

Conceptual Paper

The Price of Speed: Economic, Ethical, and Social Inequalities of Fast-Track Review in Academic Publishing

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Abstract: Fast-track review services in academic publishing offer authors expedited peer review in exchange for substantial fees, raising critical concerns about equity, ethics, and the structural dynamics of scholarly communication. This paper examines the economic, ethical, and social dimensions of fast-track review fees, drawing on international literature and the challenges faced by researchers in resource-constrained environments, with particular reference to the case of Greece, where such fees can equal a full month's salary for a senior academic. The economic analysis traces the growth of the article processing charge market and demonstrates how the cumulative burden of publication and fast-track fees creates a two-tier system that privileges financially advantaged researchers while marginalising others. The ethical analysis addresses coercive dynamics in supervisory relationships, the distortion of research agendas, the intersection with predatory publishing, and the failure of current arrangements to satisfy Rawlsian principles of distributive justice. The social and institutional analysis examines the intensification of publish-or-perish culture, the role of global university rankings in reinforcing demand for expedited publication, the erosion of trust in peer review, and the distortion of mentorship and international collaboration patterns. The paper concludes that the commercialisation of publication speed functions as a structural mechanism of inequality that demands systemic reform.

Keywords: fast-track review; academic publishing ethics; article processing charges; scholarly communication inequalities; publish-or-perish culture

1. Introduction

The landscape of academic publishing has undergone far-reaching transformations in recent decades, driven by the proliferation of open access models, the progressive commercialisation of scientific communication, and the emergence of premium services designed to accelerate the dissemination of research findings. Traditionally, the peer review process in scholarly journals has been characterised by protracted timelines, with manuscripts frequently remaining under review for periods ranging from six months to well over a year before a final editorial decision is reached (Björk & Solomon, 2013). These delays, while partly attributable to the inherent complexity of rigorous scholarly evaluation, have generated persistent frustration among researchers who must navigate the competing pressures of career advancement, grant deadlines, and institutional performance expectations. In response to this structural bottleneck, a growing number of publishers have introduced expedited review services, commonly marketed as “fast-track” or “priority review” options, through which authors pay substantial fees, ranging from several hundred to several thousand euros, to have their manuscripts processed within significantly shorter timeframes (Teixeira da Silva & Yamada, 2022). While the promise of efficiency is undeniably appealing, these services raise profound and multifaceted questions about equity, ethics, and the foundational principles of scholarly communication.

The rise of fast-track review must be situated within the broader context of the open access movement, which has fundamentally reshaped the economic architecture of academic publishing. Since the early 2000s, initiatives such as the 2002 Budapest Open Access Initiative have promoted the removal of reader-side barriers to scientific knowledge, shifting the

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financial burden of publication from subscribers to authors through article processing charges (Suber, 2012).

Although open access has significantly expanded readership and improved the global accessibility of research, it has simultaneously introduced new financial barriers for researchers who lack adequate institutional support (Khoo, 2019; Wenaas, 2022). The scale of the article processing charge market has grown dramatically, with recent estimates indicating that global expenditure on article processing charges paid to just six large publishers, Elsevier, Frontiers, MDPI, PLOS, Springer Nature, and Wiley, totalled approximately \$8.35 billion between 2019 and 2023, with annual spending nearly tripling from \$910 million in 2019 to over \$2.5 billion in 2023 (Haustein et al., 2024). Within this evolving economic framework, fast-track review services represent a further layer of monetisation, one that commodifies not merely the dissemination of knowledge but the very speed at which scholarly contributions gain visibility in the scientific record (Grossmann & Brembs, 2021). The convergence of these trends has given rise to a publishing ecosystem in which financial capacity, rather than scholarly merit alone, can determine the pace and prominence of research dissemination. As Trueblood et al. (2025) have argued, academic publishing increasingly serves two misaligned goals, knowledge dissemination and the establishment of scientific credentials, and commercial publishers have capitalised on this misalignment to extract substantial profits from the scholarly community.

The ethical implications of fast-track review fees are particularly severe for early-career researchers, graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, and academics working in underfunded institutions or low- and middle-income countries. Recent survey-based evidence indicates that early-career researchers consistently report financial barriers to publication as a significant constraint on their participation in scholarly communication, with publication costs, including article processing charges and optional expedited review fees, identified as among the most pressing obstacles (Carroll et al., 2025). In many academic environments, qualitative accounts further suggest that supervisors may directly or indirectly encourage junior researchers to prioritise rapid publication in high-impact journals, sometimes implying or expecting the use of paid expedited services. While systematic quantitative data on coercive practices remain limited, these reported experiences raise serious concerns about mentorship integrity, power asymmetries, and the potential transfer of institutional costs onto economically vulnerable researchers (Friedensen et al., 2024). The financial burden is rendered especially acute when considered in relation to the salary levels prevailing in particular national contexts. In Greece, for example, the gross monthly salary of a full professor in a public university is approximately €2,000, a figure that is comparable to, or in many cases lower than, the fast-track publication fees charged by major international publishers. For early-career researchers, doctoral students, or recently graduated scholars, such fees are not merely burdensome but effectively prohibitive. These economic realities raise fundamental questions about the fairness and inclusivity of a system in which the speed of knowledge dissemination is contingent upon authors' personal financial capacity rather than the quality or urgency of their scholarly contributions.

Empirical studies of publication cost distribution further reinforce the uneven impact of these financial mechanisms. Cross-national analyses have shown that researchers in well-funded institutions are significantly more likely to publish in journals with higher article processing charges, reflecting access to institutional funding and grant support, whereas scholars in re-source-constrained environments are disproportionately represented in lower-cost or non-APC journals (Larivière et al., 2015; Jung et al., 2025). Although specific data on the uptake of fast-track services remain scarce, available evidence suggests that the capacity to absorb additional publication costs strongly correlates with institutional wealth and national research funding levels. This pattern indicates that fast-track review is unlikely to function as a neutral efficiency mechanism and instead operates within, and reinforces, existing structural inequalities in global scholarly communication.

This financial asymmetry has far-reaching implications that extend beyond individual researchers to affect the structural dynamics of global academia. Well-funded scholars at institutions in high-income countries frequently benefit from dedicated publication budgets that absorb article processing charges and, in some cases, fast-track fees, rendering these costs effectively invisible to the individual researcher (Pinfield et al., 2016). By contrast, researchers in resource-constrained environments must often bear these expenses personally, placing them at a systematic disadvantage in terms of publication speed, citation accrual, and scholarly visibility (Larivière et al., 2015). This dynamic reinforces what has been described as a “geopolitics of knowledge,” in which the scientific record is disproportionately shaped by the

voices and perspectives of researchers from wealthier institutional and national contexts, while scholars from the Global South and from underfunded institutions in Southern and Eastern Europe are progressively marginalised (Connell, 2007; Mboa Nkoudou, 2020).

The result is a self-reinforcing cycle of privilege, what is characterised as the “Matthew effect”, in which financial resources translate into academic advantages, which in turn generate further resources and opportunities, thereby perpetuating structural inequalities across the global research community (Merton, 1968; Strevens, 2006).

The commodification of speed in scholarly publishing also intersects with the pervasive “publish or perish” culture that characterises contemporary academia (Bayanbayeva, 2026; Çakir et al., 2024; De Rond & Miller, 2005). In an environment where career progression, tenure decisions, and research funding are increasingly tied to the volume and velocity of publications, the ability to pay for accelerated review becomes a form of competitive advantage that is available only to those with sufficient financial resources. This dynamic not only distorts the meritocratic ideals upon which scientific evaluation is purported to rest but also risks undermining public trust in the integrity of the peer review process, as stakeholders may question whether publication speed is driven by the quality and significance of research or by financial leverage (Resnik, 1998). Furthermore, the existence of fast-track services may incentivise publishers to maintain or even extend standard review times, thereby enhancing the perceived value of premium options and generating additional revenue from an artificially constrained system (Grossmann & Brembs, 2021; Teixeira da Silva & Yamada, 2022). The social and institutional dimensions of this phenomenon are equally consequential: global university rankings, which assign substantial weight to research output and citation metrics, create strong institutional incentives to maximise the volume and visibility of publications, and may tacitly encourage the use of fast-track services in ways that exacerbate financial inequalities among researchers within and across institutions (Kochetkov, 2024).

The present paper examines the economic, ethical, and social dimensions of fast-track review fees in academic publishing. Drawing on international literature and the specific challenges faced by researchers in resource-constrained environments, with particular reference to the case of Greece, the analysis seeks to illuminate how the commercialisation of publication speed reinforces existing inequalities, distorts academic incentive structures, and erodes the meritocratic and inclusive ideals upon which the scientific enterprise is founded.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a critical-conceptual and analytical approach, based on the systematic synthesis of existing scholarly literature, policy reports, and documented publishing practices. Rather than generating original empirical data, the study integrates findings from prior research across multiple domains, including the economics of publishing, research ethics, and the sociology of science, in order to construct a theoretically informed critique of fast-track review mechanisms. The selection of literature prioritises recent empirical studies, influential theoretical contributions, and policy-relevant analyses that address inequalities in scholarly communication, with particular attention to evidence concerning publication costs, peer review timelines, and the experiences of early-career researchers.

The analytical framework is structured along three interconnected dimensions, economic, ethical, and social, which together enable a multidimensional evaluation of fast-track review as both a market practice and a normative issue. The paper begins by tracing the historical evolution of peer review and the progressive monetisation of scholarly communication, before analysing the economic architecture of the contemporary publishing system with particular attention to the cumulative financial burden created by the combination of article processing charges and fast-track fees. It then examines the ethical implications of these practices for early-career researchers, graduate students, and scholars in underfunded academic systems, including the intersection of fast-track services with coercive supervisory dynamics. Finally, the paper addresses the social and institutional consequences of the monetisation of speed, including its effects on the publish-or-perish culture, global university rankings, mentorship relationships, and patterns of international collaboration.

2. The Evolution of Peer Review and Open Access

The peer review process, widely regarded as the cornerstone of scientific credibility and a fundamental mechanism of quality assurance in scholarly communication, has a history that extends back to the seventeenth century. Although peer review continues to be treated as the “gold standard” of academic publishing, contemporary scholarship increasingly highlights persistent challenges related to impartiality, bias, fake reviews, reviewer fatigue, academic

reward structures, and the sustainability of the review system (Gonzalez et al., 2022). The origins of formalised evaluation of scientific manuscripts are typically traced to the Royal Society of London, which, following its establishment in 1660, began vetting submissions to its *Philosophical Transactions* through a process of collegial scrutiny and editorial selection (Kronick, 1990). In its earliest form, this process was neither systematic nor anonymous; rather, it relied on the judgement of a small number of Fellows who assessed the suitability of manuscripts for publication on the basis of their perceived relevance and scientific merit. Over the subsequent centuries, and particularly during the nineteenth century, the practice of soliciting external expert opinion on submitted manuscripts became increasingly common among scientific and medical journals, though it remained largely informal and variable in its application (Spier, 2002). It was not until the mid-twentieth century that peer review, as it is understood in its contemporary form, involving the systematic evaluation of manuscripts by independent, anonymous external experts, became the established norm across the majority of reputable scholarly journals (Drozdz & Ladomery, 2024). The institutionalisation of this process was driven by the exponential growth of scientific output following the Second World War, the corresponding need for rigorous quality control, and the increasing specialisation of disciplinary knowledge, all of which necessitated a more structured and accountable approach to editorial decision-making.

In its traditional form, peer review was conceived as a quality filter that operated without imposing direct financial costs on the author. The costs of the review process, including the time contributed by voluntary reviewers and the administrative labour of editorial offices, were absorbed by publishers and learned societies, whose revenue derived primarily from institutional subscriptions and membership fees. Publication delays, however, have been a persistent and well-documented challenge throughout the history of scholarly communication. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these delays were attributable to logistical constraints such as postal correspondence, the manual typesetting and printing of manuscripts, and the limited availability of qualified reviewers in specialised fields (Kelly et al., 2014). The advent of digital submission and management systems in the late 1990s and early 2000s generated widespread expectations that review and publication timelines would be substantially reduced. Yet, despite the efficiencies introduced by electronic platforms, significant bottlenecks have persisted, driven in large part by the growing volume of submissions, the increasing complexity of interdisciplinary research, and the continued reliance on the voluntary labour of peer reviewers who themselves face escalating professional demands (Tennant et al., 2017; Horta & Jung, 2024; Proctor et al., 2023). Average review-to-decision times in many disciplines remain in the range of six months to over a year, a reality that has fuelled demand for alternative mechanisms of expediting the publication process (Björk & Solomon, 2013; Luwel et al., 2020). This persistence of editorial and review delays has fuelled demand for alternative mechanisms of expediting the publication process.

The open access movement, which gained decisive momentum in the early 2000s through landmark initiatives such as the 2002 Budapest Open Access Initiative and the 2003 Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities, fundamentally transformed the economic model underpinning academic publishing. The core principle of open access, that the outputs of publicly funded research should be freely and immediately available to all readers without financial or institutional barriers, represented a radical departure from the subscription-based model that had dominated scholarly publishing for over a century (Suber, 2012). Under the emerging gold open access model, the financial burden of publication shifted from readers and their institutions to authors, who were required to pay article processing charges to cover the costs of editorial management, peer review coordination, and online dissemination. While this shift significantly expanded readership and democratised access to scientific knowledge, it simultaneously introduced new and consequential financial barriers for researchers who lacked adequate institutional or grant-based support to cover these charges (Fecher & Friesike, 2014). The range of article processing charges varies enormously across journals and publishers, from nominal fees of a few dozen euros for small, regionally focused journals to charges exceeding €9,000 for high-impact open access publications in the natural and biomedical sciences (Solomon & Björk, 2016). Moreover, empirical evidence suggests that article processing charge levels have increased at a rate approximately three times that of inflation, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability and equity of author-pays models (Khoo, 2019). The open access movement thus resolved one form of financial gatekeeping, the reader-side paywall, while inadvertently creating another on the author side, with disproportionate consequences for researchers in low- and middle-income countries and those working without grant funding.

It is within this evolving economic landscape that fast-track review services emerged as a further monetisation of the scholarly publication process. Fast-track review is typically marketed as a premium service that guarantees an expedited evaluation of submitted manuscripts, often promising an editorial decision within a period of weeks rather than months, in exchange for a substantial additional fee that is separate from and supplementary to the standard article processing charge (Teixeira da Silva & Yamada, 2022). This model draws conceptually on principles from service economics, in which customers pay a premium for priority access to a service or resource that is available to all users in its standard form but at a slower pace (Borrego, 2023; Halevi & Walsh, 2021). In the context of academic publishing, however, the application of such market logic has been the subject of sustained criticism. Detractors argue that fast-track services introduce a form of financial gatekeeping into the speed at which scholarly knowledge is disseminated, thereby privileging authors with greater financial resources and creating a systemic bias in the representation of voices in the scientific record (Frass et al., 2013; Resnik, 1998). The fundamental tension is between the legitimate desire for efficiency in scientific communication and the risk that the commercialisation of speed may erode the principles of fairness, equal opportunity, and merit-based evaluation that are foundational to the scholarly enterprise.

The emergence of preprint servers, such as arXiv (established in 1991) and the more recent bioRxiv and medRxiv platforms, represents an alternative trajectory in the effort to accelerate the dissemination of scientific findings. Preprints allow researchers to share their work publicly prior to formal peer review, thereby achieving rapid visibility without incurring the financial costs associated with fast-track services (Elmore, 2018; Fraser et al., 2021). The role of preprints was dramatically amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the urgency of public health decision-making demanded immediate access to emerging research findings, and traditional peer review timelines were widely perceived as inadequate for the pace of the crisis (Škorić et al., 2020). While preprints have been credited with democratising access to early-stage research, they have also raised concerns about the dissemination of unvetted findings, the potential for misinformation, and the uneven adoption of preprint practices across disciplines and regions. Nevertheless, the growth of preprint culture underscores a broader dissatisfaction with the temporal constraints of traditional peer review and highlights the demand for mechanisms that can balance speed with rigour in scholarly communication.

From a theoretical perspective, the evolution from volunteer-based peer review to the commercialisation of publication speed can be understood through the lens of the commodification of academic labour and knowledge. The progressive integration of market logic into the structures of scholarly communication, manifested in the rise of article processing charges, the concentration of publishing in the hands of a small number of commercial conglomerates, and the introduction of premium services such as fast-track review, reflects broader neoliberal trends in higher education and research governance (Larivière et al., 2015; Grossmann & Brembs, 2021).

According to Trueblood et al. (2025), commercial publishing companies have capitalised on the centrality of publishing to both knowledge dissemination and academic career advancement, extracting substantial profits by leveraging unpaid reviewer labour, creating financial barriers to research dissemination, and imposing escalating fees for open access. Within this framework, the traditional understanding of peer review as a collegial, non-commercial, and collectively owned process of quality assurance has been progressively displaced by a model in which editorial services are priced, packaged, and sold to individual researchers or their institutions. The implications of this shift are not merely economic but also profoundly ethical and social, as the ability to participate fully and equitably in the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge becomes increasingly contingent upon financial resources rather than scholarly merit alone.

Understanding this historical trajectory, from the collegial origins of peer review in the seventeenth century, through the formalisation and institutionalisation of the process in the twentieth century, to the economic transformations wrought by open access and the commodification of speed in the twenty-first century, is essential for framing the economic, ethical, and social concerns that constitute the focus of this paper. The analysis that follows draws on this historical foundation to examine how the financial architecture of contemporary academic publishing, and in particular the cumulative burden of article processing charges and fast-track review fees, creates and reinforces structural inequalities across the global research community. It then interrogates the ethical implications of these financial mechanisms for early-career researchers, graduate students, and scholars in resource-

constrained environments, before addressing the broader social and institutional consequences of the monetisation of speed, including the intensification of the publish-or-perish culture, the distortion of mentorship relationships, and the stratification of scholarly visibility along lines of socioeconomic privilege rather than intellectual merit.

3. Economic Dimensions of Academic Publishing

The economics of academic publishing are characterised by a complex and increasingly contested interplay between production costs, market structures, institutional funding arrangements, and the revenue strategies of commercial publishers. For the greater part of the twentieth century, the dominant financial model was subscription-based publishing, in which the costs of journal production, editorial management, and distribution were borne primarily by university libraries and research institutions through annual subscription fees. This model, while placing no direct financial burden on individual authors, generated escalating costs for libraries that came to be widely characterised as the “serials crisis”, a period of sustained and unsustainable increases in subscription prices that severely strained institutional budgets, particularly in smaller universities and in low- and middle-income countries (Khoo, 2019). The transition to open access publishing, which accelerated from the early 2000s onward, was conceived in part as a remedy to these inequities, shifting the cost of publication from readers and their institutions to authors in the form of article processing charges (Suber, 2012). However, as the open access model has matured, it has become evident that this shift has introduced new and consequential forms of financial exclusion, particularly for researchers who lack the institutional or grant-based support necessary to cover the costs of publication. Indeed, as Trueblood et al. (2025) have observed, although the open access movement originally intended to expand participation in the scholarly enterprise, the author-pays model has in practice made it more costly for researchers in low-income countries to publish their own work, even as their access to reading others’ research has improved.

The scale of the article processing charge market has grown dramatically in recent years, underscoring the extent to which publication fees have become a central revenue stream for major publishers. Recent estimates indicate that global expenditure on article processing charges paid to just six large publishers, Elsevier, Frontiers, MDPI, PLOS, Springer Nature, and Wiley, totalled approximately \$8.35 billion between 2019 and 2023, with annual spending nearly tripling from \$910 million in 2019 to over \$2.5 billion in 2023 (Haustein et al., 2024). These figures reflect not only the growing volume of open access articles but also the escalation of article processing charge prices, which have increased at a rate approximately three times that of inflation in advanced economies (Khoo, 2019). Moreover, recent cross-national analyses have revealed significant regional disparities in the growth of article processing charge expenditure, with countries such as Italy, South Korea, Germany, and the United Kingdom experiencing particularly high compound annual growth rates, underscoring the unevenness of the financial burden across national research systems (Jung et al., 2025). This wide variation reflects the pricing power of publishers, who have been shown to set fees based not on the actual costs of editorial processing and production but on the prestige value of their journal titles and the funding available to authors in different markets (Grossmann & Brembs, 2021). The concentration of article processing charge revenue among a small number of large commercial publishers further reinforces the oligopolistic structure of the academic publishing industry, in which a handful of corporations exert disproportionate control over the channels through which scientific knowledge is disseminated and legitimated (Larivière et al., 2015).

Fast-track review fees constitute a distinct and additional financial burden that is separate from and supplementary to standard article processing charges. While article processing charges cover the costs of processing and publishing an accepted article, fast-track fees are levied specifically for the privilege of an expedited review and editorial decision. Depending on the journal and publisher, these fees can range from approximately €600 to over €2,000, with some publishers offering tiered packages that promise progressively shorter turnaround times at correspondingly higher prices. Major publishers such as Taylor & Francis, Future Medicine, and Elsevier have developed formalised fast-track services, marketed under labels such as “Accelerated Publication” or “Priority Review,” that guarantee editorial decisions within periods ranging from several weeks to three months, as opposed to the standard timelines of six to eighteen months (Teixeira da Silva & Yamada, 2022).

For example, several journals in the Taylor & Francis portfolio offer “Accelerated Publication” options with advertised decision times of approximately 4-6 weeks for an

additional fee exceeding €1,500, while selected Elsevier journals have introduced priority review tracks promising initial decisions within 2-4 weeks at comparable or higher costs. Similarly, publishers in the biomedical domain, such as Future Medicine, provide fast-track pathways explicitly targeted at clinically time-sensitive research, with fees that can exceed standard article processing charges. These examples illustrate that fast-track services are not merely theoretical constructs but operationalised market offerings embedded within mainstream publishing workflows, with clearly defined price structures and time guarantees.

The cumulative financial burden of combining article processing charges with fast-track fees means that the total cost of a single publication can reach several thousand euros, a sum that is prohibitive for many researchers, particularly those without external funding support. For authors operating under tight grant deadlines, institutional performance evaluation cycles, career promotion schedules, or doctoral completion requirements, the incentive to pay for faster turnaround can be substantial. However, the cumulative financial burden of combining article processing charges with fast-track fees means that the total cost of a single publication can reach several thousand euros, a sum that is prohibitive for many researchers, particularly those without external funding support.

The capacity to absorb these publication costs is profoundly uneven across institutional and national contexts, and this unevenness lies at the heart of the equity concerns associated with the current publishing model. In wealthier research environments, such as those found in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands, universities and national funding agencies typically maintain dedicated budgets for covering publication costs, including both article processing charges and, in some cases, fast-track fees. Research grants in these countries routinely include provisions for dissemination expenses, and institutional read-and-publish agreements with major publishers further reduce or eliminate per-article charges for affiliated researchers (Pinfield et al., 2016). In such environments, the financial costs of publication are effectively invisible to the individual researcher, absorbed into the institutional infrastructure of the research enterprise. By contrast, in countries with more limited research funding, including many nations in Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia, institutional support for publication costs is minimal or non-existent, and researchers are frequently compelled to bear these expenses out of their personal income. The case of Greece is illustrative: the gross monthly salary of a full professor in a Greek public university is approximately €2,000, a figure that is comparable to or lower than the fast-track publication fees charged by many international publishers. For associate professors, lecturers, and early-career researchers, the disparity is even more pronounced. For doctoral students and unemployed graduates who have recently completed their studies, the expectation that they should fund fast-track publication from personal resources is not merely burdensome but effectively excludes them from a significant mechanism of scholarly visibility and career advancement.

This financial asymmetry has significant consequences for the distribution of scholarly visibility and influence. Researchers who can access fast-track services benefit from earlier publication, which facilitates earlier citation accrual, increased visibility, and stronger positioning in funding and career evaluation processes (Larivière et al., 2015). These advantages are cumulative, generating a self-reinforcing dynamic consistent with the “Matthew effect” in science (Merton, 1968). By contrast, researchers without access to expedited publication face delayed visibility and reduced competitive opportunities, independent of the intrinsic quality of their work. The result is a systemic distortion of the scientific record, in which the representation of voices, perspectives, and research agendas is shaped not solely by scholarly merit but by the financial capacity of individual researchers and the institutions that support them.

The economic implications of fast-track review services extend beyond the impact on individual researchers to raise structural questions about the incentive mechanisms that govern the behaviour of publishers. Fast-track fees represent a lucrative and growing revenue stream for commercial publishers, one that supplements the already substantial income generated by article processing charges and subscription fees.

This commercial incentive creates a potential moral hazard: the existence of premium expedited services may introduce structural incentives that could discourage efforts to substantially reduce standard review timelines, insofar as longer baseline processing times increase the relative attractiveness of paid fast-track options (Grossmann & Brembs, 2021). While direct empirical evidence of intentional delay strategies remains limited, this dynamics raises important concerns about the alignment between commercial publishing models and the broader scholarly interest in timely and equitable peer review. In the absence of regulatory

oversight or mandatory transparency requirements, there is limited accountability regarding the allocation of fast-track fees, that is, the extent to which these charges are directed toward genuinely enhancing editorial capacity, compensating reviewers for prioritised work, or covering administrative costs, as opposed to contributing to publisher profit margins. This opacity undermines the legitimacy of fast-track services and raises fundamental questions about whether these offerings are genuinely designed to improve the efficiency of scholarly communication or whether they represent, in effect, a monetised queue-jumping mechanism that exploits the urgency and vulnerability of authors operating under institutional and career pressures (Teixeira da Silva & Yamada, 2022).

It is important to acknowledge that the article processing charge-based open access model is not the only available framework for achieving open dissemination of research. Diamond open access journals, which charge neither authors nor readers and are typically funded through institutional subsidies, learned society revenues, or volunteer editorial labour, represent an alternative model that eliminates the financial barriers associated with author-pays publishing. In 2021, it was estimated that between 17,000 and 29,000 diamond open access journals published approximately 45% of all open access articles globally, with particularly strong representation in Latin America, where the SciELO and Redalyc platforms have long operated on a non-commercial basis (Bosman et al., 2021). Nevertheless, diamond open access journals remain underrepresented in the most influential bibliometric databases, including Scopus and Web of Science, which limits their role in the evaluation and reward structures that govern academic careers (Yoon et al., 2025). Furthermore, the long-term sustainability of diamond open access journals remains a subject of concern, as many depend on precarious institutional funding, volunteer labour, and limited administrative infrastructure (Yoon et al., 2024). The persistence of the article processing charge model as the dominant pathway to open access in high-prestige journals, combined with the additional monetisation represented by fast-track services, thus ensures that financial capacity remains a significant determinant of the speed, visibility, and impact of scholarly publication.

In sum, the economic architecture of contemporary academic publishing is characterised by multiple and overlapping financial barriers that disproportionately affect researchers in resource-constrained environments. The combination of article processing charges and fast-track review fees creates a cumulative cost structure that privileges well-funded researchers and institutions, reinforces the concentration of scholarly influence in high-income countries, and undermines the equitable and merit-based ideals upon which the global scientific enterprise is purported to rest. The analysis that follows examines the ethical implications of these economic dynamics, with particular attention to the consequences for early-career researchers, graduate students, and scholars in underfunded academic systems.

4. Ethical Issues and Inequalities in Access

The introduction of fast-track review services into the architecture of academic publishing raises profound ethical concerns that go to the heart of how scholarly knowledge is evaluated, disseminated, and valued. At the most fundamental level, these services create a two-tier publishing system in which the speed and visibility of research dissemination are stratified according to authors' financial capacity rather than the scholarly merit of their contributions. Researchers with access to financial resources can secure expedited review and earlier entry into the circuits of academic recognition, while others remain subject to significantly longer evaluation timelines. This structural asymmetry introduces a financial dimension into processes that are expected to operate on the basis of scholarly merit, thereby challenging core principles of fairness in scientific communication (Resnik, 1998). The resulting system is one in which meritocracy is not abolished but corroded, silently and incrementally, by the introduction of a financial variable into processes that have historically been conceived as financially neutral for the author.

The ethical challenge posed by fast-track review fees is particularly acute for early-career researchers, graduate students, and postdoctoral scholars, who constitute one of the most vulnerable populations within the academic labour market. Autoethnographic evidence from an early-career researcher in India illustrates how the process of writing, submitting, revising, and awaiting peer-review outcomes can produce significant emotional pressure, uncertainty, and professional vulnerability for researchers at the beginning of their academic careers (Banerjee, 2022). These individuals typically operate without permanent employment, without access to substantial research funding, and within hierarchical institutional structures in which their professional survival depends heavily on the decisions and goodwill of senior academics

and supervisors. In many academic environments, and particularly in countries where institutional support for publication costs is limited or absent, anecdotal evidence suggests that supervisors may directly or indirectly pressure junior researchers to pay fast-track fees from their personal resources in order to secure publication in high-impact journals (Cohen & Baruch, 2022). Some findings further confirmed that early-career researchers perceive substantial inequities in the costs, time, and mentorship support associated with publishing, and that the financial burden of open access and expedited publication fees constitutes a significant barrier to equitable participation in scholarly communication (Carroll et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2024). In the Greek context, where academic salaries are modest and dedicated publication budgets are scarce, such pressure is especially burdensome: a single fast-track fee may represent a full month's salary for a doctoral candidate or an early-career lecturer, and for unemployed graduates who have recently completed their studies, the financial barrier is effectively insurmountable. The ethical gravity of this situation lies not merely in the financial hardship it imposes but in the coercive dynamics it reveals, whereby the power asymmetry inherent in the supervisor-student relationship is leveraged to transfer institutional costs to the most economically vulnerable members of the academic community (Cohen & Baruch, 2022; Friedensen et al., 2024).

Beyond the immediate burden on individuals, the financial pressures associated with fast-track publication carry the risk of distorting the broader research agenda. Scholars who face the expectation of rapid, high-visibility publication may be incentivised to prioritise research topics, methodological approaches, and disciplinary orientations that are more likely to be accepted quickly by high-impact journals, rather than pursuing lines of inquiry that are intellectually ambitious, locally relevant, or methodologically innovative but less likely to attract expedited editorial attention (Vervoort et al., 2020). These concerns are further amplified by the growing use of generative AI in academic content evaluation, since recent quasi-experimental evidence suggests that generative AI systems may improve evaluation efficiency but still show limitations in reliability, differentiation, interpretability, and the assessment of novelty and significance (Zhu et al., 2025). Similarly, a recent scoping review of artificial intelligence in scholarly peer review concludes that AI can support peer review only when it is implemented as a transparent, auditable, privacy-preserving tool under human oversight, with clear governance mechanisms to address bias, accountability, and evaluation incentives (Giray, 2024). These governance concerns are closely connected to the legality and academic-integrity implications of using artificial intelligence in academic writing, since AI-generated or AI-assisted manuscripts raise unresolved questions about authorship, intellectual property, transparency, responsibility, and ethical disclosure (Kotsis, 2025a). At the same time, ChatGPT can also serve pedagogical functions in academic writing, particularly by supporting brainstorming, drafting, revision, and writing development, provided that its use is framed by transparency, academic-integrity safeguards, and responsible human oversight (Kotsis, 2025b).

In the social sciences and humanities, where research outputs often require extended periods of fieldwork, archival study, or theoretical development, the pressure to conform to the temporal rhythms of fast-track publishing may be particularly damaging, as it privileges research that can be produced quickly over work that demands sustained engagement with complex phenomena (Jawaid, 2017). These risks narrowing the diversity of perspectives, methodologies, and epistemological traditions represented in the scientific record, with disproportionate consequences for researchers whose disciplinary practices are poorly aligned with the speed-oriented logic of commercial publishing. The ethical concern, in this regard, is not only one of individual fairness but also one of epistemic justice: a publishing system that systematically rewards speed and financial capacity over depth and diversity impoverishes the collective knowledge base upon which scientific progress depends.

The competitive advantages conferred by fast-track publication are not static but cumulative, generating a self-reinforcing cycle of privilege that deepens existing inequalities within the academic community over time. Researchers who can afford to pay for expedited review gain earlier visibility in the scientific literature, which translates into higher citation counts, greater prominence in bibliometric rankings, enhanced opportunities for conference participation and invited lectures, and stronger positions in competitive applications for research funding, academic positions, and career promotions (Larivière et al., 2015). Each of these advantages, in turn, generates further resources and opportunities that facilitate subsequent publications, creating a positive feedback loop from which financially disadvantaged researchers are structurally excluded. Conversely, scholars who lack access to fast-track services experience prolonged invisibility, reduced citation impact, diminished

networking opportunities, and weaker competitive profiles, not because of any deficiency in the quality of their research but because of the slower pace at which their work enters the scholarly record. Over the span of an academic career, these cumulative differences can translate into significant and enduring disparities in professional status, institutional affiliation, and scholarly influence. The ethical implication is clear: fast-track review services, as currently structured, function not as neutral tools of efficiency but as mechanisms that amplify pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities within the global academic community.

The ethical analysis of fast-track review services must also extend to the conduct of publishers themselves, whose commercial interests intersect with and, in some cases, conflict with the principles of fairness and integrity in scholarly communication. Publishers who offer fast-track options derive substantial revenue from these services, and this commercial incentive may shape editorial practices in ways that are ethically problematic. As noted in the preceding section, the existence of fast-track fees may create structural incentives that risk reinforcing longer standard review timelines, thereby increasing the perceived value and market demand for expedited services (Grossmann & Brembs, 2021). Although this effect is difficult to demonstrate directly, it highlights a potential tension between revenue-generating mechanisms and the goal of efficient and equitable peer review. To the extent that this dynamic operates, it represents a form of manufactured scarcity in which delays that could be reduced through improved editorial management are instead preserved and monetised. Moreover, the lack of transparency regarding the allocation of fast-track fees, that is, whether and to what extent these charges are used to compensate reviewers, enhance editorial capacity, or improve the quality of the review process, as opposed to contributing to publisher profit margins, raises further ethical concerns about accountability and trust in the publishing system (Teixeira da Silva & Yamada, 2022). The commodification of fairness in scholarly communication, the conversion of equitable access to timely review into a purchasable privilege, represents a fundamental departure from the ethical traditions of academic publishing, in which the review process was historically conceived as a collegial, non-commercial, and collectively owned mechanism of quality assurance.

The ethical landscape is further complicated by the intersection of fast-track services with the phenomenon of predatory publishing. Certain low-quality or deceptive journals have appropriated the language of fast-track review as a marketing tool, promising unrealistically rapid publication in exchange for substantial fees while providing little or no genuine peer review (Beall, 2016; Vervoort et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2025). For inexperienced researchers, particularly graduate students and early-career scholars who may lack the disciplinary knowledge or mentorship support needed to distinguish reputable journals from predatory outlets, the proliferation of such services creates a double risk: financial exploitation and reputational damage. The ethical responsibility for addressing this risk lies not only with the researchers who must navigate an increasingly complex publishing landscape but also with institutions, supervisors, and publishers, who bear a collective obligation to ensure that the pursuit of publication speed does not expose vulnerable scholars to exploitation or lead them to compromise the integrity of their scholarly record.

From the perspective of ethical theory, the issues raised by fast-track review fees can be analysed through multiple normative frameworks. A utilitarian analysis might weigh the efficiency gains of expedited publication against the aggregate harms imposed on disadvantaged researchers, while a deontological approach would focus on whether the imposition of financial conditions on the speed of review violates duties of fairness and respect owed to all members of the scholarly community. Perhaps most illuminating, however, is the perspective offered by theories of distributive justice, particularly the Rawlsian principle that inequalities in social institutions are justifiable only to the extent that they benefit the least advantaged members of society (Rawls, 1971). Under this framework, a publishing system that permits the purchase of faster review would be ethically defensible only if it simultaneously improved outcomes for those who cannot afford such services, for example, by using fast-track revenues to subsidise publication for unfunded researchers or to reduce standard review times. In the absence of such redistributive mechanisms, fast-track services function as regressive instruments that exacerbate rather than ameliorate existing inequalities, and they fail the test of justice that any equitable institutional arrangement must satisfy.

Ultimately, even when acknowledging the potential benefits of expedited review in specific contexts, the ethical implications of fast-track review fees cannot be separated from broader questions of justice, accessibility, and inclusivity in science. A publishing system that privileges speed on the basis of financial capacity risks alienating underfunded researchers,

diminishing the diversity of scholarly voices, distorting the research agenda, and eroding the ideal that scientific knowledge should be produced and shared on the basis of merit rather than money. The following section extends this ethical analysis by examining the social and institutional consequences of fast-track publishing, including its effects on the publish-or-perish culture, global university rankings, mentorship relationships, and patterns of international collaboration.

While the preceding analysis has emphasised the ethical and structural concerns associated with fast-track review fees, it is important to acknowledge that expedited review mechanisms may, under certain conditions, serve legitimate and socially valuable purposes. In fields such as medicine, public health, and environmental science, the rapid dissemination of research findings can be critical for informing policy decisions, clinical practice, and emergency responses. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, underscored the importance of accelerating access to emerging scientific evidence, particularly in contexts where delays in publication could have direct consequences for public health outcomes (Fraser et al., 2021; Skorić et al., 2020). In such cases, mechanisms that reduce review and publication timelines may contribute positively to the societal function of science.

Moreover, some authors may reasonably value expedited review for reasons unrelated to competitive advantage, such as aligning publication timelines with grant reporting requirements, doctoral completion deadlines, or time-sensitive research dissemination. From this perspective, fast-track services can be understood as a response to genuine demand within a system characterized by increasingly compressed academic timelines and performance expectations.

However, the existence of these legitimate use cases does not resolve the broader ethical concerns identified in this paper. The key issue is not the desirability of speed per se, but the conditional access to speed based on financial capacity. When expedited review is available primarily as a paid service, its benefits are distributed unevenly, favoring researchers with access to institutional or personal resources while excluding those in less advantaged positions. In the absence of equitable access mechanisms, such as fee waivers, institutional support, or universally reduced review times, the provision of fast-track options risks reinforcing structural inequalities even when motivated by legitimate goals.

A more equitable approach would involve decoupling the objective of timely dissemination from the ability to pay, for example by investing in systemic improvements to peer review efficiency or by expanding non-commercial pathways for rapid knowledge sharing, such as preprint dissemination coupled with rigorous post-publication review. In this sense, the ethical challenge is not whether research should be disseminated quickly, but whether the conditions under which speed is achieved are compatible with the principles of fairness, inclusivity, and merit-based evaluation that underpin the scientific enterprise.

5. Social and Institutional Implications

The widespread adoption of fast-track review services in academic publishing carries significant implications for the social dynamics of academia and for the institutional structures that govern scholarly work, career advancement, and the distribution of research resources. One of the most consequential effects of these services is the intensification of the “publish or perish” culture that has come to define the contemporary academic landscape. Over the past several decades, career advancement, tenure decisions, research funding allocations, and professional recognition have become increasingly tied to the volume, velocity, and venue of publications, a dynamic that has been extensively documented and critiqued in the literature on academic labour (De Rond & Miller, 2005). In this environment, the ability to pay for accelerated review functions as a selective advantage, enabling some researchers to respond more rapidly to emerging opportunities and evaluation demands, while others remain structurally disadvantaged regardless of the quality of their work.

The result is an academic reward system in which the pace of knowledge production is modulated not solely by intellectual effort and scholarly rigour but by the financial circumstances of the individual researcher.

At the institutional level, the disparities in research funding between universities in high-income countries and those in low- and middle-income countries are significantly exacerbated by the existence of fast-track publication services. Universities in wealthy research environments, such as those in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, and Australia, typically maintain dedicated budgets for covering article processing charges and, in many cases, fast-track fees, ensuring that their affiliated researchers

remain competitive in the global academic marketplace (Pinfield et al., 2016). These institutions also benefit from large-scale read-and-publish agreements with major publishers, which further reduce or eliminate per-article publication costs. By contrast, universities in countries with more constrained research budgets, including many institutions in Southern and Eastern Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, frequently lack the financial infra-structure to support their researchers' publication expenses. In Greece, for instance, public universities do not maintain institutionalised funds for covering fast-track fees, and national research funding bodies rarely include provisions for expedited publication in their grant schemes. The consequence is a profound imbalance in the conditions under which scholars from different institutional and national contexts engage with the global publishing system. This imbalance contributes to what Connell (2007) has characterised as a "geopolitics of knowledge," in which the production, validation, and dissemination of scientific knowledge are structured by global power asymmetries that systematically privilege researchers in wealthy nations while marginalising those in resource-constrained environments.

The institutional dynamics surrounding fast-track publishing are further shaped by the growing influence of global university rankings, which have become powerful instruments of institutional governance, resource allocation, and reputational competition since their inception in the early 2000s (Kochetkov, 2024). These pressures also highlight the need for scientifically literate policymaking, since decisions about research assessment, artificial intelligence, and academic governance increasingly require policymakers to understand both the technical possibilities and the ethical limits of emerging technologies (Ertem-Eray & Cheng, 2025; Kotsis, 2024). Rankings produced by organisations such as Times Higher Education, Quacquarelli Symonds, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities assign substantial weight to research output and citation metrics, creating strong institutional incentives to maximise the volume and visibility of publications produced by affiliated researchers.

In this context, universities that are eager to improve or maintain their ranking positions may tacitly encourage, or at least fail to discourage, the use of fast-track publication services by their faculty and doctoral students, even when such services exacerbate financial inequalities among researchers within the same institution (Li & Yin, 2023). The alignment of institutional interests with the commercial offerings of publishers creates a structural complicity in which universities, publishers, and ranking organisations collectively reinforce a system that prioritises speed and quantity over depth, equity, and the long-term quality of the scholarly record. This dynamic is particularly pernicious for early-career researchers, who are most acutely affected by the pressure to publish quickly but least likely to have access to the financial resources necessary to do so through expedited channels. It is noteworthy that recent initiatives in research assessment reform, including the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (Cagan, 2013) and the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment, which have attracted over 700 signatory organisations committed to moving beyond publication-based metrics, represent an emerging counterpoint to these dynamics, though their practical impact on entrenched institutional cultures remains to be fully realised (Drach et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2026).

The monetisation of speed in academic publishing also subtly but consequentially alters the balance of power among the principal actors in the scholarly communication system: publishers, universities, and individual researchers. This shift occurs within a broader transformation of higher education, in which artificial intelligence is increasingly redefining university-level science education across cognitive, epistemological, pedagogical, institutional, and ethical dimensions (Kotsis, 2025c; Kozak, 2025). The integration of AI into higher education curricula, particularly in science-based programs, also requires institutional readiness, ethical safeguards, teacher preparation, and careful attention to equity, since AI adoption can create both opportunities for pedagogical innovation and new forms of technological exclusion (Kotsis, 2025d).

In science education more broadly, AI-supported personalized learning, adaptive systems, and automated assessment can enhance learning experiences, but they also raise policy challenges related to data privacy, algorithmic bias, teacher professional development, transparency, and equitable access (Kotsis, 2026). Publishers, as commercial entities operating within a highly concentrated and oligopolistic market (Larivière et al., 2015), benefit directly from the additional revenue generated by fast-track services, which supplements their already substantial income from article processing charges and subscription fees. The commercial incentive to maintain or extend standard review timelines, thereby enhancing the perceived

value of premium expedited services, creates a structural tension between the profit-maximising interests of publishers and the scholarly community's interest in fair, timely, and equitable access to the peer review process (Grossmann & Brembs, 2021). Universities, for their part, occupy an ambiguous position: while they bear an institutional responsibility to protect their researchers from exploitative financial practices, they simultaneously benefit from the rapid publication outputs that fast-track services facilitate, insofar as these outputs contribute to institutional metrics and ranking positions. Individual researchers, particularly those in junior positions or precarious employment, find themselves at the bottom of this power hierarchy, subject to pressures from above, institutional expectations, supervisory demands, and the competitive logic of academic career progression, while bearing the financial burden of a system designed to serve the interests of more powerful institutional actors.

Socially, the proliferation of fast-track review services risks creating a stratified academic community in which researchers' visibility, influence, and professional standing correlate less with the quality and significance of their work and more with their capacity to invest in accelerated publication. This stratification operates not only between individuals but also between institutions, disciplines, and geographic regions, producing a hierarchical structure in which access to the mechanisms of scholarly visibility is distributed along lines of socioeconomic privilege rather than intellectual merit. Over time, this dynamic may erode trust in the peer review process and in the broader institutions of scholarly communication. If stakeholders, including researchers, policymakers, journalists, and the public, begin to perceive that publication speed is driven by financial leverage rather than by the merit and significance of the research, the legitimacy of the scientific record may be compromised (Resnik, 1998). The consequences of such an erosion of trust are particularly grave in fields with direct societal implications, such as medicine, public health, environmental science, and public policy, where the credibility and timeliness of research findings can influence decisions that affect the lives and well-being of millions. In 2023 alone, over 10,000 research papers were retracted globally, a record figure that has been attributed in part to the intensifying pressures of the publish-or-perish culture and its distortive effects on research integrity (Van Noorden, 2023). Such developments underscore the urgent need for systemic reforms that decouple the evaluation of research quality from the speed and financial capacity with which it is published.

The institutionalisation of fast-track publishing also carries significant implications for patterns of international collaboration and mentorship within the global academic community. Early-career researchers in resource-limited settings who are unable to afford expedited publication may find that their work is consistently delayed by protracted standard review processes, resulting in reduced visibility, fewer citations, and diminished opportunities for networking and collaboration with colleagues in more privileged academic contexts. This temporal disadvantage can make it harder for researchers from underfunded institutions to attract international collaborators, to secure invitations to high-profile conferences and workshops, and to participate in the multinational research consortia that are increasingly central to the organisation of scientific inquiry in many disciplines. The result is a reinforcing cycle of marginalisation in which researchers outside the well-funded centres of global scholarship struggle to gain the visibility needed to participate in the networks through which academic influence, funding, and career opportunities are distributed (Mboa Nkoudou, 2020). For doctoral students and postdoctoral scholars, whose early publication records are critical to establishing their professional identities and securing permanent positions, the inability to access fast-track services can have career-defining consequences that extend far beyond the immediate delay in a single publication.

The social implications of fast-track publishing extend into the domain of mentorship and supervisory relationships, which are foundational to the reproduction of academic knowledge and the professional development of the next generation of researchers.

In academic environments where the pressure to publish quickly is especially acute, supervisors may be incentivised to steer their students toward research strategies that prioritise rapid publication over intellectual depth or methodological innovation. The availability of fast-track services adds a financial dimension to this dynamic: supervisors who encourage or expect their students to pay for expedited review may inadvertently, or, in some cases, deliberately, reinforce a model of mentorship in which the relationship between senior and junior scholars is structured around instrumental considerations of output and visibility rather than around the cultivation of scholarly independence, critical thinking, and long-term intellectual development (Cohen & Baruch, 2022). This instrumentalisation of the mentorship

relationship is not only ethically problematic in its own right but also risks producing a generation of scholars for whom the norms of academic practice are shaped by the logic of market competition rather than by the traditions of collegial inquiry and shared intellectual commitment that have historically sustained the scientific enterprise.

In sum, the social and institutional impacts of fast-track review services extend well beyond the experiences of individual researchers to shape the structural conditions of global academia. By introducing a financial variable into the speed at which scholarly knowledge is disseminated and recognised, these services interact with and amplify existing inequalities in funding, institutional support, and geographic location. They intensify the pressures of publish-or-perish culture, contribute to the concentration of scholarly influence among well-resourced researchers and institutions, undermine trust in the fairness and integrity of the peer review system, and distort the patterns of collaboration, mentorship, and knowledge production that sustain the academic enterprise. Taken together with the economic and ethical analyses presented in the preceding sections, these social and institutional dimensions reveal a publishing system in which the commercialisation of speed functions as a structural mechanism of inequality, one that demands critical scrutiny and, ultimately, systemic reform.

6. Conclusions

The fast-track review model reveals a critical tension at the heart of contemporary academic publishing: the need for timely dissemination of research on the one hand, and the obligation to preserve fairness, integrity, and equal opportunity on the other. While accelerated review may appear to offer a practical response to long publication delays, its organisation as a paid premium service transforms time itself into a purchasable academic advantage. This development is not a minor procedural adjustment but a structural shift in the conditions under which scholarly knowledge becomes visible, recognised, and rewarded.

The central conclusion of this paper is that fast-track review fees risk deepening existing inequalities in academic publishing by linking publication speed to financial capacity. Researchers working in well-funded universities, grant-rich environments, or wealthy national systems are better positioned to absorb such costs, while scholars in underfunded institutions, low- and middle-income countries, and financially constrained academic systems face substantial barriers. For early-career researchers, doctoral candidates, postdoctoral scholars, and academics without institutional support, these fees may be not simply inconvenient but exclusionary. The result is a two-tier publishing environment in which equally valuable research may travel through the academic system at different speeds depending on the economic re-sources available to its authors.

This inequality has consequences that extend beyond individual careers. Earlier publication can influence citation accumulation, grant competitiveness, promotion prospects, and institutional visibility. When speed is monetised, academic recognition becomes partly shaped by purchasing power rather than scholarly quality alone. Such a system weakens the meritocratic ideals that peer review is expected to uphold and risks eroding trust in the fairness of editorial processes. Even if fast-track review does not formally guarantee acceptance, it creates unequal access to one of the most valuable resources in academic life – time.

The ethical implications are equally serious. Paid acceleration may intensify pressures within already competitive academic cultures, especially where publication output is tied to employment, promotion, funding, or doctoral completion. In such contexts, junior researchers may feel compelled to pay for expedited services, either to satisfy institutional expectations or to respond to direct or indirect pressure from supervisors and collaborators. This raises important concerns about academic responsibility, mentorship, and the protection of vulnerable researchers from financial and professional coercion.

The paper therefore argues that the problem is not speed itself, but the commercialisation of speed. Scholarly communication would benefit from faster, more transparent, and better organised review systems, but these improvements should be available equitably and should not depend on authors' ability to pay. Possible responses include stronger transparency requirements for publishers, clear separation between payment and editorial judgement, fee-waiver mechanisms, institutional safeguards for early-career researchers, and greater support for non-commercial open access models. More broadly, universities, funders, and journals must reconsider evaluation systems that reward publication velocity without sufficient attention to the conditions under which that velocity is achieved.

Ultimately, fast-track review fees should be understood as part of a wider transformation in academic publishing, in which access, visibility, and recognition are increasingly mediated

by market mechanisms. If scholarly communication is to remain a public good, its procedures must be governed by principles of fairness, inclusivity, and intellectual merit rather than by the ability to purchase advantage. Reforming the fast-track review model is therefore not only a matter of publishing policy but also a necessary step toward a more just and trustworthy academic ecosystem.

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