



Interview with Nicola Jones, Springer Nature

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KENNEALLY: What's the lucky number for Springer Nature's SDG publishing program? The answer is 17, for 17 content hubs covering all 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Welcome to Velocity of Content. I'm Christopher Kenneally for CCC. The 17 SDG hubs bring together multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed research content from across Springer Nature's output of journals and books, including its flagship publication, *Nature*. The effort aims to connect policy and business professionals with the research that can provide the information and the evidence they need to resolve development challenges, from eliminating poverty and hunger to delivering quality education and economic growth.

Nicola Jones is head of publishing for the Springer Nature SDG program. Welcome to the program, Nicola.

JONES: Thank you very much, Chris. I'm very excited to be here.

KENNEALLY: We're delighted you could join us. Springer Nature is among many publishers around the globe who are signatories of the SDG Publishers Compact, which launched in 2020 in collaboration with the International Publishers Association. The compact commits publishers to accelerate progress to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The Springer Nature effort, though, stands out for its scope and ambition. Nearly 400,000 articles and chapters on SDG-related topics have been published since 2015. So why is an SDG publishing program so important to Springer Nature?

JONES: Well, first of all, thank you very much for saying that our effort stands out. We felt like this was the best way we could help to make a difference. So as you noted, lots of organizations are now showing up and saying that they support Sustainable Development Goals. Back in 2015 when they were formally adopted, we realized that actually, the topics that they set out to address, the challenges that they set out to address, are things that need to be informed by academic research, and high-quality academic research that can be trusted. As a publisher of that kind of research, we realized that actually we had quite an important role to play.

The other thing that was happening in 2015, which is a reason the program was created, was that that was when Springer Nature was created. It was the merger of Macmillan



Science and Education with Springer Science and Business Media. And at that time, as is the case across academia, we had lots of people working on similar topics, but from different disciplinary backgrounds or working on different product types. We saw the SDGs as a way to try to bring colleagues together across this brand-new, very large organization to help make a difference in the real world around something people could really get enthusiastic and excited about and help themselves realize how they were making a difference.

KENNEALLY: So then moving from bringing your colleagues together to reaching audiences, tell us about who is the various publics you're after here? Because there are researchers. There's many other potential audiences for this work.

JONES: Yeah, so the primary audience for us as a company is the same as the primary audience for our SDG publishing program. It's academics. It's the people who are actually conducting the research and publishing the research, in many cases with us. But we also believe – in fact, we know – that research on these kinds of topics needs to be implemented. So we intend that through the SDG publishing program, the research that addresses these global challenges will also find its way to the hands of practitioners – so they might be engineers or health care workers or people in business or, let's say, financial institutions, for example, or people in policy and government or people working for NGOs or international organizations.

What we want to do – one of the stated goals of the program is to take research that has the potential to solve global challenges and put it in the hands of people who are actually working to do that on the ground. So yeah, a lot of potential audiences, and a lot of challenges associated with reaching some of them.

KENNEALLY: We'll talk about some of that, Nicola Jones. But I suppose when it comes to science and challenges, there's none bigger right now than COVID-19. Certainly, the pandemic has raised awareness of groundbreaking science and moved it far beyond academic circles. In fact, science is now part of daily political debate. So how does a program like this, do you think, widen access to science?

JONES: I think it's about putting it into context. So I think it's about helping people to understand how science, and indeed, humanities and social science research, is addressing the kind of problems that are affecting everyday lives. COVID-19 has been that amazing example on a kind of accelerated timeframe than we've ever seen before, from the recognition and characterization of the disease, to development of treatments, to development of vaccines, to the rollout of these, to the kind of social measures that have been put in place to stop transmission. And it's not just in daily political debate. It's in everyday conversation between people who have nothing to do with politics or science.



And I think it's really helped people to understand how actually these very academic topics do have an effect on their lives. And we see the SDG program as kind of the widening out of that. There are other global problems besides health, besides COVID in specific, and academic research has an important role to play in addressing them.

KENNEALLY: An interesting piece of academic research is that we may think of journals first, but it goes far beyond that. And in 2021, for UNESCO's World Book and Copyright Day, Springer Nature created the hashtag #booksinspired. That was meant to emphasize how science books can stimulate ideas and creativity. So as a publisher, could you explain how research books complement your journals?

JONES: First of all, I do have to say, also humanities and social science research, because my colleagues who work in humanities and social science research, which make up a significant amount of our book publishing output, will never speak to me again if I don't say that to you. (laughter) And they're very important topics for addressing these issues.

The idea behind the SDG program is that people can publish research that affects the goals or that has the potential to impact the goals in whatever format is most appropriate to them. So we are the world's largest publisher of academic books, as well as being one of the world's largest publishers of academic journals, and we want to make clear that there is a format for your research to be published in. If you need more space, because you want to develop arguments in more depth, for example, book publishing formats are available. If you want to collect chapters together from people who are working on a particular project, and you don't want that to go through a journal publishing route, there are edited collections that you can publish.

We also know that book publishing may be more integral to the research landscape in certain disciplines rather than others. So again, thinking quite specifically about the humanities and the social sciences and how book publication – and monograph publication in particular – is still very important for those disciplines. One of the important reasons, as I mentioned at the beginning, about creating those connections between the disciplines is that we need to make sure that the outputs that we offer are inclusive of the formats preferred by people working in whichever environment is addressing the goal at that time.

KENNEALLY: Well, I certainly appreciate the correction, and it's an important point, of course. Humanities and social sciences – they contribute and are especially important to the UN SDGs. I'm thinking about the most recent of the 17 content hubs you created around education. There wouldn't be much there if it weren't for humanities and social sciences. So talk about that latest content hub. What will we find there about education?



JONES: So we actually have quite an interesting take on education. I think it's a little bit different to some other publishers. Because we publish research about education from our research division, but we also publish educational resources from our education division. So what you'll find on the hub is a selection of content from our research books and journals, as well as links to some of those educational resources that I've mentioned and interviews with the people who have put those content together. So it's not simply a case of here's a list of articles or here's a list of books. It's that contextualized information about why is this important? Why is this a topic that you wanted to research? How is this actually going to make a difference?

Education is so fundamental to being able to address global challenges. If there's not an educated population in the world, then we just really have no hope for the future. So the more that we can do to help people understand how education can be effective and also provide resources to make education effective, I think that's how you'll have that kind of power.

KENNEALLY: And for a publisher like Springer Nature to create the role of head of SDG publishing, it sends a strong message about connecting research to the real world. So is it fair to say that scholarly publishing, science, humanities, social sciences is emerging from its ivory tower?

JONES: Oh, I certainly hope so! I think with things like the SDG Publishers Compact, where academic publishers have been really amongst the first signatories, and I think a lot of them were very quick to sign up to that, there is an increasing appreciation within the industry of the role that we can play in that, affecting people's day-to-day lives. You see this more and more. Other publishers have launched programs around the SDGs. There may not be a specific head of publishing kind of setting those up, but there are content portals in different places.

There's a group called the SDG Publishers Compact Fellows which I am part of. One of my colleagues, (inaudible), is also part of. That's an initiative of HESI, which is the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative, and that is largely academic publishers and librarians at research institutions and graduate students coming together to talk about how we can create resources to bring the Publishers Compact to life so that other signatories to the compact can understand how to kind of enact those commitments. So I think scholarly publishing actually has really embraced the SDGs as a way to, yeah, bring themselves out of the ivory tower.

KENNEALLY: And if it's about impact, tell me about what the SDG Impact Festival is trying to achieve.



JONES: Oh, I'm so pleased you asked about this. The SDG Impact Festival is one of the most exciting and fun projects that I worked on last year – in fact, through my whole career in publishing. It was an internal event that we organized at Springer Nature which was designed to recognize and reward the people that work here who are making a difference towards the goals.

So we wanted to say, you know what? This is really, really genuinely important to us. Everything I do relates to content that's acquired by other people, by editors and publishers across the company. I'm not actually, in spite of my job title, publishing anything myself, but other people are, and some people have really embraced the Sustainable Development Goals as a way to develop their publishing programs. And some people are a little bit less far along on that particular journey.

So what we wanted to do was to ask people to show us examples of things that they have done that they think really have the potential to address the goals. So we asked people to submit entries across four categories. One was about supporting and amplifying the goals and what we have done to raise awareness of the goals and how we are helping to tell that story. One was about innovating, which was about what new things have we developed? One was about acting and operating. Because the other side of the SDG program that we haven't touched on yet is that how we publish and how we behave as an organization is as important as what we publish. And my role as head of publishing works really closely with Thea Sherer, who is our director of sustainability and climate action officer. We together manage those kind of two sides of that aspect. So we had an acting and operating category. And then we had a category called SDG Hero, where we asked people to nominate colleagues who they know really care deeply about the ability to address the goals through their work.

We had nearly 80 entries across the company. We had people involved as judges from all levels in the organization. The CEO was involved. Sir Philip Campbell, who's the editor-in-chief of Springer Nature, was involved. And we rewarded people with money. We had monetary prizes for the winners of the categories and for the people who were awarded the title of SDG Hero. We wanted to really show that this was something that we believe in.

We took a week in September, Global Goals Week, around the time of the UN General Assembly, to say that these are the ways in which your colleagues have supported the goals through all of their activities, and these are people who've really made a fantastic difference. And it was a really positive thing to be involved with. It has been the pandemic. We've all been working from home for two years. It can be quite easy to feel disconnected from your colleagues. And we saw this as a way to recognize and reward people's efforts, to help people feel a bit more connected to each other, and to encourage people to think about doing this again in future. So I'm hopeful that we will do it again



this year and that this will be an ongoing program of really public reward, at least internally at Springer Nature, of efforts to engage with this program.

KENNEALLY: And the kinds of problems we're talking about – they're enormous. Eliminating poverty, for example. So to cite people, to praise them for making a difference, that would seem to really, I think, appeal to the humanity in all of us, because we wonder, can we make a difference at all?

JONES: We do. And one of the nice things about working on this topic from the idea of engaging with this is that people really do genuinely want to make a difference. So most of the time, when I ask people to think about this, people just say yes. When we went out to senior-level people around the company and said would you want to be involved in the SDG Impact Festival? It will take some of your time. We'd like you to review some applications. We'd like you to listen to some presentations. Everybody just said yes straightaway, because it is something that people care about. People do, I think, want to feel like what they're doing is making an impact and making a difference beyond just kind of helping you meet your internal targets.

KENNEALLY: And Springer Nature's also established Science for a Sustainable Future, which is a series of virtual conferences in partnership with the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network. The first of these, held in November 2021, led to publication of a white paper, "Harnessing Science for a Sustainable Future." So tell us what the recommendations were for bridging this gap between research and policy.

JONES: Yeah, so this has been another really exciting project to be involved in and another really great ongoing partnership that we have with the Sustainable Development Solutions Network. And the recommendations that were set out in the white paper, which can be downloaded from our website – I'll just go through a few of them, because we organized them so that they were directed at either policymakers, at researchers, or at scholarly journals and academic institutions as the kind of supporting infrastructure around this.

Essentially, they can kind of be boiled down to talk to each other more and make sure that there is a two-way feedback process. Often, when we talk about bridging the gap between research and policy, from the publisher's side of things, we're thinking about how do we get policymakers to read the things that we have published? But actually, we also need researchers to be thinking about how can they address the topics that need to be addressed for the policy to be developed? So it's really important that we stop seeing this as a kind of one-way process and start seeing it as a two-way process, where there's iterative engagement between not just policymakers and researchers, but also communities.

That was the other very important thing that came out of the first conference, was the need to involve communities in this. The people who are actually living through these problems and potential solutions are the best people to understand what solutions will be effective. So actually thinking about how conventional scientific or academic models can be complemented with other forms of knowledge is a really important recommendation that came out here. And that's, again, for policymakers who quite often just think of something that's quite structured. It might have been commissioned by government themselves. It might have been something that's been published by researchers. But actually, traditional cultural and practical knowledge is really, really important.

KENNEALLY: And that kind of – sorry, yeah.

JONES: Yeah, the other thing – I'm going to say the other really important –

KENNEALLY: Hang on, Nicola. If you want to just sort of restart in kind of a – actually, I'll tell you what. I have a follow-up question that I think will give you an opportunity to do it, OK?

All right. So it seems to me, Nicola Jones, that this kind of conversation you're describing – an exchange between people – is also reflected in the publishing program, because it's so multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary. It brings people and research together.

JONES: Yeah, that's exactly right. We are just trying to make as many connections as we can. It's kind of said there in SDG 17 – partnerships for the goals – that it's only through individuals and organizations and nation-states working together that we can address these challenges. You can't have an individual country reach all of the targets associated with the SDGs and then just kind of be done. That's no good. Everybody has to get there.

KENNEALLY: And the climate crisis and COVID-19 pandemic have certainly drawn a lot of public attention to all of these issues, but the SDG program covers a very wide ground. So of the 17 content hubs, is there one that impresses you the most?

JONES: So this is a really hard question. Again, I think it's likely to result in some of my colleagues not necessarily wishing to talk to me again. But if I had to pick one, I think SDG 14 is one that's actually quite special. SDG 14 is life below water, or essentially ocean sustainability. Three billion people worldwide depend on the oceans for their livelihoods. But if you look at the amount of research output that's devoted to it, it's about 1% of articles relating to the SDGs is related to SDG 14. It's a really small amount.

What we have done at Springer Nature through, actually, all of our different brands and publishing programs is to say we think this is a really important issue that's not being



given the attention it deserves, so we want to give it more attention. So SDG 14 was the first SDG hub that we launched. It was actually back in mid-2020, around World Oceans Day. And we have partnered with a number of organizations to make sure that we're publishing research from – maybe not the kind of traditional academic research that you would expect to see in the papers of *Nature*, but research that has that kind of practical element to it.

So we have a couple of collections that have been published here. We had one that worked with the High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy and one that was with a group called the Blue Food Assessment looking at sustainable food from the oceans. They're both showcased on that site. We've also worked with Oceanic Global, who are a nonprofit organization aimed at setting up sustainable ocean activities and encouraging sustainable ocean. The oceans account for so much of the world, and they're just so important. It's kind of staggering that so little research time and money is devoted to this. Obviously, there's only so much to go around.

So I'm quite proud of the way in which people at Springer Nature, especially Philip Campbell and Magdalena Skipper, editor-in-chief of Springer Nature and editor-in-chief of *Nature*, respectively, have really taken up the challenge to promote the idea of ocean sustainability as a really important area for scientific research.

KENNEALLY: Nicola Jones, head of publishing for the Springer Nature SDG program, thanks for joining me today.

JONES: Thank you very much for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our program producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content from CCC.

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