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## Empowering through knowledge: the push for open access

Madhusudan Subedi<sup>1</sup>  

Professor, School of Public Health / Dept. of Community Health Sciences, Patan Academy of Health Sciences (PAHS), Lalitpur, Nepal

### Introduction

Knowledge is the foundation of human progress. However, in the modern academic landscape, access to scholarly publications is often restricted by paywalls and subscription fees. The gatekeeping of academic knowledge behind paywalls positions as a philosophical contradiction to the values of education, justice, progress, equity, and global development. However, public voices have largely been absent from the discussion about open access (OA) of research findings.<sup>1</sup> This editorial argues that knowledge dissemination should be free and that academic publications should be openly accessible to ensure equitable access to information, foster innovation, and accelerate global development.

### Barriers to knowledge access

Despite the digital revolution, many of the world's leading academic publications are locked behind excessive paywalls. Many scholarly publications, scientific journals and educational database require costly subscriptions or one-time payments making crucial information inaccessible to those who lack financial resources. Such situation disproportionately affects academic community from low-income regions and accelerates inequalities in education and research opportunities. Institutions in high income countries afford subscriptions, but researchers in low and middle income nations are often face significant barriers to accessing academic works that hinders innovation and knowledge advancement. Such situation is creating a global inequality in the access to knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

In paywalled publications, researchers must transfer copyright to publishers, restricting their ability to share their findings freely. These researchers often write, review, and edit papers without compensation but the final products are sold back to the public at high prices. This creates an exploitative and inequitable system where only those with financial resources can access to new knowledge, verification and challenges of previous researches while others are left behind.



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**Correspondence:** Prof. Madhusudan Subedi, School of Public Health / Dept. of Community Health Sciences, Patan Academy of Health Sciences (PAHS), Lalitpur, Nepal  
**Email:** madhusubedi@pahs.edu.np

Some publishers contend that unrestricted access to academic works poses a risk to their revenue models and long-term sustainability. In such cases, nominal article processing fees can be justified when not covered by institutions or grants, as they help maintain publication quality without compromising accessibility. However, excessively high costs create unjust barriers, limiting the free exchange of knowledge and restricting valuable knowledge to only those who can afford it. Furthermore, generating knowledge using various data from low income countries and without openly sharing the findings with those communities is ethically unjust.

### Importance of open access

Open access (OA) publishing offers a transformative solution to these challenges and ensures that knowledge is accessible to all, regardless of financial status or institutional affiliation. This democratization of knowledge fosters inclusivity and ensures that valuable research reaches a broader audience.<sup>2</sup> When research is freely available, scientists can build upon existing work more efficiently. OA facilitates collaboration, enabling researchers to share data, methodologies, and findings without bureaucratic hurdles. OA articles receive more citations than paywalled publications. Greater visibility enhances the impact of research, benefiting both authors and the academic community. Free access to academic publications supports innovation in various fields, from medicine to engineering. Entrepreneurs, policymakers, and educators can leverage research findings to drive economic growth and societal advancements. OA empowers the general public to engage with academic research. Citizens can access studies on health care and engineering advancement, climate change and resilience, and technology transformation, fostering informed decision-making and civic participation. When knowledge is freely available, scholars can collaborate to address societal challenges.<sup>3</sup>

There is also a moral imperative to make academic research accessible. Patients, educators, students, and policymakers frequently seek access to scholarly knowledge that directly affects their lives. Denying them access due to cost undermines the social responsibility of academia.

Fortunately, the landscape is evolving. Open-access journals like those under the Public Library of Science (PLOS) and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) have proven that sustainable, high-quality scholarly publishing without paywalls. These platforms demonstrate that the quality of peer review, editorial standards, and academic integrity need not be compromised for the sake of accessibility. OA

information is a powerful tool for equity and social justice, fostering a more inclusive and fair academic society.<sup>4</sup>

### A call to action

The reviewers from the low-income countries should write the editors that the topic of the article is her/his areas of expertise but it is impossible for the researchers of lower and middle income countries to access and publish. They should argue and decide not to review any articles unless the journal ensures that the article from low and middle income countries will be published free of cost and that the articles is open access.

Furthermore, authors must choose OA venues for their work and retain their copyrights where possible. Institutions must support OA funds and repositories. Funders must mandate public access to research. And readers must advocate for policies that prioritize knowledge equity. Importantly, we must change the metrics of academic success. The overreliance on journal prestige and impact factors drives authors toward high-impact, closed-access journals. Academic institutions should value openness, reproducibility, and societal impact. Free and open dissemination of academic research is not a luxury but a necessity for a just, informed, and innovative society. Governments, institutions, and researchers must work together to promote open access and dismantle barriers to knowledge sharing. By promoting OA publishing, we can create a more inclusive and collaborative academic landscape that benefits humanity as a whole.

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