

## THE VEILED THREAT TO DIAMOND OPEN ACCESS: WHEN INDICATORS BECOME WEAPONS OF EXCLUSION

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents a critical analysis of the recent methodological change implemented by the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR), which has begun estimating article processing charges (APCs) even for journals operating under the diamond open access model. This practice, which links citation metrics to presumed editorial quality, reinforces an elitist and market-driven evaluation system, threatening the sustainability of collaborative and non-commercial models of scholarly communication, particularly in the Global South. Based on a review of recent studies and international declarations, the authors denounce the dangers of indicator commodification and propose urgent actions to safeguard the integrity of the diamond model. These include the explicit visibility of journals without APCs, the strengthening of public infrastructures, and the adoption of fairer metrics that better reflect the social value of science. The article concludes that equating scientific quality with the ability to pay perpetuates structural inequalities that are incompatible with the principles of open science.

**Keywords:** Commodification of science; Diamond model; Evaluation indicators; Open access; Global inequality.

## 1 Introduction

The commodification of science begins with the exploitation of scientific knowledge, which has long been treated as a commodity. This process starts with article processing charges (APCs), extends through citation impact indicators, often equated with “quality”, leading to rankings and lists of the “best” journals, thus creating a hegemonic, exclusionary publishing market centered in the Global North.

With the rise of the open science movement and the implementation of international guidelines for best practices in scholarly publishing, the publishing conglomerates have found new ways to maintain their monopoly over science. One such mechanism is the emerging correlation between “quality/citation” and APCs, even in journals operating under the diamond open access model. The publishing market implements this logic so subtly and discreetly that it may seem almost naïve, but what is the purpose of encouraging APCs, if not to preserve an elitist and exclusionary system?

Studies by Halevi et al. (2024), Björk and Solomon (2015), and Guerrero-Bote and Moya-Anegón (2012) show that journals with higher impact factors tend to charge higher APCs. This practice has been actively promoted by indexing databases, which associate the potential for APCs with citation-based metrics, even in open access journals that do not currently charge publication fees. (Halevi et al., 2024).

Haustein et al. (2024) describe how the practice of charging APCs has grown, as well as the problem of the lack of transparency and justification of the amounts charged in APC fees by journals (Borrego, 2023; Halevi et al., 2024). The market has appropriated the open access model, generating negative consequences for the entire scientific community.

The strategy of incorporating APCs information as an indicator is clear: to promote charging based on citation impact, an action that reinforces scientific segregation and further fosters the publishing market. Once again, citations are used as a bargaining chip, under the pretext of “quality”, to justify charging authors for publication.

The recent methodological change in the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR), which includes estimated APCs even for diamond open access journals, has raised legitimate concerns among editors, librarians, researchers, and advocates of open science. This modification introduces significant tensions that warrant deeper analysis and collective reflection.

## 2 Cognitive capitalism disguised as metrics

The growing link between APCs and editorial prestige risks promoting a reductionist perception: that paying APCs equates to quality. However, recent research (Khoo, 2019) has shown that competitive market mechanisms do not regulate APC hyperinflation, and authors often do not react to price increases, raising questions about the application of market logic to scholarly communication. The value of a journal should not be measured by its fees, revenue, or prestige, but by the robustness of its editorial practices, its commitment to scientific integrity, and its contribution to bibliodiversity. As Yoon et al. (2024) argue, diamond models are not only viable but have proven to be sustainable when supported by institutional infrastructure and long-term policy frameworks.

What the SCImago index is actually measuring is the relative position in the index, not the intrinsic value of published content nor its social contribution. This distortion reinforces what some authors have termed cognitive capitalism (Moulier-Boutang, 2011), where knowledge ceases to be a common good and becomes a commodity, governed by logics of accumulation, monetization, and algorithmic visibility.

This logic reproduces historical inequalities by favoring institutions and authors who can afford to pay, while marginalizing journals committed to inclusive and sustainable models. This shift also contradicts recent international guidelines such as the Action Plan for Diamond Open Access (Ancion, 2022), which explicitly promotes the strengthening of collaborative, non-commercial publishing models, along with the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA, 2012) and the Manifesto on Science as a Global Public Good (Toluca, 2023; BOAI, 2022).

Any attempt to standardize modes of scientific communication runs counter to the foundational principles of Open Science, including equity, multilingualism, and respect for the diversity of publishing models, as outlined in the UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science (2021). At the same time, it undermines the core tenets of informational justice (Mathiesen, 2015) by restricting equitable access, active participation, and diverse representation in the production and circulation of knowledge.

Assigning an APC value to diamond journals may have unintended consequences for diverse editorial models, especially those operating on a non-profit basis. As Dufour et al. (2023) caution, diamond journals require direct and structural funding mechanisms that recognize their particular characteristic. Without such recognition, the inclusion of estimated APCs can lead to misinterpretations that negatively affect the perception and legitimacy of these journals.

### 3 Consequences for the Global South

In Latin America, where cooperative networks and public funding have historically driven open access, the standardization of global metrics threatens to obscure the achievements of this model. A deliberate threat emerges: the widening disconnect between dominant indexing criteria and the editorial realities of the Global South.

As highlighted by Silveira et al. (2023), Babini et al. (2020), and Cetto et al. (2015), this region serves as a global reference for the implementation of non-profit open access practices. However, mounting pressure to adopt commercial models endangers long-standing infrastructures. Yoon et al. (2024) emphasize that the sustainability of diamond journals increases significantly when supported by public policies and government funding. Córdoba (2021 and 2024) has studied the rising prevalence of publication charges in the region, demonstrating a consistent upward trend.

By estimating high APC values as part of its methodology, SCImago further entrenches barriers to access to scientific publishing. On its platform, virtually no

journal is listed below USD 2,000, a figure that sharply contrasts with the Fair Open Access Alliance (FOAA, 2023) recommendation of a reasonable upper limit of USD 1,000 to preserve equity in scholarly communication. This discrepancy is not trivial; it introduces a structural bias that penalizes journals operating outside market logics, excludes under-resourced communities, and weakens the principle that every researcher, regardless of institutional or geographic origin, should have the opportunity to share knowledge without financial barriers.

#### 4 Possible and Urgent Responses

In light of this scenario, the Open Science community cannot remain on the sidelines. We propose the following responses:

- a) We denounce the distortion promoted by SCImago in estimating article processing charges (APCs) even for journals operating under the diamond model. We propose that the APC-related indicator be displayed only for journals that actually charge APCs, and that, instead, a clear and prominent note be included for journals that do not charge any publication fees, that is, where the APC is zero. This distinction is crucial to prevent misunderstandings, protect the reputation of diamond open access journals, and promote a fairer and more transparent assessment of the diverse modes of open access publishing.
- b) We recommend the use and increased visibility of initiatives such as DOAJ and OpenAlex, which value open metadata and more accurately and fairly recognize the diamond model at a global level.
- c) We propose that journals adopt alternative metrics grounded in diversity and scientific integrity, rather than relying solely on commercial or quantifiable factors.
- d) We call on evaluation agencies, academic institutions, and funding bodies to adopt responsible and context-sensitive metrics that acknowledge the diversity of editorial practices, publishing models, and contributions to the public good. This recommendation aligns with the Hong Kong Principles

(Moher et al., 2020), which promote evaluation based on integrity, transparency, and Open Science practices. It also resonates with the Manifesto for Socioterritorial Metrics (Latmetrics, 2023) and the FOLEC-CLACSO Declaration (2022), both of which advocate for evaluation systems that are sensitive to local contexts, the heterogeneity of scientific capacities, and the social relevance of knowledge.

- e) We recommend strengthening institutional journal portals and regional consortia that support diamond open access journals, with transparent public funding and the development of independent indicators aligned with the goals of science as a common good.
- f) We propose applying the principle of shared responsibility. All scientific output relies on publishing infrastructures, and their funding must be considered an integral part of the knowledge production. To ensure the financial and technological sustainability of non-commercial scientific communication infrastructures, including diamond journals, institutional repositories, research data repositories, open indexing systems, and free open-source software, publicly funded research projects should allocate a fixed percentage of their gross budget to these resources. This funding must reach projects directly through transparent and equitable distribution mechanisms.

It is essential to recall that neither APCs nor citation-based rankings are synonymous with editorial or scientific quality. The quality of an academic journal is built upon transparent editorial practices, rigorous peer review, ethical policies, and a firm commitment to open access and the public good. Confusing economic value or commercial prestige with academic quality is not only conceptually flawed, but also perpetuates exclusionary dynamics that reward those who can afford to pay and punish those who uphold equitable, non-profit models. The consolidation of a fair and non-commercial scientific ecosystem requires collective coordination in defense of diamond open access.

## 5. Final Considerations

This is not a call to reject the APC model per se, but rather to resist its imposition as the only legitimate path. The Open Science ecosystem must be plural, accessible, and resilient. Recognizing, respecting, and supporting the specificity of the diamond model is not merely a technical issue; it is an ethical and political imperative. It must be urgently defended against emerging threats promoted by commercial publishing strategies disguised as technical neutrality, which in reality reproduce exclusionary logics and the commodification of knowledge, a process also referred to as the commercial feudalism of knowledge.

In of current challenges to scholarly publishing, we reaffirm our commitment to editorial diversity, regional collaboration, and open access as a common good. Truly inclusive open science demands open data, open and situated socioterritorial metrics, inclusive funding models, and crucially, the political will to sustain them all.

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