** provide reliable, expertly indexed access to the world's scientific literature on food, nutrition, and health. They enable food scientists, researchers, information professionals, and clinicians to:



Discover high-quality evidence across a wide range of interdisciplinary content across the food, nutrition, and health landscape, from trusted, peer-reviewed sources.



Search with greater precision

Controlled descriptors connect equivalent terms and related concepts across the literature.



Follow the evidence

Move from trend signals to individual studies and investigate questions in depth.



Support teaching, research, and innovation with authoritative information that underpins evidence-based decision-making.

Whether used for systematic reviews, curriculum development, or product reformulation, FSTA and NutriHealth help users navigate complex topics with confidence and precision.

