



## **Interview with Sowmya Swaminathan**

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**KENNEALLY:** The identification of fossil remains of humankind's most ancient ancestors. The enumeration of new species in every corner of the animal kingdom. Fieldwork and data collection of all sorts, from geoscience to public health. Important, groundbreaking research happens across Africa. Yet African scientists and institutions rarely see credit in the world's most recognized scholarly journals.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

In May, an editorial from *Nature*, one of the world's most highly regarded scientific publications, announced a new approach to improving inclusion and ethics in all Nature portfolio journals. The Nature policies are guided by the Global Code of Conduct for Research in Resource-Poor Settings and seek to address a range of exploitative research practices.

Sowmya Swaminathan is head of collaborations, Springer Nature. Dr. Swaminathan is also chair of Springer Nature's research publishing DEI program and a member of the Springer Nature DEI council. She joins me from her San Francisco office. Welcome to the program, Sowmya Swaminathan.

**SWAMINATHAN:** Thanks, Chris. It's good to be here today.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, we're happy you can join us, because this is an important topic. We mentioned at the top the extensive work in research that comes from Africa. African researchers, authors, editors, and reviewers, of course, though, are not the only ones whose careers are affected by so-called parachute research. Such practices occur around the globe when researchers from high-income settings or who are otherwise privileged conduct studies in lower-income settings or with groups who are historically marginalized, with little or no involvement from those communities or local researchers. That's the definition of this practice of parachute research. But I wonder if you can share with us a bit more about how it occurs in scholarly publishing. What is parachute research? Also, it's called helicopter research. Can you give us some examples as well?

**SWAMINATHAN:** Yeah, so helicopter research and ethics dumping, which is the other side of the kind of policy approach that we're trying to address, they're both practices that are typically associated with situations that are marked by systemic legacies of inequality and



an imbalance in power. As you mentioned, you see that in collaborations between, research between, high-income countries and low- and middle-income settings, but also research within countries with historically marginalized groups.

Helicopter research is really when researchers from one setting are carrying out research in a low- or middle-income setting with little, no, or potentially exploitative involvement of local communities or local researchers. One very common and obvious example is the conduct of research without involvement of local researchers as coauthors.

You've mentioned a couple of different ways in which the production of knowledge with impact in Africa is very skewed. And we see many, many examples of how the production of knowledge is very skewed across many different disciplines. For example, a systematic review of authorship for infectious disease research conducted in Africa in the last 30 years or so that was published in *BMJ Global Health* found that less than half of these studies had an African first or last author, and there are examples like this not only in Africa, but in other parts of the world, where the production of knowledge – there's a very significant underrepresentation from the global south even in areas that are of direct relevance to the global south.

But helicopter research, or as it's called, parachute research or colonial research, is not only limited to authorship. It can extend to other types of unethical methods – for example, sample collection of fossils and archaeological material and their export from one jurisdiction or country or territory or community to another without the appropriate approvals and permissions for collection and analysis. So those are a couple of different ways in which this practice is characterized.

Ethics dumping refers to the export of unethical research practices to low- and middle-income countries that are typically not permissible in high-income countries, but that can intentionally or inadvertently exploit vulnerabilities in these other settings. Examples could include animal research – use of nonhuman primates in research, which is very highly regulated in the EU and the US, for example, but perhaps is less regulated in other parts of the world. But it can also occur in contexts beyond biomedical, clinical, health research – for example, in development economics, where there can be little local involvement of local ethics committees, a study design can result in either exposing participants to risk or in exacerbating local inequities. Those are a couple of different ways in which we come across these two issues in the practice of research today.

**KENNEALLY:** Whether it's helicopter research or ethics dumping, it really seems egregious. Some of those practices one would hope were from the distant past, but this is still going on.



SWAMINATHAN: It is still prevalent, and it is very much part of the way that research has been historically conducted around the world, and it is really part of, let's say, systemic legacies of colonialism. Indeed, it is still very much prevalent. I should say, though, that there is a growing awareness and a growing push to decolonize knowledge, to decolonize how we conduct research, and there's a push coming from communities of researchers, who of course have to be at the forefront of making change, embracing change, and really fundamentally shifting the way that knowledge is produced and shared around the world. So we at Nature Journals and at Springer Nature, we're really committed to doing our part to push toward improving research and publishing practice and to drive positive change. We've used policy and advocacy as levers to catalyze discussions and change in other areas, and that's exactly what we hope to do here as well.

KENNEALLY: Tell me about the global code of conduct for researchers. How was that developed?

SWAMINATHAN: The global code of conduct – it's a code of ethics for equitable research partnerships, and it was developed by TRUST, which is an EU-funded project on research ethics. And it was developed by a global group of authors who undertook a very broad, consultative approach, engaging with stakeholders across the ecosystem, going from research funders to vulnerable populations who are actually impacted by some of these practices – that, of course, makes the code an incredibly kind of robust foundation to have that perspective integrated into the way the code was developed – but also policymakers, ethics committees, and industry.

It's a framework that's based on four values of fairness, respect, care, and honesty. It's a very comprehensive framework with about 23 articles. But at the same time, it's also designed in a way so as to make it relevant across multiple disciplines. So these are actually the elements that drew us to the code – the fact that they took such a broad, consultative approach, that they integrated the perspective of vulnerable populations, and that it is designed to be relevant across multiple disciplines.

The other real positive is that it's embraced by funders and institutions as part of the consultation process, but also the European Commission has upheld the code as one of its reference documents. And as a group of journals, we always look to work across the research ecosystem, and where there is traction with funders and institutions, it becomes then a very fertile ground for journals then to also help push the issue and make change in a collaborative way across the ecosystem.

KENNEALLY: With the adoption of this policy, Dr. Swaminathan, what is Nature going to expect from authors? What will they need to do?



SWAMINATHAN: So we've used the global code of conduct as an orienting framework to develop our approach, and we'd like to take action in four ways. One, we want to raise awareness of these issues. As I've said, there is a growing awareness in many communities, but we work across a global footprint, a global landscape of authors, and across many different disciplines. So we want to raise awareness in this broad way. We are encouraging authors to consider the global code when developing, conducting, and communicating their study.

Second, we really want to create a mechanism for transparency. So we've used the code to develop a set of about nine questions, and we're encouraging authors to provide a disclosure statement using these questions to guide the development of that disclosure statement that we will make available through the peer review process to reviewers as well as publish in the paper. And we are encouraging authors to take the code and to consider these questions during the editorial process so that it's integrated in the course of their usual publishing workflow. We're very optimistic, in fact, and hopeful that by doing this, it'll build awareness – that's one thing – but it'll actually cause authors to think about authorship, to think about the contributions that local researchers have already made, and to think about whether those contributions warrant authorship. In fact, we're already starting to see some of those changes.

The other two aspects where we are hoping also to push for change is to improve citation diversity. We're also asking authors to consider whether they've taken local and regional research relevant to their study into account in the citations. And finally, we're also setting a standard for ourselves for inclusive peer review to work in a consistent and deliberate way to involving local and regional experts in peer review. Those are the changes that we are looking to make with this new guidance and using the global code as a framework.

KENNEALLY: There's a remarkable degree of transparency involved here, shedding lights on parts of research and publishing that just have been obscured in the past.

SWAMINATHAN: Yes, that's right. That's exactly what we're hoping to do, Chris. We're really hoping that transparency will be the way forward, and that through transparency, we can then, together with many other stakeholders across the system, actually push for more consistent changes in practice. But transparency is indeed the first step.

KENNEALLY: It really is important for our listeners to understand why you think these practices of inclusion and equity are not only a moral imperative – that's the obvious part – but they really are vital to producing reliable, trusted research, aren't they?

SWAMINATHAN: Yeah, that's a really good question. You can imagine many ways in which the expertise and perspective of local researchers could be valuable to add cultural context,



understand local impacts of research, interpret data, have knowledge of field study sites. But I'll give you an example that's very relevant to many of us today where there's a growing recognition of the absolutely vital contributions of indigenous knowledge and indigenous practices and collaborations, and that has to do with managing wildfire risk.

As you know, 2020 was a record-breaking year for us in the US, with almost double the acreage in wildfire burns across the country. What researchers as well as policymakers as well as practitioners are understanding and calling for more is understanding fire and land use and really incorporating indigenous practices into better ways of managing land. I'll give you an example, actually, of how researchers have used indigenous oral accounts and worked with Native American communities to help reconstruct history of fire-prone forests in California. That's a growing effort to really combine indigenous knowledge to help understand ecosystems.

KENNEALLY: Sowmya Swaminathan, head of collaborations with Springer Nature, thank you so much for joining me today and telling us about these new policies.

SWAMINATHAN: Thank you, Chris. It's a pleasure.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer 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 on Facebook. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for joining me on another Velocity of Content podcast from CCC.

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