“Counting” Informal Media Industries

Jade Miller¹

WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY

jamiller [AT] wlu.ca

Abstract

This article encourages a critical look at the obsession with counting in media industries research, an impulse shared by academics and media-industry capitalists. Rather than being neutrally inquisitive, this impulse hopes to translate the world into a language that is palatable to the external glance, to investment, and to corporatization. How can we explain an industry’s importance without relying on fuzzy numbers and manipulated statistics created for the purpose of such explanation? How can we temper our reliance on adulterated quantitative measurement to support qualitative media industries research? I offer specific methodological suggestions for media industries researchers, including valuing specific qualitative assessments of industrial importance, an interrogation of all cited numbers. These are aimed at those researching media industries, encompassing a great deal of informality. However, as most global media industries incorporate a degree of informality in their production and distribution, these suggestions can be of use across industrial contexts.

Keywords: Informality, Qualitative Research Methods, Measurement, Africa, Distribution

I recently published a book on the industrial structure of the Southern Nigerian movie industry, known popularly as Nollywood.² As I have delivered talks, submitted papers, given interviews, and explained my research in a variety of academic and nonacademic contexts, some baseline questions tend to arise no matter the audience. Those seeing me as an “expert” on the industrial structure of Nollywood tend to ask me for specific statistics, whether they are journalists, academics, or even just casual conversation partners: How many movies does the industry release a year? How many people are employed by the industry per year? The industrial gross per year? These individuals seek to know the “size” of the industry, and hence its importance, via a number of different metrics.

These numbers have mostly been produced, and I would be able to reply with a citable number in response to most of these questions if I wanted to. But the more I have researched the

industry, the more I have come to understand that most of these numbers have been produced only in the sense of possible answers for these questions. The closer one gets to Nollywood's industrial realities, the more one sees the answers to these questions as impossible to get to the bottom of and the less faith one can have in the numbers that have been produced and cited in the past. The further I went, the more I began to feel that employing any of these numbers is disingenuous, as they have been doctored just for the sake of justifying interest in the industry, and making the case that the industry "counts," based on it allegedly having been quantified or "counted."

Qualitative versus quantitative research is often oversimplified as a bipolar issue: researchers base their research on numbers or they do not. In social science research methods textbooks, many will obligingly acknowledge "multi-methods research," but it is usually described as, for instance, a focus group or interviews designed to help interpret quantitative survey results.³ In other words, multi-methods research is often framed as the qualitative in service to interpreting the quantitative. Yet, there are many ways in which the quantitative is indeed employed in the service of the qualitative, as opposed to the more widely recognized converse.

Quantitative and qualitative approaches are often positioned at loggerheads with one another, with each side ascribing to different interpretations of the adage "if you don't count, you don't count." Post-structural feminists, for instance, critique statistical research as flattening out populations, making each individual representative and exchangeable with another, dismissing individual difference, and homogenizing personal experience. This stands in contrast to a theorized masculinist approach to knowledge which sees the world as composed of fixed facts only knowable through detached accounting.⁴ Quantitative researchers would counter that acknowledging the ways in which large data sets blur individual data points and drawing conclusions accordingly is a basic expectation for rigorous research and does not negate the explanatory potential of counting and statistics, a form of knowing that would be particularly well suited for macro-level research.

At its heart, counting enables the veneer of global commensurability, and it is this perceived comparability across contexts that lends counting an enhanced ability to convince the removed onlooker that a phenomenon is legitimate or particularly deserving of large-scale attention or concern.⁵ In this vein, Lawson suggests counting should be a tool for post-structuralist feminist researchers, particularly in terms of documenting difference, without being at odds with a feminist approach to knowledge.⁶ Even in a qualitative study, there remain many ways in which researchers can rely on the counted to prove that their study "counts," although counting can range from being based in local specificities to complying with globally commensurable data-gathering norms.

And while both qualitative and quantitative research can illuminate the object of the study, casual readers can privilege the most seemingly commensurable counted data due to our collective citizenship in what is sometimes known as the "audit society."⁷ This term refers to a historical stage in which audits and accounting firms are routinely valued as objective determinants of quality.⁸ In this increasingly pervasive ordering of society, that which is counted is verified and that which cannot be counted is glossed over, as citizens become accustomed to valuing numerical knowledge over other more grounded local knowledge.⁹

This perspective rends its way from business through to governance and beyond,¹⁰ as audits evaluate the effectiveness of nearly everyone and everything, from personal credit ratings to audits of governments, universities, and companies,¹¹ to the point at which the “uncountable” is considered suspect until it can be counted. While governments, institutions, public corporations, and companies seeking investment are compelled to commission audits, the end result is an expectation that any industry worth knowing about, even those not collectively seeking external investment, will have similar commensurable quantitative information available.

I have primarily used critical qualitative methods as I conduct media industries research. I argue in this article for a recognition of all the places in which critical qualitative media industries researchers are encouraged to rely on standardized quantitative data in offhand ways—ways in which our critical focus is sometimes abandoned—and I offer suggestions for alternative measures through which to argue that a study “counts,” suggestions that rely on locally based knowledge (including that of countable things) over globally homogenized counting conventions.

This article analyzes how we justify the importance of particular media industries in service of research on them. How can we explain an industry’s importance or the worth of studying it without relying on fuzzy numbers, and manipulated statistics created for the purpose of such explanation? How can we temper our reliance on adulterated quantitative measurement to support qualitative media industries research?

Informality and Numerical Obfuscation in Media Industries

There are a wide variety of statistics that could possibly be officially produced about any given media industry, but some industries are marked by their reliance on (and production of) such figures much more than others. The extent to which a media industry has official numbers ascribed to it is correlated with the typical level of formality in its business transactions. In their take on informality inherent in all media industries, Lobato and Thomas define informality most simply as “the sum of economic activity occurring beyond the view of the state.”¹² This definition tends to also mean economic activity that is not counted in a manner that is easily trackable. Informality does not present as a distinct manner of industrial practice. Degrees of informality persist in all media economies, no matter how far these industries lean toward formality—or, in other words, documentation—on the spectrum.¹³ Engaging in media-industry studies, by nature, means analyzing in part that which is not officially documented.

European audiovisual industries may be some of the most documented in the world, due to the mission of the European Audiovisual Observatory, an intergovernmental organization with a specific charge to gather and aggregate statistics on media industries across forty-one countries defined as being in or loosely bordering the European Union (including countries like Russia, Morocco, and Turkey). Although these statistics are neither consistently gathered nor complete,¹⁴ the ability to rely on these is taken by many researching media

industries on the continent as something to be expected, and researchers lament the lack of data available on, for instance, subnational European industries (e.g., Flemish-language productions within Belgium¹⁵).

The Southern Nigerian video-based movie industry known as Nollywood, my own area of study, similarly does not feature the reality of actual documentation, but there is also little expectation thereof. The goal of the majority of the industry's executive producers, a group known as "marketers" largely comprised of traders from the Igbo ethnic group, is to be completely opaque in their business operations.¹⁶ Their aim is to make it impossible to produce reliable numbers about their distribution and profits, as a matter of course in maintaining their grip on the industry while freezing out anyone with cause to pursue a portion of their profits (tax collectors and creative personnel on individual projects alike) as well as attempts by external investors to usurp the marketers' collective power, as these interlopers would be unable to predict market sales themselves.¹⁷

This derivation of strength from obfuscation and sheltering business from state knowledge and intervention is not just a response to corporate power in a globalized age. This strategy has its origins in precolonial times, in which the Igbo were a stateless ethnic group that developed kinship-based networking strategies to gird their power as long-distance traders over inhospitable terrain.¹⁸ They continued this strategy in the colonial era, when it first became seen to be a specifically informal strategy due to its existence outside of the view of the now-existent state.¹⁹ Meagher, along with other political science researchers, refers to this economic strategy as social network-driven or identity economics as opposed to informality as the former terms focus on the structures that enable these networks and the latter focuses more on the lack of documentation that marks this business strategy.²⁰ While trade in precolonial Africa also was what we now consider to be informal, current informal trade in those same areas is not necessarily path-dependent. Instead, Meagher sees these practices as calculated reactions to the business environment encountered by traders over the centuries (such as the emergence of predatory states) and notes that standard practices have in some cases become even more opaque and informal over the years.²¹

Numbers exist within industrial informality, but they are marked by opacity and fuzziness. "Opacity" in this sense can be defined as the lack of ability to double-check someone's assertions about the productivity or profitability of a business: in other words, a lack of external oversight and not documenting sales or expenses in any externally scrutinizable fashion.²² And "fuzziness" is what can result: numbers engineered to appear as desired. This could mean intentionally touting higher sales projections to attract investors or lower ones to put off tax and debt collectors.²³

In separate past work, both Ganti²⁴ and I²⁵ examine the ways in which fuzziness and opacity have been productive tools used by producers to attain and/or maintain power. Ganti suggests that "a dearth of statistics does not hinder (but perhaps even makes possible) confident projections about the scale of a media industry."²⁶ As she points out, opacity, and the resulting ambiguity and fuzziness, allows producers to remain in the industry even after a quantitative analysis may have deemed them to be losers. In this way, ambiguity in the Hindi industry serves as a siren song to swayed investors and fuel for continued industry

functioning even during actual downturns.²⁷ The unreliability of numbers can be used to manipulate, and opacity can be used to guard power.

This industrial structure—one based on informal business transactions and the obfuscation and opacity of records—is not confined to this Nigeria’s STV (straight-to-video) industry known popularly as Nollywood, though it is a particularly robust example of such an industry. Informality is a continuum and is a business practice running through nearly all media industries to some extent.²⁸ Dealing with numbers produced from obfuscation and opacity is relevant across this continuum, including in industries involving significantly more formality than the Southern Nigerian movie industry.

And, while informal trade may be unrecorded or unreported, its effects are not. The trade performed in an informal open-air market on the Uganda–Democratic Republic of Congo border that Meagher studied, for instance, impacted the exchange rates of local currencies and transferred the exports of one country into the official export statistics of its neighboring country.²⁹ In this way, we can see the repetitive interlinkage of formal and informal trade working its way throughout the life of a resource, shifting from external visibility to invisibility throughout the process.

Quantification in Media Industries

As Lobato and Thomas put it, “a characteristic feature of the informal media economy is that people are always trying to measure it: media companies, government institutions and market researchers.”³⁰ Stakeholders with ambitions to expand various media industries globally have sought the massaging forces of quantification, via reports from international accounting firms³¹ and statistics released by governmental and intergovernmental organizations,³² both the very fuel of what has variously been referred to as “the audit society”³³ and “indicator culture”³⁴; the collective sense beginning in late fifteenth-century Western Europe and spreading globally by the twenty-first century that anything worthwhile must be countable and therefore accountable.³⁵ Although the accuracy of many of these reports on informal media industries has been questioned, they have also had very real productive power in generating hype about and investment in these industries.³⁶

Much of the academic research thus far done on the relationship between informality and quantification in media industries has come from scholars studying the Hindi film industry, known popularly as Bollywood. Most significantly, Govil,³⁷ Punathambekar,³⁸ and Ganti³⁹ have interrogated the role that distribution statistics have played in driving Bollywood. One reason research on the topic has focused on this Indian industry is because of the stark relief into which a 2000 policy change threw the industry’s self-presentation. In 2000, the Indian national government granted the film industry official “industry” status. This made the industry eligible for significant corporate and bank investment. Instead of needing to appeal to the noncorporate less formal investors that had fueled the sector for years, filmmakers now tried to woo formal investors, such as multinational corporations (MNCs) and banks. Before, the industry had cause to seem *less* productive than it was to discourage investors and creative workers looking to share official profits; after 2000, the industry needed to seem *more*

productive than it is to encourage official stock market investment, which rewards companies that can “prove” profitability or growth.⁴⁰ This drove the creation of statistics and overly confident assertions of certainty in these statistics.⁴¹

In the wake of official industry status, Govil describes a dance of incredibly specific predicted numbers about the industry, set to the tune of unbridled growth for an audience of potential investors as well as the local business booster organizations that commissioned them (for instance, a prediction that domestic box office would increase by specifically 10.2 percent over the proximate five years).⁴² This level of almost absurd certainty (“a delirium of numbers,” as Govil calls it⁴³) regarding an industry that is actually known for its lack of verifiable receipts is a simultaneous product and driver of corporatization and global capital investment that came with official industry status.

In his interrogation of the role of statistics in Bollywood, Govil posits three functions of film statistics, particularly as they are implemented suddenly on an industrial level. First, they legitimate the industry and position it for investment by the state and private investors by making it “legible”⁴⁴ and understandable. Many researchers have noted the illegibility of all sorts of informal trade to outsider observers, particularly those well versed in the performatively omnipresent oversight of audit cultures.⁴⁵ Onlookers have referred to informal trade logic as “bewilderments,”⁴⁶ with impenetrability to outsiders a key liability and hindrance to success, narrowly defined as joining up with global corporate trade networks. Audit culture essentially transforms all aspects of the world it touches into something externally scrutinizable and commensurable—and therefore controllable. Audit culture makes “sense” out of a diverse world that is more ambiguous than the numbers produced would make onlookers believe.⁴⁷

Second, these statistics are performative, portraying the industry as serious: if companies are able to measure themselves and produce numbers consistently, they are taken to be organized and worthy of formal money, regardless of the story those numbers tell.⁴⁸ This performativity forms the roots of modern accounting: throughout the centuries since the birth of modern double-entry bookkeeping in Western Europe in the late fifteenth century, precision has been linked to accuracy in a way that does not reflect the actual relationship between the two.⁴⁹

Finally, Govil posits that these statistics group disparate activities together so that they can be understood as the function of a single “industry,” following a single predictable trend.⁵⁰ Govil⁵¹ employs Kaviraj’s concept of “fuzziness”⁵² to describe the opacity of enumeration in colonial India. This is not intentional obfuscation but, rather, accounting to meet personal ends as opposed to accounting with an aim of normalizing statistics across an entire “industry.” As Kaviraj writes, conceptualizing existences (or industries) as being shared across all members of a nation-state and counting them as such, as opposed to counting only within one’s immediate lived experience or personal sphere, is itself a product of colonialization and formalization.⁵³ As Govil puts it, industry reports tie “legitimation to legibility.”⁵⁴ Far from being a product of the Indian context alone, the role of officially sanctioned, if questionable, predictive numbers drives investment in most media industries, and their absence leads to investor uncertainty.

Numbers in Nollywood

The Nigerian video industry is not able to receive a transformation by the government in one fell swoop. Dominated by physical sales of VCDs (video compact discs, similar to a digital optical disc [DVD] but less expensive to produce) in open-air marketplaces as opposed to cinema screenings, the industry is much less potentially measurable than Bollywood. And the marketers, the industry's coterie of executive producers, possess few incentives to make their business practices transparent. Yet, rather than eschewing numbers-talk, due to an absence of reliable measurements, statistics peppered nearly every interview I had with producers and were thrown around with wild abandon: "85% of my business is domestic"; "we control 90% of the market"; "I lose 60% of my business every year to piracy." These statistics are derived not from measurement but, rather, from general feeling. We can think of these as qualitative statistics: numbers meant to represent a subjective assessment of how something is personally known to be, but presented in the language of quantitative assessment to reflect assuredness.

The statistic afforded the greatest reverence and presented with the most frequency both within and outside Nollywood has been the one released by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the intergovernmental organization (IGO) devoted to counting global cultural production. In 2009, UNESCO's Montreal-based UIS (UNESCO Institute for Statistics) branch declared the Nigerian movie industry to be the "second largest film industry in the world," after India and ahead of the United States. This statistic not only showed up endlessly in Nollywood's industrial self-presentation, but it was also repeated in what seemed to be every popular press article written on the industry afterward, on a global scale.

The UIS statistic was titled "world's largest film industries," but the intention was to operationalize the word "largest" as "number of titles produced per year." This eschewed more common statistical measures of industry size such as industrial gross per year. It is first worth considering why titles per year would be a useful metric at all. How many titles does the US pornographic industry produce per year? Could we perhaps say that it rivals the US cinematic film industry in size if they, perhaps, release a similar number of titles per year?

The statistic also eschewed what I would deem to be more meaningful counts. On how many screens are movies from this industry seen every year? What number of people see the movies per year? For how many people do these movies supersede all other media as the main object of consumption? In how many places do the productions of this industry outpace all other media on screens and in people's hearts? Nollywood might well come in second or third there in one of these in its own right. Some of these numbers would be difficult, if not impossible, to come by: how can we count how many eyes are on each siphoned unpaid satellite television airing of a movie? On each television screen airing a burned copy of a VCD in a crowded marketplace or grocery store? Yet the difficulty in quantifying these does not make these unimportant measures. I argue that easily produced numbers should not be privileged over qualitative assessments of the same core principles: for how many people and in

how many places is this industry's production important and influential? And can we come to an answer to these questions that does not rely on actual numerical accounting?

Because it becomes clear upon further examination that the famous 2009 UIS statistic is a practice in absurdity. The numbers the UIS gathered came not from their own data-gathering operations but from self-reporting by national statistics agencies of UNESCO-cooperating governments worldwide. The UIS, then, would first need to rely on these national agencies to collect the same kind of information completely and in the same way as one another. In 2009, the Nigerian agency in charge of supplying statistics to UNESCO decided to start reporting video productions instead of just cinematic films, a ground-shifting change.⁵⁵ However, Nigeria appears to be the only country that made such a shift in 2009. Note that the United States, for instance, continues to not report most STV films, including student films, most online-only releases, or the standard STV fare that populates the back catalogues of convenience stores and online distributors alike. The much-touted UIS statistic, then, lacks comparative value. In some ways, Bud suggests that this means that a Nigerian government agency truly did create "Nollywood" after all by manufacturing its ascent toward the top of a UNESCO-sanctioned list and engendering the global hype that followed.⁵⁶

I bring this statistic up not only because it was so widely used but because I also used it, in an article on Nollywood I published in 2012.⁵⁷ I began the article by referencing this UNESCO figure in the opening paragraph to catch the reader's attention, as this was published before Nollywood was a popular topic of research in media journals and I wanted to make a case that an article on this Nigerian movie industry was important to research and, hence, to read. Though I am quite far from the only academic to have cited this statistic, I now cringe when I see it. It was, quite simply, convenient to throw an offhand statistic in the first paragraph to indicate that this media industry is worth taking notice of, worth studying, and worth an article in a journal, before delving into the qualitative meat of the research inside. Asserting that the industry had been "counted" by a respected IGO was a shorthand method of asserting the industry "counts." By the time of my 2016 book on Nollywood, I only referenced this statistic as something frequently bandied about but otherwise to be considered useless. I highlight my 2012 use of this statistic to emphasize the need for self-reflection and self-examination of ourselves as researchers as the end-users of and thereby also part of the demand for these juked statistics.

As I realized my own role as an author in serving to demand such questionable statistics, I tried further in my book to balance the spuriously counted and the purposeful opacity of the subject matter. Here are two examples of attempts at this balance. On page 31 of my book,⁵⁸ I wrote,

Despite the low cost and rampant unauthorised distribution that marks the industry, Nollywood is a huge business with a well-defined structure and hierarchy, employing thousands. It has been variously estimated to make anywhere from \$600 million (Oh, 2014) to \$5 billion (over 1 trillion naira) (NBS, 2015) in annual sales, in inherently shaky estimates that valiantly attempt to incorporate global and unauthorised revenues via data collection channels that have been accused of unrealistic estimation in the past (see *The Economist*, 2015)."

In this quote, I present first an offhand generalization. "Nollywood is a huge business . . . employing thousands," without citation, to indicate that this is the bare minimum one can

be sure of without doing measurement. “Employing thousands” is clear at face value: looking through just the membership of each guild, not to mention the far-flung structures that gird its distribution, and those involved in procuring equipment, two thousand people (the minimum to accurately use the word “thousands”) would be a laughably small estimate. The first point, though, is frustratingly vague: “Nollywood is a huge business.” After writing this sentence, I felt compelled to support it. Searching for reliable estimates of the actual “size” of the industry, I came up with a wide range of estimates based on completely divergent conceptions of what even constitutes an industry: US\$600 million to US\$5 billion in revenue. Knowing the industry as I did, I was certain of one thing about those numbers, which is that they are estimates based on estimates of estimates and that there has absolutely been no reliable research done that could come up with a reliably accurate number. By nature, these estimates are “inherently shaky.” Yet I wanted to somehow gird my statement of Nollywood as a “huge business” with at least acknowledgment of these issues. I interrogate now the impulse to even offer such numbers as these: are we as researchers partners to MNCs and banks seeking to invest in “emerging media industries”? To prove that the industry we study is worthy of global attention, must we seek out and cite statistics that we can, at best, refer to as “inherently shaky,” “valiant [attempts],” and “accused of unrealistic estimation”?

I had a similar dilemma as I described the size of Lagos and its limited public municipal services in Lagos at the time of my research:

Possibly home to 21 million (Rosenthal, 2012), with less than a third connected to a public water supply as measured by Nigeria’s statistical body (NBS, 2012), Lagos could be on its way to becoming the third largest city in the world, depending on how you count and who is counting. (p. 34)

It is an offhand sentence, used as a support for a larger point. Yet, here it is, with two different citations to back it up. How many people live in Lagos, how they are counted, and who is undercounted or overcounted could be the topic of its own journal article. My desire was to impress upon the reader the immense numbers of people calling Lagos home. Yet I chose just one of many available estimates (I chose one of the highest estimates at 21 million), qualified it with the word “possibly” to indicate that it is one of the higher estimates, and ended the sentence with further mitigation of the statistic in the first place.

The question of how many people were connected to the water supply in Lagos, meant as a cipher for unreliability of government services, was more difficult to find. While this figure was meant to indicate that municipal services are undependable in Lagos, anyone who has spent more than a week there could verify this without needing to reference a statistic. After failing to locate a primary Lagos-based measure in previous academic research or IGO research reports, I found that Nigeria’s National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) had once produced a relevant metric in 2012.⁵⁹

In my relief at locating this number, it is also worth considering why the NBS produces this statistic. Access to various municipal services is a development marker that is widely used in measuring against global standards such as the United Nation’s (UN) Millennium Development goals⁶⁰ and, as such, can be wielded as a tool for grants, loans, and development projects. As Jerven points out, statistics bodies, such as the national statistics bureaus kept by most

nations, take their mission to be intersecting with international and global measurement demands.⁶¹ A blog post on the NBS website offers the following among its *raison d'être*⁶²:

- “usefulness for policy and business decision making”
- “demand for data by policymakers and business leaders seeking to identify how to sustain the recovery, implement policies, prioritise programmes and ensure that the Nigerian economy gets on a more sustainable path of inclusive growth”
- “Concerned citizens, eager to witness immediate changes in their socio-economic circumstances”
- “objectively identify key areas in our society that actually require change, or accurately determine what policy prescriptions will best respond to the real needs of the country, or take advantage of the next big business opportunity in this resilient economy”

At heart, these reasons center around providing justification for policy and business practices, as well as accountability to concerned citizens of any nature. In using their water statistic to obliquely support my point about Lagos’ municipal services, I too became a consumer of the NBS, further supporting their choices in what is important to measure versus what is okay to overlook, whether or not my citation of this statistic will ever be “counted” by them in internal reviews.

Suggestions for Future Media Industries Researchers

This article is meant to encourage a critical look at the fixation on counting in understanding audiovisual media industries, a fixation derived from a global fixation on accountability and creditability in everything from government to corporations to individuals. Statistics about film industries are produced and consumed within the same context as most other institutions in “the audit society”: an industry’s ability to present itself for counting legitimizes it and enables its legibility and therefore credibility to outsiders. An industry’s ability to be examined and to generate numbers for outsiders to inspect is considered equivalent to its importance and the validity of its quests to garner interest and investment. This fixation on counting in informal audiovisual media industries is an impulse shared by multiple actors. In academic publishing and the popular press, experts are asked to come up with figures: characterizing an industry as the “second largest in the world,” sales figures, and how many people the industry employs. When it comes to Nollywood, the topic of my recent book, these are almost always conjecture, with justifications of various quality. It is my position that this impulse is not neutral. Rather, this fixation hopes to translate the world into a language that is “legible”⁶³ to the external glance, to foreign investment, to bank investment, and to corporatization and to be understandable to foreign actors, much in the same vein as the exoticizing Nollywood documentaries Jedlowski critiques⁶⁴ (2013) or the accounting firm reports that have marked the last two decades of the Indian media industry.⁶⁵

In my work in Nollywood, I show the intense level of informality of the industry is an active decision by networks of small-scale entrepreneurs running the industry (the “marketers”). It is an active strategy employed first and foremost to avoid government notice, but is also recognized by the industry’s executive producers as a strategy to thwart corporate or foreign interlopers attempting to usurp industrial power, a strategy that has historic roots dating back to colonial and precolonial times. Rather than attempting to circumvent this strategy by producing numbers, I suggest accepting it and researching media industries in a way that recognizes the strategic uses of fuzzy and opaque numbers without attempting to correct them into a transparent format expressly designed to be legible to MNCs, accounting firms, large banks, tax collectors, and international investors.

We can find inspiration in Merry’s analyses of indicators produced by the UN and other NGOs. She interrogates different global approaches to measurements of violence against women and concludes that those that incorporate local definitions and understandings of violence have the most meaning.⁶⁶ For example, measures that incorporate whether a woman was in fear for her life regardless of the action that caused this fear are a more resonant measure than counts of specific acts that vary in meaning across cultural contexts.⁶⁷ However, the measures that have the most realistic chance of being measured similarly across global contexts, enabling commensurability (generally those performed routinely by national criminal justice bodies and other governmental agencies), are those least likely to incorporate local knowledge.⁶⁸

We can see, then, the role of qualitative researchers as particularly well poised to perform these more locally grounded measures, combining qualitatively gathered knowledge with smaller types of counting. By this, I mean to support counting locally relevant measures without necessarily needing to present the object of study for global commensurability, as measured by widely used global practices. Merry uses the term vernacularization to refer to the process by which “global ideas” are “reinterpreted, redefined, and relocated in a different context,”⁶⁹ and this process drives the suggestions presented here.

I offer three specific methodological suggestions for researchers of media industries. These were written in the context of those researching media industries encompassing a great deal of informality in their business transactions, making the production of numbers and statistics particularly wrought with issues. However, as most global media industries incorporate a degree of informality in their production and distribution processes, these suggestions are of use across all industrial contexts in media research. This article serves to encourage researchers to examine their dependence on all figures, regardless of the nature of the industry they study.

First, I suggest validating the importance of an industry with locally derived qualitative assessments. In an informal movie industry, the definition of popularity can be counted on a less commensurable more local level in a number of ways. For example, one could assess physical presence of movie posters on city streets, visibility and prominence of articles about movies and stars in local newspapers, or ubiquity of media playing on screens visible in public and quasi-public places like buses, marketplaces, or shops. These are countable but not in the globally commensurable ways that those requesting quantified data would usually prefer, as the presence of these would vary from place to place and are not investable counts.

They can, however, be valuable in presenting justifications of an industry's popularity in manners grounded in local knowledge and practices. This could also include the fame of stars in everyday conversation and the ubiquity of these productions in everyday people's day-to-day lives. For how many people is this their first choice and primary avenue of popular culture consumption? How many people count themselves as fans, regardless of the money spent on production or money spent on official and unofficial channels of distribution? How many individual human hours are spent engrossed in this media product on a global level? How central is this industry in how many people's lives? Despite the fact that many of these are counting-based assessments as well, these numbers would be unlikely to be globally commensurable, and many could only be knowable through ethnographies and case studies as opposed to a wide survey. This is particularly true regarding a media industry that, like Nollywood, is based first on sales of physical copies, regularly circulated through unofficial channels and watched in groups. Easily accessed globally, comparable quantitative measures should not be privileged as a marker of an industry's importance due to their commensurability. These attributes and questions can be judged qualitatively and through non-commensurable counting derived from time spent in communities.

The examples I mention here are applicable for the Nigerian context (Nollywood, for instance, is clearly the most popular entertainment form in public spaces in Nigeria and others parts of sub-Saharan Africa, without need for misleadingly specific numbers to back this up), but I expect similar manners of analysis to be applicable to other industries. The challenge for researchers is to find a meaningful measurement of popularity based on researchers spending a significant amount of time in the fan communities and labor networks of their industry.

Second, I encourage researchers to think critically about the sources of the numbers they do use to avoid overreliance on questionably produced numbers and to make sure not to privilege number-based assessments in their research. While any rigorous quantitative researcher will acknowledge the drawbacks of the statistics upon which they rely, many researchers will refer to official statistics when such reference is actually unnecessary in the course of the argument being made. Some statistics related to media industries research are created rigorously and deepen understanding, while others do neither. Yet, their production by government authorities, international organizations, or accounting firms is often taken at face value. Researchers should default to finding the most valid justifications for their study rather than privileging numbers over more qualitative measures such as those listed above, as in the case of the water supply statistic I casually employed in pursuit of a larger point about Lagos. I suggest researchers analyze the original sources of every number they do wind up using, so the reader is constantly aware of the uncertainty from which they are inseparable. This is perhaps akin to Socrates' position in the *Phaedrus* dialogues,⁷⁰ that written as opposed to oral argument could be acceptable as long as the writer acknowledges the inferiority of written to oral arguments and does not put too much faith in the written word.

It appears that writing about areas further afield from one's own expertise and training is more likely to beget the use of questionable statistics. In Jonathan Haynes' 2016 book on Nollywood film genres, for instance, all in service of proving the sentence "Nigeria is indeed changing fast," the author indicates that the Nigerian economy has been growing at 7 percent a year for a decade, that the Nigerian telecommunications sector is the "largest in Africa and one of the fastest growing in the world," and that 47 million Nigerians use the internet,

all difficult-to-measure numbers delivered without citation.⁷¹ Yet, other statistics in his book are delivered with skillful skepticism. Just a few paragraphs later,⁷² he indicates that he has personally double-checked the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics' assertion that the movie industry was valued at US\$3.3 billion and was the second-fastest growing sector of the national economy with the "guy in a shop" where he buys videos in Lagos and has found the statistic to be doubtful as a result of the information given to him by one man working at the point-of-sale:

In 2013, the NBS put the value of the film industry at \$3.3 billion (the figure was admittedly approximate, based on the 1844 films produced that year) and claimed that, together with the music industry, it was the second-fastest growing sector of the economy (Bright, 2014). But the guy in a shop in Surulere where I go to buy films said only 15 or 18 English-language movies are being released every two weeks, a third the number from a year before. (p. 302)

It would appear that it is easier for scholars to be skeptical of statistics created in their area of expertise, but, when they are used in an offhand manner to provide background for the author's delivery of a main point, there is significant room for passive credulity in their use. In cases where we can provide our own qualitative assessment of who can reliably possess what information, it is, in fact, possible for us to rely on the anecdotal evidence of one man working in a shop in a marketplace over the production of a national statistical bureau. Knowing the lack of motivation for obfuscation by his regular video vendor and knowing too the reliable window any regular street vendor would have on movies produced per week, the author can, in fact, feel comfortable privileging such information over that of the NBS data, which he knows were generalized and extrapolated from figures NBS respondents had limited motivation to report accurately and completely. In their suggestions for researching informal trade, Eliss and MacGaffey recommend a combination of micro-level case studies enabled by locally trusted agents along with market studies.⁷³ In the context of informal media industries, a market study could include the sort of information gathered by Haynes in his discussion with the local "guy in a shop": surveying the stock of products for sale, indicated prices, and evidence of links between traders in different marketplaces, for instance.

I finally suggest that we consider unorthodox sources of information as not necessarily inferior to information gathered by government or intergovernmental bodies. And we can easily understand the presentation of some numbers as qualitative and performative in nature, if readers are cautioned to understand them as nonspecific subjective assessments, such as the types of qualitative statistics producers may mention offhand in interviews (e.g., "10% of my business comes from internet distribution"). We can use Merry's concept of vernacularization to understand the employment of the language of statistics by those working in the industry without access to the data needed to produce accurate accounting.⁷⁴ If we can understand these numbers as qualitative and performative, we can lend to them a level of trust not usually afforded numbers produced without massive surveys or transparency. These numbers reveal qualitative local knowledge as opposed to globally commensurable quantified knowledge.

The use of statistics to justify the beginnings of interest in a topic has been ingrained in researchers, and I don't mean to suggest we completely stop relying on such numbers. Rather, I encourage researchers to consider the sources of their statistics and the possibility

that locally derived information can be more accurate and explanatory, even if not globally commensurable. If we can simply say that a particular media industry is “important” and “worthy of study” due to the qualitatively measured level of awareness of its productions, that is one small step toward wresting ourselves from our own troublesome position as demanders and consumers of juked statistics and therefore partially responsible for their creation. I hope for this article to spur examination of such tendencies in past, current, and future media industries research alike.

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- ¹ Dr. Jade Miller is associate professor of communication studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, ON, Canada. She works on media industries from a global networked perspective. Her book *Nollywood Central*, on the industrial structure and global connections of the Southern Nigerian video industry, was published in 2016.
 - ² Jade Miller, *Nollywood Central* (London: BFI, 2016).
 - ³ Gary Bouma, Rod Ling, and Lori Wilkinson, *The Research Process: Third Canadian Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Deborah Van den Hoonaard, *Qualitative Research in Action: A Canadian Primer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
 - ⁴ Victoria Lawson, “The Politics of Difference: Examining the Quantitative/Qualitative Dualism in Post-structuralist Feminist Research,” *Professional Geographer* 47 (4, 1995): 449–57.
 - ⁵ Sally Engle Merry, “Firming Up Soft Law: The Impact of Indicators of Transnational Human Rights Orders,” in *Transnational legal orders*, ed. Terrence Halliday and Gregory Shaffer (NY: University of Cambridge Press, 2015): 374–99.
 - ⁶ Lawson, “The Politics.”
 - ⁷ Michael Power, *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
 - ⁸ Ibid.; Cris Shore and Susan Wright, “Audit Culture Revisited: Rankings, Ratings, and the Reassembly of Society,” *Current Anthropology* 56 (3, 2015): 421–44; Marilyn Strathern, “Introduction: New Accountabilities,” in *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics, and the Academy*, ed. Marilyn Strathern (London: Routledge, 2000), 1–18.
 - ⁹ Sally Engle Merry, *The Seductions of Quantification: Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
 - ¹⁰ Ibid.; Power, *The Audit Society*; Shore and Wright “Audit Culture Revisited.”
 - ¹¹ Ibid.
 - ¹² Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas, *The Informal Media Economy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 8.
 - ¹³ Ibid.
 - ¹⁴ Lydia Papadimitriou, “Researching the Greek Screen/Film Industry: Challenges and Opportunities in the Study of a Crisis-Ridden Sector” (paper presented at Media Industries Conference, London, April 20, 2018).
 - ¹⁵ Ibid.; Jaap Verheul, “Lack of Data: Researching a Small Media Industry in the Absence of Screen Regulation” (paper presented at Media Industries Conference, London, April 20, 2018).

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- ¹⁶ Miller, Nollywood Central.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. This is virtually everyone, so long as the key marketplace for the industry remains physical sales conducted via the network of open-air market stalls controlled by the marketers.
- ¹⁸ Kate Meagher, *Identity Economics: Social Networks and the Informal Economy in Nigeria* (Suffolk: James Currey, 2010).
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Miller, Nollywood Central.
- ²³ Tejaswini Ganti, "Fuzzy Numbers: The Productive Nature of Ambiguity in the Hindi Film Industry," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 35 (3, 2015): 451–65; Nitin Govil, "Size matters," *BioScope* 1 (2, 2010): 105–109.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Miller, Nollywood Central.
- ²⁶ Ganti, "Fuzzy Numbers," 453.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Lobato and Thomas, *The Informal Media Economy*; Ramon Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (London: BFI Press, 2012).
- ²⁹ Meagher, *Identity Economics*.
- ³⁰ Lobato and Thomas, *The Informal Media Economy*, 15.
- ³¹ Aswin Punathambekar, *From Bombay to Bollywood* (NY: NYU Press, 2013); Nitin Govil, "Envisioning the Future: Financialization and the Indian Entertainment Industry Reports," *South Asian Popular Culture* 14 (3, 2016): 219–34.
- ³² Alexander Bud, "The End of Nollywood's Guilded Age? Marketers, the State and the Struggle for Distribution," *Critical African Studies* 6 (1, 2014): 91–121.
- ³³ Power, *The Audit Society*.
- ³⁴ Merry, *The Seductions of Quantification*.
- ³⁵ Ibid.; Power, *The Audit Society*; Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- ³⁶ Ganti, "Fuzzy Numbers"; Bud "The End."
- ³⁷ Govil, "Size Matters"; Govil, "Envisioning the Future."
- ³⁸ Punathambekar, *From Bombay*.
- ³⁹ Ganti, "Fuzzy Numbers."
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.; Punathambekar, *From Bombay*.
- ⁴² Govil, "Envisioning the Future," 106.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 107.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 107.
- ⁴⁵ Meagher, *Identity Economics*; Jane Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
- ⁴⁶ Guyer, *Marginal Gains*.
- ⁴⁷ Shore and Wright, "Audit Culture Revisited."
- ⁴⁸ Govil, *Envisioning the Future*, 107.

- ⁴⁹ Poovey, *A History*.
- ⁵⁰ Govil, *Envisioning the Future*, 107.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2010).
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Govil, "Envisioning the Future," 228.
- ⁵⁵ Bud, "The End."
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Jade Miller, "Global Nollywood: The Nigerian Movie Industry and Alternative Global Networks in Production and Distribution," *Global Media and Communication* 8 (2012): 117–33.
- ⁵⁸ Miller, *Nollywood Central*.
- ⁵⁹ NBS (National Bureau of Statistics of Nigeria). "Annual Abstract of Statistics, 2012," 2012, 115–17, <http://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/nbslibrary/nbs-annualabstract-of-statistics/nbs-annual-abstract-of-statistics>.
- ⁶⁰ Morten Jerven, *Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do About It* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
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- ⁶⁵ Ganti, "Fuzzy Numbers"; Govil, "Size Matters"; Punathambekar, *From Bombay*.
- ⁶⁶ Merry, *Seductions*.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 110–11.
- ⁷⁰ Plato. *Phaedrus Dialogues*, trans. Christopher Rowe (London: Penguin Classics, 2005).
- ⁷¹ Jonathan Haynes, *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
- ⁷² Ibid., 302.
- ⁷³ Stephen Ellis and Janet MacGaffey, "Research on Sub-Saharan Africa's International Trade: Some Methodological and Conceptual Problems," *African Studies Review* 39 (2, 1996): 19–41.
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