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Human rights and the rise of indicator culture

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HC Coombs Extension Building 9, Room 1.04, Fellows Road, ANU



The demand for information grows daily as global interdependence rises and questions emerge for which local information is wholly inadequate. Local knowledge provides no help if a person is trying to decide which university to attend around the world, where to invest capital, or which country is the best place for a textile factory. There is a growing trend to develop global indicators to provide quick and accessible information about issues such as corruption, trafficking, and human rights compliance. Indicators are a technology designed to provide simple, quantitative knowledge to decision makers and the general public. They are based on numbers, which convey objective truth through scientific authority. They are seductive because they appear to offer certain knowledge about a complex and murky world. Yet, quantified knowledge is

deeply interpretive and influenced by expertise and the politics of wealth and experience. As indicator culture expands, it redefines practices of governance at the global as well as local level.

Sally Engle Merry is Professor of Anthropology and Law and Society at New York University. She is author of *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice* (University of Chicago Press, 2006 J.I.Staley Prize) and *Gender Violence: A Cultural Perspective* (Blackwells, 2009), and is President of the American Ethnological Society. The Law and Society Association awarded her the Kalven Prize for overall scholarly contributions to sociolegal scholarship in 2007.

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