Description

A bibliometric analysis of 10,558 original research articles published in five leading medical journals (NEJM, JAMA, Nature Medicine, The Lancet, and BMJ) between 2010 and 2019 found that corresponding-author affiliations came from only 77 countries, but just 32 countries accounted for 98.9% of all affiliations with the United States (48.2%) and the United Kingdom (15.9%) dominating the record. This concentration illustrates a clear geographic skew in high-impact medical publishing and raises questions about who sets global research agendas and who is heard.

This article examines evidence for regional and institutional bias in high-impact journals; explores mechanisms that produce and reproduce these disparities; discusses consequences for science and equity; and offers practical, evidence-informed steps that researchers, institutions, and journals can take to reduce the imbalance.

What the Evidence Shows

Large-scale bibliometric studies document uneven geographic representation across fields. An analysis of hundreds of thousands of health-science records found that while the proportion of publications with at least one author affiliated with a low- or middle-income country (LMIC) has increased, first- and last-author positions remain substantially underrepresented for many low-income countries. This indicates gains in inclusion at the contributor level but persistent gaps in leadership positions on papers about LMIC settings.Field-specific audits mirror these trends. In global emergency medicine and family medicine literature, authors affiliated with high-income countries (HICs) are disproportionately represented in first and senior (last) authorship roles, even when the research concerns LMIC contexts. Such patterns suggest that collaboration does not always translate into equitable credit or leadership.Editorial and decision-making power is similarly concentrated. Analyses of editorial boards and journal operations show overrepresentation of scholars from HICs and centers of institutional prestige, with many editorial boards dominated by members affiliated with a small set of nations and institutions. Recent audits of tropical medicine journals and studies of top medical journals document regional skew and a tendency for journals to publish research from their own country or region more frequently.

How These Disparities Arise

Language and Gatekeeping

English-language dominance and the practical realities of writing, reviewing, and editing in English create an initial barrier. Manuscripts from nonnative English-speaking authors may face harsher scrutiny for language quality, which can translate into desk rejections or greater revision burdens. The journal system's reliance on English therefore interacts with geography to disadvantage many researchers.

Editorial Composition and Networks

Editorial boards and reviewer pools frequently reflect the same institutional and geographic concentrations seen in publications. Editors and reviewers tend to recruit from familiar networks, increasing the likelihood that submissions from well-known institutions or countries receive preferential treatment. Studies show journals more commonly publish work from their home country and that authors preferentially cite domestic work, reinforcing a cycle of recognition and visibility.

Metric Incentives and Prestige Economies

Reliance on indicators such as the *impact factor* shapes incentives: institutions and authors pursue publications that maximize perceived prestige, favoring journals that already concentrate citations and visibility. The *impact factor* itself is calculated on citation counts across a short window, which can advantage fields and topics more visible in HIC contexts. These incentive structures elevate institutions with resources and established reputations, a pattern often called a "Matthew effect" in science.

Capacity and Resource Gaps

Research infrastructure, funding, and access to methodological support vary widely across countries and institutions. Limited grant funding, constrained laboratory or field capacity, and restricted access to statistical or editorial support hamper the ability of many researchers to produce work that meets the formal expectations of top-tier journals.

Why This Matters

Skewed editorial and publishing patterns have three important consequences. First, research agendas shift toward questions prioritized by well-represented institutions, leaving critical local problems understudied. Second, exclusion from high-visibility outlets reduces researchers' access to career-advancing recognition, grants, and collaborations. Third, the evidence base that informs policy and practice can become less applicable to underrepresented settings, undermining global equity in science and health. The combined effect is a self-reinforcing system that preserves existing power centers in knowledge production.

Practical Steps for Researchers, Institutions, and Journals

Researchers (Early-Career and Experienced)

- Prioritize equitable collaboration. Negotiate authorship, leadership, and data-sharing plans at project outset to ensure local researchers have opportunities for first and senior authorship whenever appropriate.
- Strengthen manuscript readiness. Use language and editorial support to address presentation-related barriers. Consider preprints to accelerate dissemination and to document findings prior to formal peer review.
- Choose journals strategically. Examine a journal's editorial board, peer-review policies, and regional publishing patterns before submission. Where possible, prefer journals with transparent diversity or inclusion statements. Enago's journal selection assistance can help identify journals that match scope and objectives while considering acceptance likelihood and indexing.

Institutions and Administrators

- Reward substantive contributions beyond JIF. Reform promotion and hiring criteria to value societal impact, capacity building, policy influence, and collaborative leadership not only publications in high-impact journals.
- Invest in capacity. Fund writing workshops, statistical and methodological support, and mentorship programs that prepare researchers to compete on an even footing for top-tier outlets. Institutional partnerships that include reciprocal training and infrastructure support can reduce dependence on external HIC partners.
- Support open science and regional dissemination. Encourage publication in reputable regional journals and repositories, and recognize these outputs in performance evaluations.

Journals and Publishers

- Diversify editorial leadership and reviewer pools. Recruit editors and editorial board members from underrepresented regions and institutions, and publish metrics on board composition to ensure transparency. Recent analyses call for explicit DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) strategies for editorial recruitment.
- Mitigate language bias. Offer language-editing support options and accept submissions in multiple languages where feasible; consider formal pathways for language improvement rather than immediate desk rejection.
- Adopt bias-resistant peer review. Implement double-anonymized review where practical, and provide reviewer training on equity and cultural competence. Monitor and report acceptance rates by country and institution to detect and address systemic patterns.
- Revisit metric-driven incentives. Balance citation-based metrics with measures of societal impact, reproducibility, and methodological rigor when promoting journals or shaping editorial priorities.

Progress Practices

Traditional publication bias usually refers to selective reporting of positive or significant results. Geographic and institutional bias are broader structural phenomena: they govern access to editorial influence, shape which research questions are prioritized, and determine whose voices appear in the most visible venues. Addressing these disparities therefore requires systemic change across editorial practice, evaluation criteria, and resource allocation.

Some journals have begun to publish audits of editorial and authorship diversity, and publishers are experimenting with regional editors and mentorship schemes to support authors from LMICs. Audits that quantify domestic preference and Anglocentric dominance and make those results public can drive corrective action by revealing where disparities are largest. Regular monitoring, public reporting, and concrete targets for editorial diversity are practical, measurable steps journals can adopt.

Common Misconceptions

- Do not conflate “lower visibility” with “lower quality.” Many high-quality studies from underrepresented settings fail to reach top journals for structural, not scientific, reasons.
- Avoid tokenism. Genuine inclusion requires shifting decision-making power not merely adding a small number of board members from diverse regions.
- Track progress. Institutions and journals should collect and publish disaggregated metrics (by country, institution type, and language) to evaluate whether reforms are working.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Geographic and institutional disparities in high-impact journals are not isolated faults but systemic features of the current scholarly ecosystem. Evidence from large bibliometric audits and editorial board studies shows a persistent concentration of publication and decision-making power in a small set of countries and institutions. Addressing these disparities requires coordinated action: researchers and institutions should negotiate equitable collaborations and invest in capacity; journals and publishers should diversify editorial leadership, reduce language-based gatekeeping, and adopt bias-resistant review practices; and funders should support infrastructure that enables researchers worldwide to lead work relevant to their contexts.

For authors seeking practical help to navigate these structural barriers, targeted support can reduce nonscientific causes of rejection. Consider professional academic editing services to improve clarity and presentation. These services can help level the playing field for authors whose work deserves broader visibility.

Category

1. Reporting Research

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