





How to address the geographical bias in academic publishing

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INTRODUCTION

The commitment by the global health community to promote equity in research, publishing and practice is a welcome addition to the discourse on decolonising global health.^{1 2} Bibliometric analysis of authorship and prime authorship positioning (first and last) has demonstrated that researchers from low-income and middle-income countries or the Global South are under-represented in academic publishing^{3–5} highlighting the need for diversification. Concomitantly, journals have made efforts to ensure equitable research collaboration³ and authorship practices,⁶ to diversify editorial boards, and to improve accessibility of research through open access (OA) policies to increase Global South representation.⁴

However, there has been little attention paid to where research is disseminated. Academic publishing is dominated by journals from Western Europe and North America—henceforth WENA or the Global North—where major publishers and citation databases are based. Global North journals are often associated with international and global-level prestige, while Global South journals are presumed to be local, national or regional in scope. Despite increased OA publication, many peer-reviewed articles remain behind paywalls and out of reach of the very communities on whom the research was conducted and from whom data was collected.⁷ While OA increases access to research, it also places an unfair economic burden for Global South researchers whose research environments rarely provide funds to cover article processing charges (APC) typically between US\$1500 and US\$2500 and as high as US\$11 000.⁸

The disparity in the geographical distribution of academic publishing perpetuates a cycle in which the global health research agenda is determined in the Global North, knowledge production occurs in the Global South, and dissemination reverts to the Global North due to the limited scope of Global

SUMMARY BOX

- ⇒ Academic publishing is dominated by Western Europe and North America or the Global North, leading to a disparity in representation and access to research from other regions, particularly low-income and middle-income countries or the Global South.
- ⇒ Journals from the Global South face challenges in competing with Global North journals in terms of prestige and finances, which hinders their recognition and impact.
- ⇒ To diversify academic publishing, strategies should focus on improving the impact factor of Global South journals, such as requiring citation of relevant articles from within the region and copublishing with international journals.
- ⇒ Decentralising editorial boards, addressing the language bias towards English and establishing independent regional-level citation databases can contribute to improving the quality and representation of Global South journals.

South journals.⁹ We argue that disrupting this colonial model of knowledge extraction is pivotal to the decolonising discourse. We must be intentional in prioritising strategies that improve the reach of Global South knowledge.¹⁰ We exhibit how academic publishing centres the Global North, and how the increasing monopolisation of publishing is a barrier for national and regional journals. We provide suggestions to progressively move journals in the periphery towards the centre of the global stage by strengthening Global South knowledge platforms.¹⁰

THE PUBLISHING LANDSCAPE

To date, diversifying academic publishing has focused on increasing representation of researchers from the Global South in Global North journals after evidence showed that their editorial and peer review process often gatekeeps and disadvantages the Global South. Researchers from the Global North have greater representation in editorial boards,^{6 11 12} reflective of their cultural and social capital which Paasi (2005) noted, has



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Table 1 Public health journals ranked on SCImago Journal and Country Rank portal, by region

Region	No of journals	Per cent
Western Europe	268	46
Northern America	165	28
Asiatic Region	51	9
Eastern Europe	29	5
Middle East	24	4
Latin America	23	4
Pacific Region	15	3
Africa	9	2
Total	584	

created and strengthened ‘colonialism and imperialism in modern research communities.’ There has been little attention on where academic publishing is centred, and how this too reflects historical norms. We argue that this is by design, not default.

First, the geographical distribution of academic journals is dominated by WENA. Focusing only on public health journals indexed on SCImago Journal and Country Rank portal, of the 584 journals, 46% (n=268) and 28% (n=165) are from Western Europe and Northern America, respectively (table 1). Remaining regions (categorised as Africa, Asiatic, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Middle East and the Pacific regions) have 151 journals and within-region disparities mean India (n=15), Iran (n=19), Brazil (n=13), and the Russian Federation (n=14) contribute 40%, and Africa 2% (n=9). These 584 journals do not reflect the entirety of public health research.

Major citation databases are in the Global North and indexing is based on established norms. For example, Web of Science editorial process and quality criteria include English language abstracts, determination of scholarly content and clarity of writing. Citations over a 2-year period then determine impact factor (IF) which is associated with journal quality and reputation. Journals

from the Global South are less likely to be indexed, less likely to appear in search listings, have lower IF or none at all and are often perceived as lower quality.^{6 8 9} The preference even among Global South researchers to publish in Global North journals is thus unsurprising.^{7 12}

The numerical advantage of Global North journals and the ranking process means they lead SCImago rankings. Of the top 200 journals; 60% and 32% were from Western Europe and Northern America, respectively; of the top 100, 58% and 40% are from Western Europe and Northern America with only 2 from China and South Korea. The top 50 journals are exclusively from WENA (table 2). This has led to what has been referred to as ‘the uneven geographies of international publishing spaces’¹¹ and ‘the geographical bias in knowledge diffusion’,¹³ where Global North journals occupy the centre of academic publishing whereas Global South journals remain in the periphery. We thus concur that ‘the periphery must claim centrality by itself’.¹⁰

Second, some argue that research conducted in the Global South is primarily intended for a local audience and should preferably be published in local spaces.¹⁴ However, we wager that what is considered ‘international’ today, was once local. Today’s leading international journals such as the *American Journal of Public Health*, *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)*, *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, *British Medical Journal (BMJ)* and *The Lancet* began as national journals. Their ‘international’ reputation stems from cultural capital accrued over time.¹³ Journal longevity thus implies ‘authenticity’ relative to ‘journals-without-histories’.¹⁵

Third, publishing is increasingly monopolised. In SCImago, 11 publishers embody 45% of journals, and all except *Wolters Kluwer Medknow Publications* are in WENA (table 3). This is unsurprising given academic publishing is highly lucrative with 20%–40% margins,¹⁶ and publishers have a stake in citation databases which earn them subscription fees. Publishing companies are, therefore, commercially motivated to promote the journals included in their index as ‘non-predatory’, furthering the notion that Global South journals not considered for

Table 2 Top 200 public health journals ranked on SCImago Journal and Country Rank portal, by region and country

Region	N	%	Countries
Western Europe	120	60	UK (84), Netherlands (18), Switzerland (7), Germany (6); Denmark (2), Finland (1), Ireland (1), Sweden (1)
Northern America	64	32	Canada (4), USA (60)
Asiatic Region	8	4	South Korea (5), China (1), Japan (1), Singapore (1)
Pacific Region	4	2	New Zealand (2), Australia (2)
Latin America	2	1	Brazil
Africa	1	0.5	Egypt*
Middle East	1	0.5	Iran
Total	200		

*Authors recategorised Egypt to Africa region, categorised as Middle East/Africa by SCImago.

Table 3 Publishers with more than ten journals, by region

Publisher	Asiatic Region	Northern America	Western Europe	Total
Elsevier	2	8	33	43
SAGE Publications	0	27	13	40
Springer	1	12	20	33
Taylor and Francis	0	5	26	31
BioMed Central	0	0	28	28
Wiley-Blackwell	0	7	17	24
Routledge	0	10	8	18
Oxford University Press	0	0	13	13
Lippincott Williams and Wilkins	0	10	0	10
Mary Ann Liebert	0	10	0	10
Wolters Kluwer Medknow Publications	10	0	0	10
Total	13	89	158	260

their index are of poor quality.¹⁵ Given that intellectual copyright accrues to publishers, regions where research is produced do not benefit from its dissemination.⁷

Taken together, Global South journals can neither compete on prestige nor finances. However, they play an important role in dissemination not only of context-specific research,^{11 14} but are also often the only space to showcase Global South researchers and collaborators.^{6 10} We argue that to diversify academic publishing, we must be intentional about bringing ‘peripheral’ Global South journals to the ‘centre’.

DIVERSIFYING THE ACADEMIC PUBLISHING SPACE

Abimbola’s important article on the foreign gaze posits that editors require that authors justify their choice to publish in journals external to the region their research is conducted,¹⁴ to ensure research is disseminated locally and improve the visibility of Global South journals. However, given the aforementioned ‘geographical bias in knowledge diffusion’, this risks diminishing the reach of Global South research and maintains the problematic connotation of ‘international’ being the Global North.⁷

Instead, we extend this by recommending that editors require research articles from a specific region cite relevant articles from journals within that region and on submission, provide justification where this is not feasible. Given the importance of IF, this would gradually improve citation metrics of Global South journals by encouraging authors to publish in Global South journals, even if primarily for the purpose of self-citation. Though this might seem like circular reasoning, increasing citations could help redress the exclusion of Global South journals from Journal Citation Reports¹⁷ which results in their not being indexed and reduced visibility in search results. International journals should also highlight Global South researchers by intentionally soliciting articles from them, and publishing special issues that disseminate their research.¹² As this does not improve the IF

of Global South journals, we suggest in addition, copublishing with Global South journals and showcasing these articles within Global North publishing spaces, given their larger reach.

Salager-Meyer offered as a longer-term solution the formation of private editorial boards based in the Global South.¹² Given the high number of regional journals already in circulation today, decentralising editorial boards remains worthy of consideration. The dominance of English as the language of science and the limitations this places on non-English-speaking researchers has been noted, with numerous suggestions provided to reduce this bias.^{7 11 12 18} Decentralised boards could facilitate the publication of high-quality research in regional languages. The requirement of English language titles and abstracts by citation databases should also be redressed. van Weijen¹⁹ documents an increase in Brazilian journals in Scopus (Elsevier’s abstract and citation database) due to inclusion of journals published in Portuguese. A similar initiative should be considered for major non-English journals.

It is also critical to decentralise journal indexing by establishing independent regional-level citation databases, for example, an African Citation Index.¹⁵ This would reduce western bias in gauging the quality of journals and be a source of revenue for Global South journals, by establishing equitable subscription fees models.

CONCLUSION

We have provided a few suggestions on ways to improve the impact, quality and representation of Global South journals in academic publishing. This requires investments to improve the quality and reach of Global South journals, and there is currently limited incentive to do so. As we strongly believe that it is imperative that national and regional journals are attractive not just to researchers in the Global South, but also those from the

Global North, we suggest it is time to diversify knowledge dissemination.

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Author note SCImago Journal & Country Rank is a publicly available portal with information from the Scopus database (Elsevier B.V).

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