An African Platform for African Research

with
Joy Owango & Johanna Havemann

For podcast release
Monday, November 15, 2021

KENNEALLY: Nearly half a century ago, Jean-Jacques Muyembe returned to his native Congo after earning a PhD in microbiology in Belgium. Working as a field epidemiologist, Dr. Muyembe courageously collected blood samples for people with a puzzling and dangerous new infectious disease, then sent them abroad for analysis because he lacked the proper equipment.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content. The scientists who received Dr. Muyembe's blood samples eventually got credit for discovering Ebola. Over the following decades, the Congolese scientist pioneered various Ebola treatments, and he helped to build the Congo National Institute for Biomedical Research. Today, Dr. Muyembe no longer sends blood samples abroad. Foreign researchers must come to him in Kinshasa.

According to a 2018 World Health Organization analysis, African countries in 2016 received only 0.65% of global research funding, yet research by Elsevier has shown that Africa has by far the strongest-growing scientific production in the world and that the number of African authors is growing at an equally astounding rate.

In October, TCC Africa, based at the University of Nairobi, Kenya, and the pan-African open access portal AfricArXiv agreed to foster a long-term strategic and sustainable approach to building and managing an international scholarly community that will enrich the visibility of African research. Joy Owango is founding director of TCC Africa and serves on the AfricArXiv board of directors. She joins me now from Nairobi. Welcome to the program, Joy.

OWANGO: Thank you so much, Christopher. Thank you for having me.

KENNEALLY: Well, we appreciate you taking the time to join us, Joy Owango. Tell us first how this new partnership will work. Your ambition, it seems, is no less than to build a continental ecosystem for African researchers and scholars.

OWANGO: Oh, wow. I must say to begin with, it is scary, it is ambitious, but it is necessary. What we are doing with AfricArXiv is AfricArXiv originally was a community-led organization. It did not have any legal standing. And in order for the publishing platform to start engaging with potential partners and have a long-term, sustainable plan, we came in as a partner to offer the legal standing and the financial standing in terms of setting up a financial and legal framework for them. So from a legal and financial perspective, it is now registered through TCC Africa in Kenya. So basically, it is officially African, even though it is still a community-based platform.

What is the plan for AfricArXiv? Increasing the visibility of African research. We do not believe in reinventing the wheel. There are already existing repositories that exist, and what we've done is that we've partnered with them, and through those repositories, we've created a gateway in which African research can be visible – can be much more visible.

This is a platform by Africans, for Africans, on African research. It can't get better than that. And it's multidisciplinary in nature, so any research area that any African researcher takes part in can put their work in AfricArXiv. Any non-African who is doing research on or about Africa can put their work in the platform as well.

KENNEALLY: So your objectives are discoverability, visibility, but also sustainability. Talk about why sustainability is so important when it comes to this initiative.

OWANGO: You know, that is the hardest question for anyone who is running an archive, mainly because if your archive is in partnership with a publisher, then you have the sustainable aspect of it. So it is associated with a publisher, like the bioRxiv or the medRxiv, or the one which is by the NIH, so it is supported by the NIH funding body. But I always keep on asking the hard question – how can an archive survive without that support? It is so easy to say let's look for funding. And we conveniently forget which part of the world we come from, whereby we are vulnerable to the politics of the global north. When they change their mandate, we end up suffering.

Funding is good. Yes, we acknowledge it and appreciate it. But it's not necessarily sustainable. So it's an issue of looking long term, and that is where you build an academic community in Africa, whether it's with universities or research institutions, to be part of this process. That's why we are saying it is for Africans, by Africans. So we each contribute the little that we have so that we can sustain this platform. Because at the end of the day, what we are doing is just not putting in your data in one platform. We are also translating research that is done in indigenous language – the African Union languages – so that the world can see the work that is coming out of the continent.

There's so much sitting in panels that we can do. We need to act. We need to act. And that is what we are doing. We just dove in and said, OK, you dive in. The goal is going to be a net to catch you. So let's begin working. And then with that, then there's the financial bit. So how do we work together? Whatever little that you have and whatever little that we have, we pool it together to support that platform. That is the long-term approach we are looking at in terms of sustaining the platform.

KENNEALLY: You say that there's a need for this. There's a demand for this. There's a will to act. And it strikes me that what's important about the initiative is that this is collective activity. This is across all of Africa that this is taking place.

OWANGO: Absolutely. We have received submissions from 33 out of the 54 African countries. As I was saying when I began the interview – I said, oh, it's scary, but it's also exciting. We have received 33 and 15 from outside Africa. These are researchers from outside Africa doing research on Africa. That says a lot.

Also, we are seeing some of the research areas that Africa is well known for being highlighted in the platform, and that is what we are talking about. We are in a situation whereby we need to influence the narrative. Those words ring true to me, because they come from Professor Ahmed Bawa. He is the current CEO of the South African Association of Universities (sic). He keeps on saying we cannot continue complaining. We need to influence change. That is what we want to do. We cannot sit down in panels. We need to influence change and show that this is what we are capable of doing and then also seek partnerships. We already are seeking partnerships, even in the global north, to show them that this is a platform that is capable of being sustainable through a community-led partnership and a commitment from the partners who joined into making sure that their research is visible.

KENNEALLY: Well, that's the vision, Joy Owango. But talk about the current state of African science and research. Help us understand better what the conditions are and what factors contribute to the challenges.

OWANGO: Some of the challenges in African research are marred by poor infrastructure or lack of infrastructure, depending on the country you are in. Also, when you're looking at open science, limited understanding on what open science entails. It is not a researcher's agenda. It is not a librarian's agenda. It's a higher education agenda. It's not a funder's agenda. We bring all of them together, and we speak one voice in understanding how open science works in supporting our research visibility and also improving our research output.

KENNEALLY: So altogether, what this effort is about is to create a critical mass of scientists and research environments across Africa. Certainly, a key piece of that is going to be

something you've been tackling at TCC Africa for many years now, which is education and mentorship.

OWANGO: Absolutely. Education and mentorship, especially when it comes to producing good-quality research outputs, is important. I always tell partners that when the ministry of education is looking at the research output that comes out of the country, they just don't look at those that are funded. They look at everyone. So what does that mean? It means that we need to democratize the process – make sure that people have easier access to some of these resources. They have a better understanding of scholarly communication processes, from research idea to publishing, and what is available to them. Because without that, it becomes a challenge getting into this whole animal which is the developments in academic publishing, and there's always something new when it comes to academic publishing.

We want a situation whereby early-career researchers are at par with the developments that are happening, and open science is giving us that opportunity. And AfricArXiv is actually giving us that opportunity, because researchers can now see that like in the case of Kenya, where you must publish before you graduate, they do not have to be stressed about their journal selection strategy, because they can put it in a preprint repository. It starts collecting citations and downloads as you're going through your journal selection strategy – smart journal selection strategy. So it's a win-win for everyone, and that is what we are really trying to advocate for.

KENNEALLY: Joy Owango, founding director of TCC Africa, thank you so much for speaking with me today.

OWANGO: Thank you so much, Chris.

KENNEALLY: With me now on the line from Berlin is Dr. Johanna Havemann, co-founder and executive director for AfricArXiv. Welcome to the program.

HAVEMANN: Hi, Chris. Thanks for having me.

KENNEALLY: Thank you for joining us. We've been chatting with Joy Owango about the partnership between TCC Africa and AfricArXiv, and I'd like to learn from you a bit more about AfricArXiv. You were involved in the launch in June of 2018. What are some key accomplishments to date?

HAVEMANN: What we provide, and that was the vision from the onset, is to have ready to be used digital infrastructure for African scholars, because there is a narrative – and also a reality – about African scholarship not being visible on a global, so to say, or the Western

scholarly community and in scholarly communication, meaning published articles. And knowing that the infrastructure is there, available to be used, we created this platform to basically pitch it to African scholars and encourage them to use what's here to be used for their own benefit.

KENNEALLY: Right. As you connect the dots, the researchers contribute their work. What disciplines are especially prominent, or what countries are leading contributors?

HAVEMANN: Basically, we have submissions from 33 African countries by now. We also accept submissions from non-African scholars and those who do research in an African context or in African territory to make their work available to African scholars and to enable discussion and collaborations between the various stakeholders and parties and researchers.

In numbers, we have most submissions from social and behavioral studies or social studies and humanities, and then physical sciences, life sciences, medicine and health, education, and then the rest as well in lower percentages.

KENNEALLY: Your partnership with TCC Africa certainly is an ambitious, exciting new chapter, but tell us what you expect to see develop as a result. What's your timeline?

HAVEMANN: TCC Africa has been a very supportive advocate of our work, and we have already done work together informally, basically like people and organizations do in the ecosystem in a collaborative setting. Now, with this formal partnership announcement, we're here to basically leverage our activities and to also give AfricArXiv a home in Kenya that is, for starters, with TCC Africa to be seen and also to prove as a reliable partner for African stakeholders and institutions – the mechanics of everything to also be able to accept funds to have African-owned infrastructure, so to say, which is still connected and plugged into an international and globalized system.

KENNEALLY: I wonder if you can help explain how well prepared you think Africa is for leveraging the opportunities that open science, open access, open research present.

HAVEMANN: I would say Africa as a whole, as a continent, as a region is pretty well prepared. The benefits that open science practices bring to African scholarship are obvious. The bottlenecks and challenges are also omnipresent, with connectivity issues and missing or under-equipped digital infrastructure, but that's also changing as we speak. And what we're trying to achieve also through the partnership with TCC and other partners that we've already engaged with and that we continue to engage with, and also new partnerships we aim to build – we want to see which systems are in place today. How can we leverage those systems with the digital services that we have now opened the gateways

to, basically? And how can we move from there, developing an African scholarly ecosystem and infrastructure that serves the continent and is also in part, at least, governed and owned by African scholarly communities in all five regions of the continent?

KENNEALLY: So really, that's what it's about, then – the TCC Africa/AfricArXiv partnership is about changing paradigms. It's about changing the direction of travel when it comes to African research and African scholarly contributions.

HAVEMANN: I think so. And we're not the only ones in the ecosystem who are doing that. I think it also takes a lot of initiatives to pave the way to make sure that taken-for-granted paradigms are being questioned and rebuilt into new ones. Yeah, so it's exciting. It's also frustrating sometimes.

KENNEALLY: Tell me why it's frustrating.

HAVEMANN: I think in any setting, change is always too slow, or it seems too slow. But we also see the fruits of our work. Sometimes, it's frustrating, because we think, oh, we've done so much. Why are we still here? Or why isn't that changing faster? I mean, you can't shed off hundreds of years of colonialism in a decade or two. You just can't, because too much happened in the past.

Things are moving, and visibility has changed in the last three years drastically – not only because of our work, but because systems are being changed, and there is a global discussion on equity and decolonization, not only in Africa, but also in Latin America, southeast Asia. There's many colleagues in different parts of the world, including the West, who do what they can to work together and change the paradigm.

KENNEALLY: Dr. Johanna Havemann, co-founder and executive director for AfricArXiv, thank you for speaking with me today.

HAVEMANN: Thanks, Chris. It's been a pleasure.

KENNEALLY: Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts, and please do follow us on Twitter and Facebook.

I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for joining me. See you again soon on another Velocity of Content podcast episode from CCC.

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