

The Future of Bioethics Publishing

Ethical Risks and Infrastructural Power



Giovanni Spitale
giovanni.spitale@ibme.uzh.ch
UZH, IBME Minion



Nikola Biller-Andorno
biller-andorno@ibme.uzh.ch
UZH, IBME Director



**The way we publish shapes what we know
and whose voices are heard.**

**In bioethics, discourse is the method —
so the infrastructure of discourse is an ethical object.**



The comforting story

- Open Access freed knowledge from paywalls
- Funders mandate it, institutions fund it — equity advances
- Authorship guidelines (ICMJE, COPE) protect credit
- Publication-ethics frameworks safeguard integrity
- Peer review guards quality
- Metrics give us objective measures of merit
- And bioethics, of all fields, gets ethics right. *Right?*



CiteScore 2025	92.4
SJR 2025	14.821
SNIP 2025	27.703



Recommendation on Open Science

Preamble

The General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), meeting in Paris, from 9 to 24 November 2021, at its 41st session,

Recognizing the urgency of addressing complex and interconnected environmental, social and economic challenges for the people and the planet, including poverty, health issues, access to education, rising inequalities and disparities of opportunity, increasing science, technology and innovation gaps, natural resource depletion, loss of biodiversity, land degradation, climate change, natural and human-made disasters, spiralling conflicts and related humanitarian crises,

Acknowledging the vital importance of science, technology and innovation (STI) to respond to these challenges by providing solutions to improve human well-being, advance environmental sustainability and respect for the planet's biological and cultural diversity, foster sustainable social and economic development and promote democracy and peace,

Also acknowledging the opportunities and the potential provided by the expansion of information and communication technologies and global interconnectedness to accelerate human progress and foster knowledge societies and *highlighting* the importance of narrowing the STI and digital gaps existing between and within countries and regions,

Noting the transformative potential of open science for reducing the existing inequalities in STI and accelerating progress towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and beyond, particularly in Africa, least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries (LLDCs), and small island developing States (SIDS),

Mindful of UNESCO's global priorities, namely gender equality and Africa, and the need to mainstream all these aspects in open science policies and practices with a view to addressing the root causes of inequalities and providing effective solutions to that end,

Considering that more open, transparent, collaborative and inclusive scientific practices, coupled with more accessible and verifiable scientific knowledge subject to scrutiny and critique, is a more efficient enterprise that improves the quality, reproducibility and impact of science, and thereby the reliability of the evidence needed for robust decision-making and policy and increased trust in science,

Also noting that the global COVID-19 health crisis has proven worldwide the urgency of and need for fostering equitable access to scientific information, facilitating the sharing of scientific knowledge, data and information, enhancing scientific collaboration and science- and knowledge-based decision making to respond to global emergencies and increase the resilience of societies,

Committed to leaving no one behind with regard to access to science and benefits from scientific progress by ensuring that the scientific knowledge, data, methods and processes needed to respond to present and future global health and other crises are openly available for all countries, in

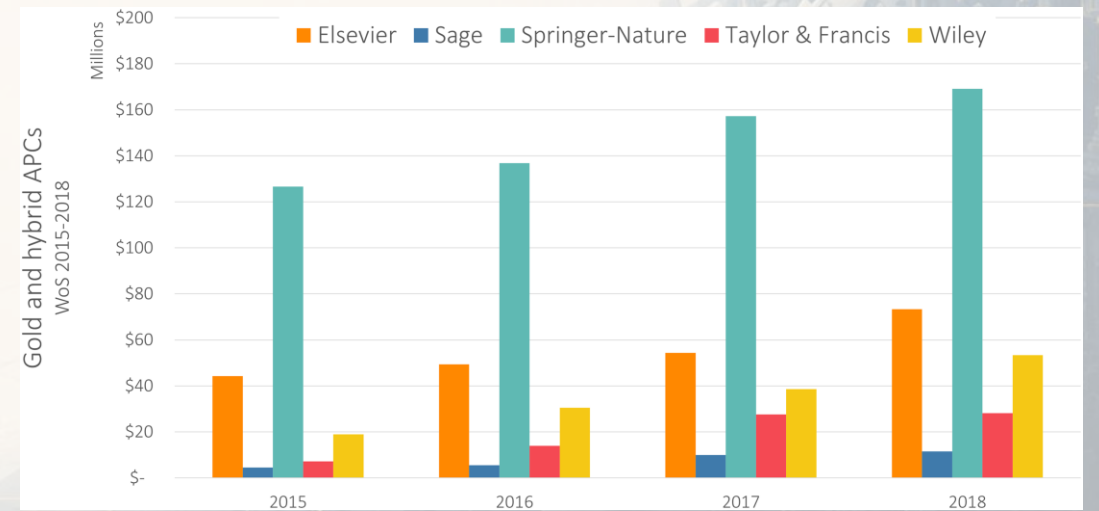
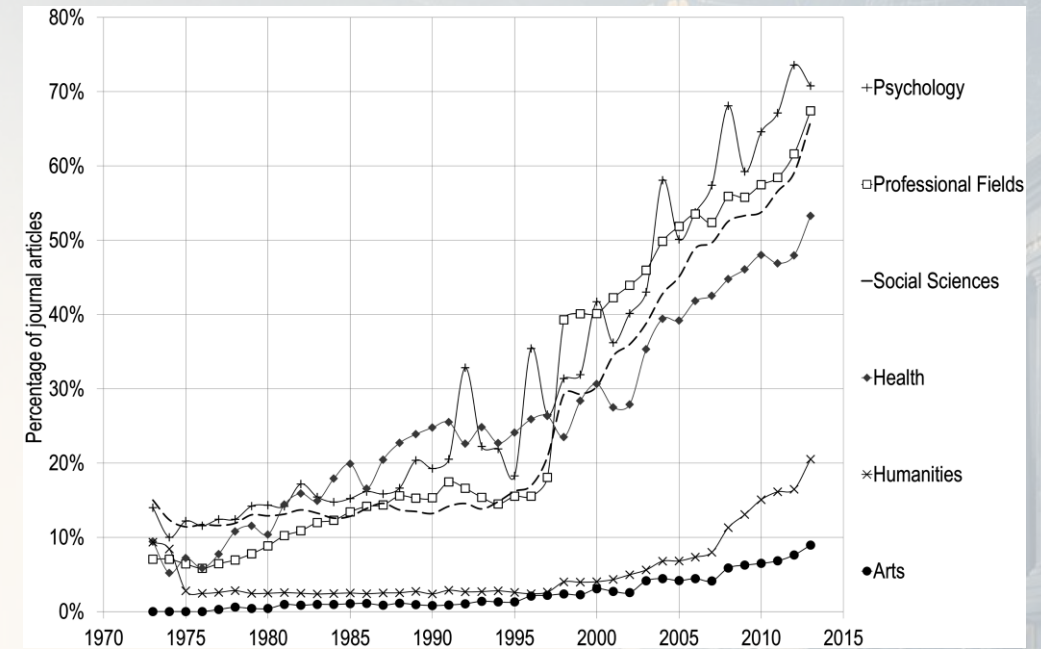
Disturbances

The background is a dark, atmospheric illustration. On the left, there are stacks of books and some papers scattered around. In the center, a path leads towards a glowing archway in the distance. On the right, there are large gears and a complex network of nodes and lines, suggesting a technical or digital theme. The overall color palette is dark blue and black, with some golden highlights from the glowing archway and network nodes.

Disturbance 1: the oligopoly

Open-access publishing might be better termed open-access reading, because now the publishing part is only open to those who can pay (Klugman 2024).

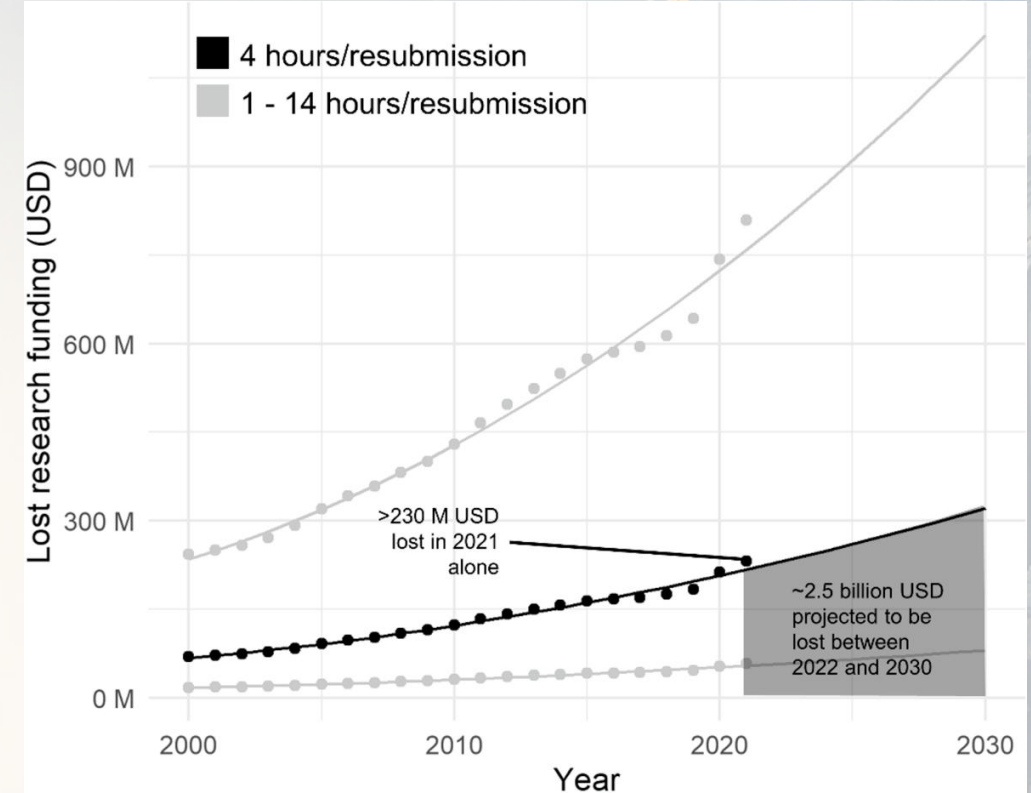
- Five publishers control >50% of all indexed articles (Elsevier · Springer Nature · Wiley · Taylor & Francis · Sage) (Larivière et al. 2015)
- APCs moved the barrier from reader to author
- \$1.06 billion in APCs to the big five, 2015–2018 (Butler et al. 2023)
- Profit margins ~37% — "monetized unpaid labor" (Larivière et al. 2015)



Disturbance 2: time

>100 million hours of unpaid peer review in 2020 — over 15,000 years of expert labor (Aczel et al. 2021)

- ≈ \$230 million of researchers' working time was lost in 2021 alone ... up to \$2.5 billion by 2030 (Clotworthy et al. 2023).
- Acceptance is at its slowest pace since 2011 — and still slowing (Petrou 2025)



Disturbance 3: acceleration

As AI lowers the friction of text production, writing may become faster than reading, driving a surge in submissions while human attention to the literature — the ultimate scarce resource — remains fixed or even declines.
AI linked to explosion of low-quality biomedical research papers (Naddaf 2025)

4. Strengthen the argument about why bioethicists have an obligation to speak up (conditions, equal application):

- **Response:** The section **The Risk to the Field of Bioethics: A Hypocritical or Unbalanced Discourse?** has been significantly strengthened. It now includes a new paragraph explicitly discussing that the "moral obligation applies to all bioethicists, though the degree of complicity and the specific actions required may vary depending on their context and proximity to the issues." Examples are provided for bioethicists in different geopolitical positions. The overall argument for why silence is complicity is also reinforced.

These comprehensive revisions aim to address all feedback points, making the manuscript more robust, clear, and well-supported. The modified version in the canvas reflects all these changes.

Your theoretical contribution around the concept of an "insidious loop" or the mutual reinforcement of divergent framings could be developed more explicitly. Wait, actually I need to check the manuscript again because I might be confusing this with the previous manuscript about solar energy. Let me reread. Actually, this manuscript doesn't use the term "insidious loop" - that was the previous manuscript. This manuscript's theoretical contribution is about how divergent framings of freedom across discourse spheres contribute to polarization and democratic weakness. This contribution is present but could be articulated more clearly and forcefully. You make the argument that "without shared definitions, and with discussions devolved into competing narratives rather than constructive debates, democratic resilience is weakened," but this claim would benefit from more theoretical development. Drawing on scholarship in political communication, deliberative democracy theory, or linguistic anthropology could help you develop a more robust theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between semantic divergence and political polarization.

Disturbance 4: value extraction, defined

The use of access to APC coverage as leverage to obtain authorship without proportional intellectual contribution (Spitale, Germani & Biller-Andorno 2026).

Vulnerables: early-career · less-resourced institutions · Global South — "support" as coercion

Von: [REDACTED]
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Betreff: Co-author and Funding collaboration

Hello,

Please can you send me your current draft manuscripts, if I can contribute as a co-author, if you are currently developing any new publications?

My research is closely related to your recent publications.

Funding available for APC Journal charges

If I am a corresponding author of our co-authored paper, I have funding available to pay journal APC costs for our co-authored publications. This will boost our collaboration achieving highest impact journals:

1. If the journal is fully open access (OA), I have funding to fully pay the APC.
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CORRESPONDENCE | 10 March 2026

The ethical risks of open-access agreements being used for authorship leverage

By [Giovanni Spitale](#), [Federico Germani](#) & [Nikola Biller-Andorno](#)



Transformative agreements – contracts between institutions and publishers that help to fund open-access (OA) systems – are widely presented as tools to advance equity in scientific publishing. But they can introduce an integrity risk: access to publishing could be used as academic leverage.

For example, researchers at well-resourced institutions that are part of transformative agreements could offer to pay the processing charge for an article by colleagues with less funding in exchange for being a corresponding author.

Research Article

The phenomenon of 'value extraction'

[Giovanni Spitale](#), [Federico Germani](#) & [Nikola Biller-Andorno](#)

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ABSTRACT

Background

Open Access (OA) agreements were introduced to remove financial barriers to scientific dissemination and promote equity in knowledge access. As Article Processing Charges (APCs) have shifted from individual researchers to institutions, access to OA publishing has become an institutional asset, unevenly distributed across institutions, countries, and career stages.

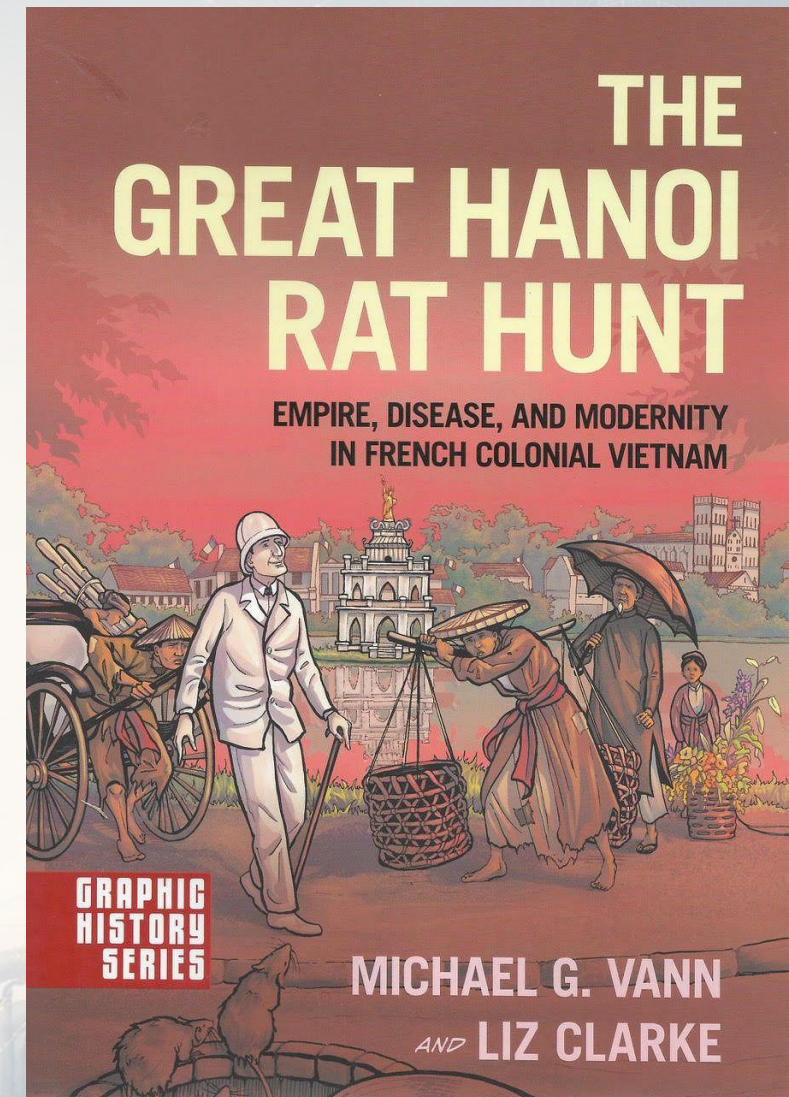
The common root: we reward counting

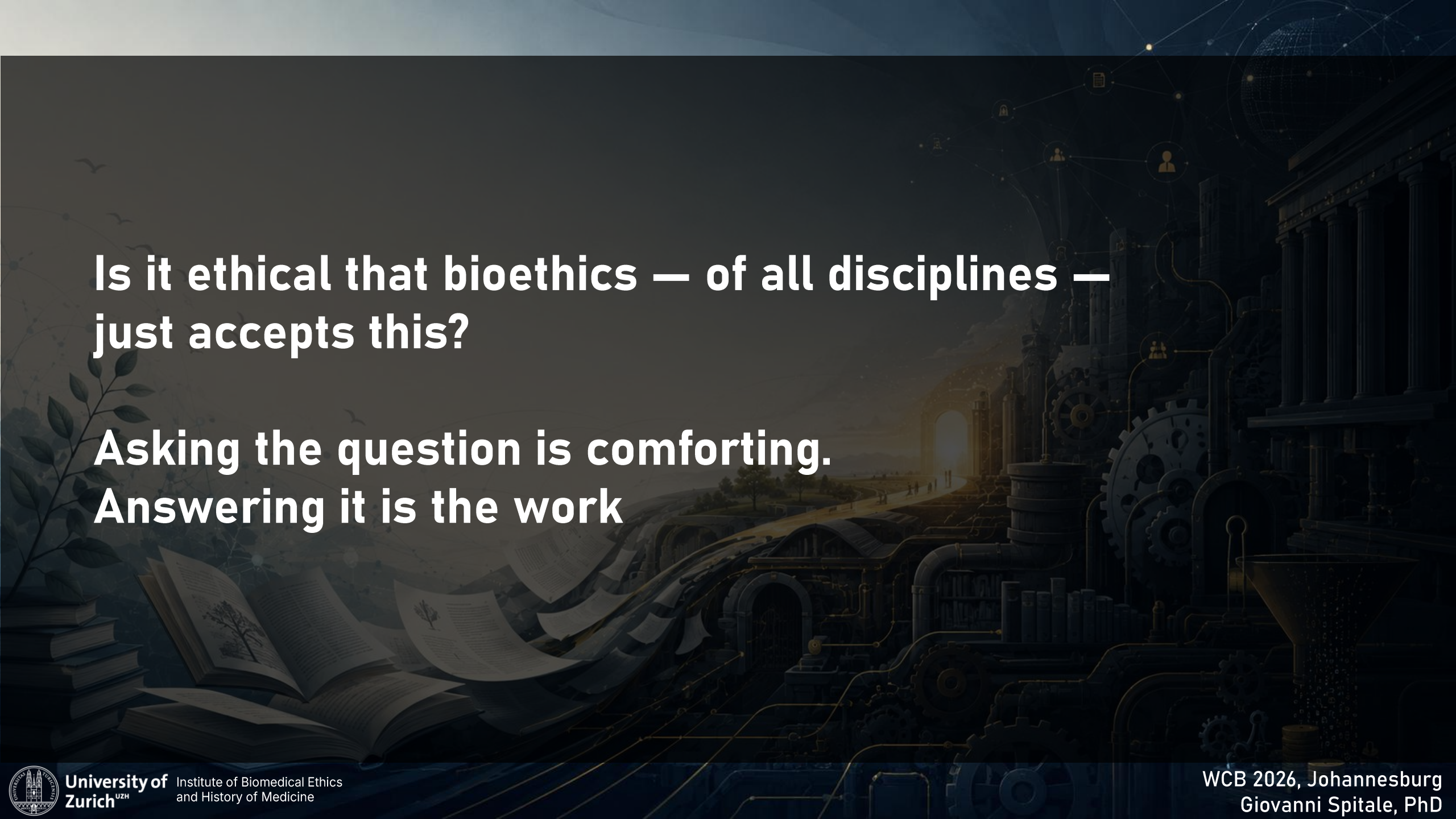
We don't have a publishing problem wearing an evaluation costume. We have an evaluation problem wearing a publishing costume.

Those who control publishing infrastructure can position themselves as indispensable intermediaries between intellectual labor and metric recognition

Metrics "used as proxies for scholarly merit, despite longstanding critiques." (Leiden Manifesto, 2015)

"When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure" (Strathern 1997, after Goodhart).





**Is it ethical that bioethics — of all disciplines —
just accepts this?**

**Asking the question is comforting.
Answering it is the work**



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The Future of Bioethics Publishing: Principles, Platforms, and Practices

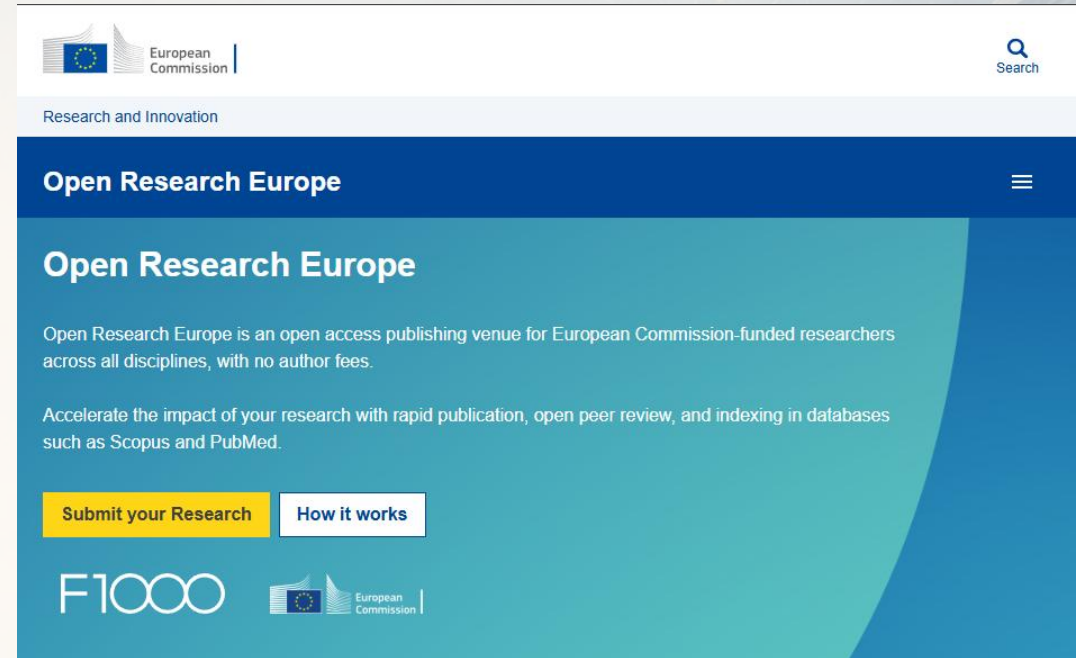
Spitale, Giovanni¹ ; Germani, Federico¹ ; Fadda, Marta^{2,3} Rivas Velarde, Minerva⁴ ; Trachsel, Manuel⁵ ; Biller-Andorno, Nikola¹ [Show affiliations](#)

The way we publish shapes what we know and whose voices are heard. In bioethics, where discourse itself is a fundamental method, publishing practices must reflect core ethical commitments. This paper outlines a vision for the future of bioethics publishing rooted in three principles: true open access, a not-for-profit structure, and inclusive discourse. In this paper, we explore innovative solutions to ongoing challenges, such as the peer review crisis, editorial invisibility, and the dominance of monolithic knowledge models. We advocate for community-owned journals that treat publishing as a collective, reflexive, and discursive practice. The future of bioethics requires publishing models that are as ethically sound as the work they aim to disseminate.

Principle 1: True OA

Diamond (true) OA: a community-driven, non-commercial model of scholarly publishing that removes financial barriers for authors and readers, funded by consortia, libraries, grants. (UNESCO 2023).

- Gold OA just moves the barrier reader → author. True OA removes both.
- Not utopian: already running for 20+ years: SciELO · Redalyc · Open Library of Humanities
- Median cost ~ \$208 / article (Becerril et al. 2021)
- Open Research Europe: ethically solid but, for now, a walled garden
- Bioethics Open Research (F1000): open, post-publication peer review but APC-funded, on commercial infrastructure.
- Access to knowledge is a human right (UDHR 1948; UNESCO 2023)



Principle 2: Not-for-profit

The current for profit system equals to "unbridled corporate predation on captive academic prey" (Shankar Raman 2021). We should "boycott the commercial, for-profit publishers and ... develop high-quality, nonprofit outlets" (Klugman 2024).

On these grounds:

- Knowledge is a public good — non-rivalrous. Paywalls turn it into a club good.
- Commercial margins ~30–40% = "the monetized unpaid labor of researchers" (Larivière et al. 2015)
- Non-profit = full financial transparency; any surplus reinvested in the community (junior awards, reviewer recognition, tools)
- The structural backbone: it makes true *OA affordable* and editorial ethics *non-negotiable*

Principle 3: beyond monolithic knowledge

Ethics is a conversation, not a (just) canon. Publication should mark the start of a conversation, not its conclusion.

Inclusive discourse — pluralize the forms:

- Beyond rigid IMRaD: dialogues, reflective narratives, short provocations, multimedia
- Open peer commentary (AJOB model): target article + commentaries + author replies
- Living layers: linked webinars, collaborative annotation Multilingual submissions, AI-assisted (human-checked)


Open peer review:

- Reports + reviewer identities published → accountability + credit
- Credit via ORCID / Publons; reviewer consortia & reciprocal review
- 83% of researchers say more recognition would improve peer review (Murphy & Thomas 2025)

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ? x ?

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Version 1 09 May 26	? view	x view	? view

1. **Kokil Jaidka**, National University of Singapore, Singapore, Lower Kent Ridge Rd, Singapore
2. **Giovanni Spitale** , IBME, Universitat Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland
3. **Marius Dragomir**, University of Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela, Spain

Comments on this article

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We can start this.

Money is the easy part.



The easy part, and the hard part

THE EASY PART (costs & infrastructure):

- Median cost ~ \$208 / article; >60% of diamond journals run on <\$10,000/year (OA Diamond Journals Study, 1,619 journals — Becerril 2021)
- A bioethics journal of 30–50 articles/yr → \$15–25k/year = APCs of 5/10 Gold OA papers
- Infrastructure already exists: OJS / PKP, university hosting (UZH HOPE)

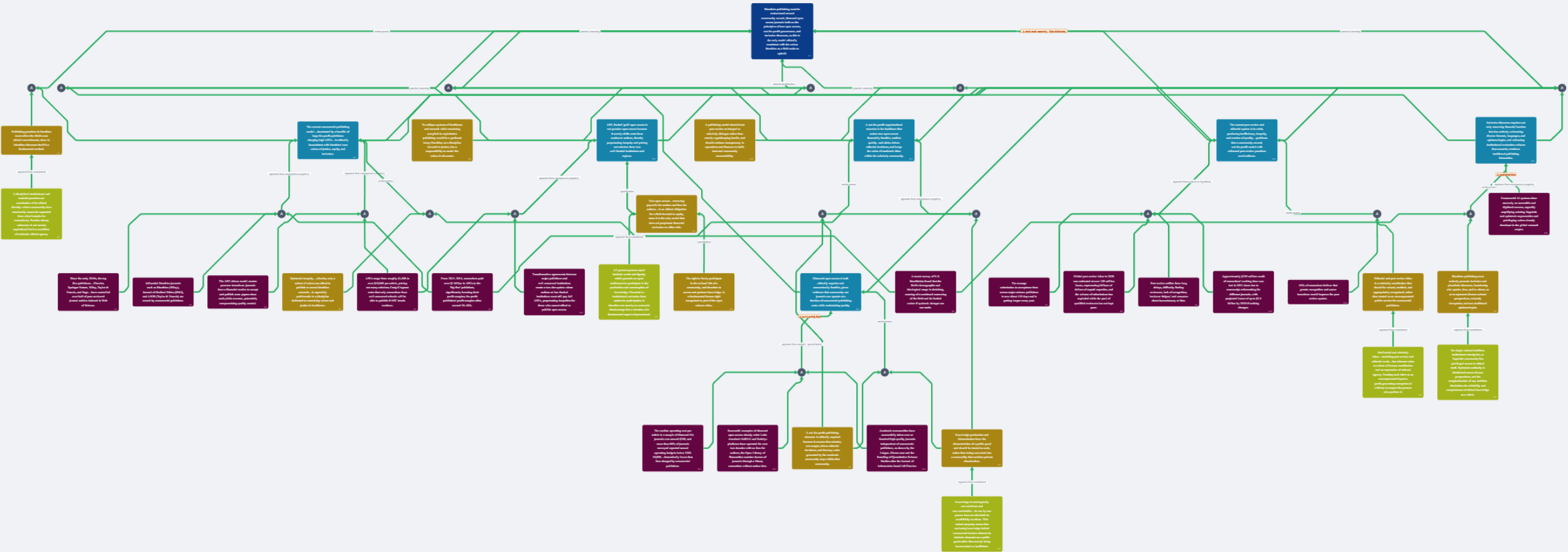
THE HARD PART (evaluation):

- No publishing reform survives a system that still rewards counting rat tails
- Decouple infrastructural access from academic credit (see: value extraction)
- Reform assessment: DORA, narrative evaluation, CRediT contribution statements

It's going to be disturbing (a lot) before it gets comforting.

**and "comforting" here means:
a system we no longer have to apologize for**





https://automap.borant.eu/share/JNFA8_VGjNiKEhJ-20Rme-eWecCHWSvH

Bioethics commons – co-dream with us

Imagine a journal built on the principles we just discussed, plus the infrastructure to keep the conversation going:

- open tools to play with — live prototypes: ArguMap · Debate-A-Bot · TopicTracker (see: <https://borant.eu/tools/>)
- ArguMap at scale: map arguments across one paper, a topic, a whole archive; pull every paper making a given argument, ...
- Transparent, explainable, and responsible AI-workflows
- Shared tutorials, linked webinars, collaborative annotation
- ... co-dream the rest with us

Goodbye, and thanks for all the fish!



Giovanni Spitale

giovanni.spitale@ibme.uzh.ch

UZH, IBME Minion



Nikola Biller-Andorno

biller-andorno@ibme.uzh.ch

UZH, IBME Director



Download the slides

WCB 2026, Johannesburg
Giovanni Spitale, PhD

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Tools and infrastructure

OJS / PKP — Open Journal Systems, Public Knowledge Project. <https://pkp.sfu.ca/software/ojs/>
UZH HOPE — Hauptbibliothek Open Publishing Environment, University of Zurich. <https://www.hope.uzh.ch/>
Open Research Europe — European Commission. <https://open-research-europe.ec.europa.eu/>
ArguMap: <https://argumap.borant.eu/login>
TopicTracker: <https://topictracker.borant.eu/>