Balkan Med J 2026;43:294-296

The Strong Get Stronger: The Matthew Effect in Academic Publishing

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The Matthew Effect is Merton's term for the pattern by which initial advantage builds into further advantage, as the saying goes, to those who have, more shall be given.[1] Originally applied to individual scientists, it now operates across journals and institutions, producing paths for well-resourced and under-resourced journals over time (Figure 1). Reputation builds through impact metrics and citation networks. Prestigious journals attract higher-quality submissions, receive more citations, and further elevate their status. In contrast, independent or university-based journals, often equal in rigor but lacking commercial backing, struggle to sustain operations and visibility. This asymmetry transforms academic publishing into a highly concentrated market dominated by a handful of large publishers.

Research from high-income, English-speaking countries receives more citations than comparable work from other nations, reflecting structural advantage rather than content differences.[2] This citation bias deepens disparities between scientific communities. Journals emerging from public universities or regional networks, many operating under diamond open-access models which charge neither authors nor readers, are vital but fragile.[3] Their sustainability depends on volunteer labour and minimal budgets, leaving them vulnerable to the pressures of global competition.

The experiences of independent, university-based medical and behavioural science journals illustrate these challenges. For example, the Balkan Medical Journal, an open-access publication from Türkiye operating under a diamond open-access model, has seen a surge in submissions following its rise in international ranking, despite limited financial or administrative support.[4,5] Similar pressures are reported by comparable non-commercial journals, including escalating submission volumes, static resources, and increasing editorial complexity.[6] Volunteer editors balance peer review, production, and ethics oversight with full-time academic duties, while constrained budgets prevent investment in digital infrastructure, professional copyediting, and advanced manuscript management systems.

These structural advantages are reinforced by three further mechanisms, reviewer scarcity, submission cascades, and technological asymmetry, each of which routes resources and attention disproportionately toward already-advantaged journals.

Peer review has become a systemic bottleneck. The global supply of qualified reviewers has not kept pace with submission growth, producing longer turnaround times and inconsistency in review quality.[7] Under institutional reward systems that offer little recognition for reviewing, academics reasonably prioritise their own outputs, leaving quality control to a small core of unpaid editors. This scarcity is not distributed evenly. Reviewers preferentially accept invitations from prestigious journals, where the reputational return is highest, leaving smaller titles with longer queues and weaker review pools. Slower, less rigorous review further erodes their standing, a direct feedback into the cumulative-advantage loop.

Structural strain is compounded by the "publish or perish" imperative, which encourages volume over substance. Performance metrics tied to publication count encourage authors to submit first to the highest-prestige journal plausibly within reach, moving to lower-ranked journals after rejection. Elite journals therefore enjoy first selection over nearly every competitive manuscript, while independent journals receive work only after it has been filtered through one or more rejections above them. The submission hierarchy itself becomes a sorting mechanism that channels the strongest material toward the already-strong.

The rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI) introduces new inequities into this system.[8] AI tools improve efficiency in writing, translation, and editing, but they also generate risks of undetected plagiarism, fabricated data, and synthetic manuscripts. Because AI-detection tools, integrity pipelines, and AI-assisted production systems are capital-intensive, only well-resourced publishers can deploy them at scale. The same journals that already command prestige now also command the infrastructure to police and exploit AI, accelerating, rather than merely preserving, cumulative advantage.

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Available Online Date: June 1, 2026 • **DOI:** 10.4274/balkanmedj.galenos.2026.2026.150426
Available at www.balkanmedicaljournal.org
ORCID iDs of the authors: S.K. 0000-0003-4632-6850; S.A. 0000-0001-7112-3970.
Cite this article as: Korkmaz S, Altay S. The Strong Get Stronger: The Matthew Effect in Academic Publishing. Balkan Med J. 2026;43:294-296

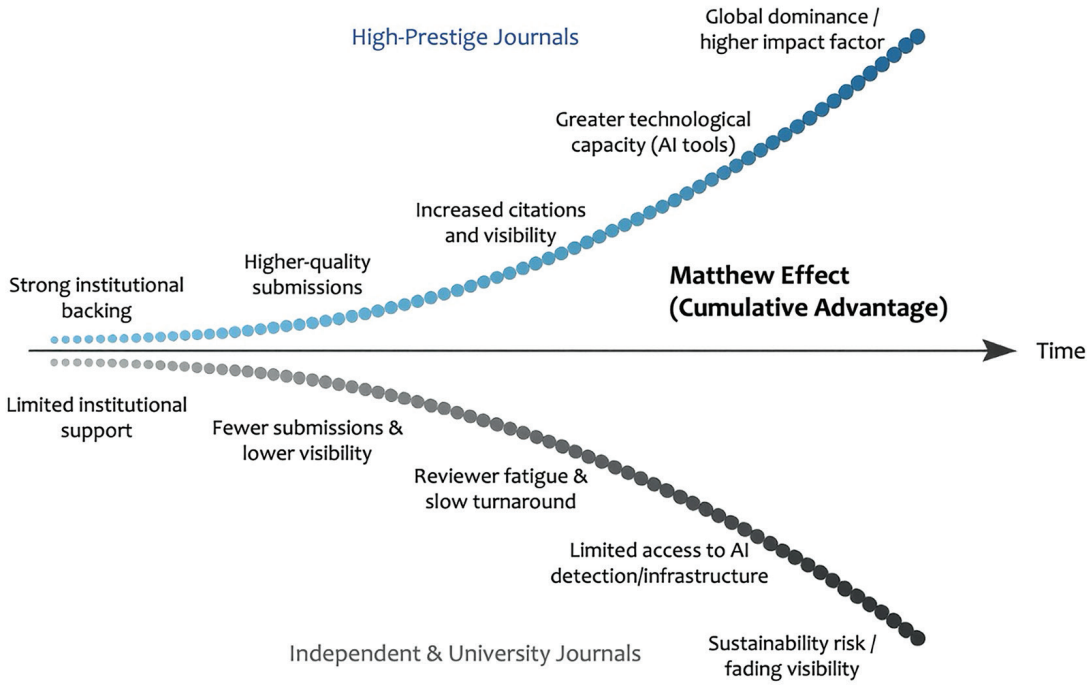

FIG. 1. Cumulative advantage and disadvantage in academic publishing. Over time, high-prestige journals (upper trajectory) accumulate reinforcing advantages, strong institutional backing, higher-quality submissions, rising citations and visibility, greater technological capacity, and global dominance reflected in impact-factor growth. Independent and university-based journals (lower trajectory) face compounding disadvantages, limited institutional support, fewer submissions and lower visibility, reviewer fatigue and slow turnaround, constrained access to AI-detection infrastructure, and ultimately sustainability risk and fading visibility. The diverging curves illustrate the Matthew Effect as two sides of a single structural mechanism. AI, artificial intelligence.

The rise of predatory journals, exploiting the author-pays model to skip peer review while preying on authors' pressure to publish, has eroded trust in open access broadly.[9] The damage spills over unevenly. Legitimate open-access journals share only the label with predatory ones, yet pay a reputational cost they did not cause.[10] Ironically, this has strengthened established commercial publishers. Authors avoiding disreputable venues increasingly favour a small circle of highly recognisable journals. Reputation becomes a proxy for legitimacy, concentrating attention and citation flow toward those already advantaged. These interconnected mechanisms, including citation bias, reviewer fatigue, AI asymmetry, and erosion of trust, together reproduce the Matthew Effect at the system level. Advantage comes not just from excellence but from structural position, such as visibility, language, and access to resources. Journals situated in low- or middle-income contexts, or dependent on public funding, face chronic sustainability challenges despite editorial excellence.

The consequences extend beyond economics. When the spread of scientific knowledge is controlled by a limited number of commercial platforms, scientific diversity becomes restricted. Bibliometric analyses show that citation networks increasingly mirror the research agendas of the Global North, even in fields where the Global South bears the greatest burden of disease or social relevance.[2] The overrepresentation of certain scientific communities distorts global research priorities, shaping what is studied, funded, and regarded as "impactful". The Matthew Effect thus becomes not only a sociological principle but a mechanism of knowledge inequality.

Sustaining a diverse and equitable publishing ecosystem requires coordinated systemic reform. Efforts by individual journals are not enough to counter the global incentives shaping the system. Four interventions could meaningfully disrupt the feedback loop of cumulative advantage.

1. Diamond open-access journals worldwide operate under similar constraints, volunteer editorial labour, minimal budgets, limited technical capacity, yet each reinvents the same compliance infrastructure in isolation. Coordinated through bodies such as the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), the Open Access Scholarly Publishing Association (OASPA), and the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), a Diamond Open-Access Integrity Alliance could share a cross-journal reviewer registry, negotiate collective access to AI-detection and manuscript-screening systems, and harmonise editorial and ethics standards. Collective scale would give participating journals the technological footing of the largest commercial publishers at a fraction of the cost.
2. Reviewing activity is already recorded through ORCID and Web of Science Reviewer Recognition but is rarely weighted in hiring, promotion, or tenure. National research councils, university consortia, and evaluation frameworks aligned with the

Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) should mandate that verified peer-review contributions count in academic evaluation alongside publications and grants. Recognition that follows the reviewer across institutions would stop reviewers from favouring only top journals and help rebuild the reviewer pool that every journal depends on.

3. Major research funders, including Wellcome, cOAlition S signatories, the European Research Council, the National Institutes of Health, and UNESCO's Open Science programme, should set aside a small, defined fraction of their budgets for the operating costs of diamond open-access journals. Predictable, multi-year funding is more valuable than one-time grants, because it permits editorial planning and investment in infrastructure rather than constant crisis management.
4. Journals do not have to wait for evaluation systems to change. They can publish a short set of indicators with every article, covering reproducibility, data and code availability, and clinical or societal relevance, so that prestige reflects the work itself, not the journal.[11]

These measures would not eliminate inequality, but they would slow its cumulative acceleration and maintain pluralism in how science is produced and shared.

The current asymmetry of academic publishing is not a natural by-product of excellence. It is a behavioural and institutional construct. Addressing it demands collective responsibility across the research ecosystem. Sustaining independent, open-access journals is not an act of charity, it is an investment in the resilience of global science.

Without deliberate correction, the Matthew Effect will continue to widen disparities. The strong will grow stronger, while voices outside dominant networks will fade. Recognising and mitigating this dynamic is essential not only for fairness but for the intellectual integrity of science itself.

Authorship Contributions: Concept- S.K., S.A.; Design- S.K., S.A.; Supervision- S.K., S.A.; Literature Search- S.K., S.A.; Writing- S.K., S.A.; Critical Review- S.K., S.A.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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