



# **Words, numbers, culture: Thinking with Sally Merry at the Universal Periodic Review**

Jane Cowan  
April, 2021



#9

Webinar  
Series  
in honour of

**Sally  
Engle  
Merry**  
(1944-2020)



Jane K. Cowan (University of Sussex) will give a talk titled 'Words, numbers, culture: Thinking with Sally Merry at the Universal Periodic Review'. Julie Billaud (Graduate Institute in Geneva) will act as discussant.

**When: 30 April 2021 / 2.00-3.30 pm CET**



**Link:** <https://zoom.us/j/93210372616pwd=dTZZ...>

**ID:** 93210372616

**Password:** 4JzWZ6

## **Abstract**

Currently being prepared for a festschrift honoring the work of Sally Engle Merry, this paper involves ‘thinking with Sally Merry’ in two senses. It recalls conversations with Merry over a period of more than two decades, and in particular her visit to Geneva in 2011 when she accompanied me to a session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), which I was then researching along with Julie Billaud. With so little ethnographic work having been carried out on the United Nations human rights system up to that point, we both felt a strong desire to ‘compare notes’ regarding the similarities and differences between CEDAW, an example of the treaty body system and the UPR. In a second sense, the paper involves my continuing engagement with Merry’s broader concerns with language, quantification and culture as I have tried to make sense of practices surrounding the Universal Periodic Review as a new monitoring mechanism with its distinctive logics of audit, power and influence. In the presentation I examine the practices of members of civil society and non-governmental organisations, another core concern of Merry’s work, focusing on activities developed by UPR-Info, an NGO that provides crucial support to the UPR process. I look first at the recently invented ritual of the UPR Pre-sessions, focusing on language used by civil society actors and questions of vernacularization. I then consider the preoccupation with quantification, showing how and why it works rather differently in the UPR than in other parts of the UN system where indicators have taken hold. The theme of ‘culture’ runs through the paper, particularly regarding ‘UN culture’: the quickly normalized and taken-for-granted yet somewhat strange conventions of everyday practice at the United Nations.



## See you on Zoom!

Here is the full [schedule](#) of the webinar series.

You can also access the webinar videos on [Allegra's YouTube channel](#).