‘Numbers don’t lie.’ Discuss.

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“Numbers don’t lie”. This oft-quoted refrain vouches for numbers in that numerical figures are unerringly truthful. In the movie Pacific Rim, it was even said that numbers are the closest we have come to the handwriting of God: truth. On one hand, numbers do not “lie” because they are the best way to present hard facts, and their use often leads to success. Yet, numbers can be viewed as poor conveyors of truth because they can confuse people, and do not paint the full picture sometimes.

Firstly, it can be argued that numbers do not lie as they are the best way to present hard facts. In our complex world, numbers provide elucidation to our thinking by acting as an unfailing tool for describing our world. Just as one and one adds up to two, the use of numbers to model our world produces results that are by and large irrefutable. For instance, it is undeniable that climate change is occurring because the figures derived from geographical data demonstrate our glaciers are receding and our sea levels are rising. Numbers are antithetical to the situation of using your two hands to judge which object you hold is heavier because numbers by their fundamental nature remove the subjectivity of human approximation. Thus, numbers do not lie because they objectively present our world.

Secondly, some also opine that numbers do not lie because their use can create success. In the rapidly expanding field of Big Data analysis, numbers are used as a tool for discovering and plotting trends, whether to find consumption patterns or for sociological purposes. Especially in the financial realm, numbers are employed to enable companies to decide the probable success of product releases or to dictate their business strategies. As illustrated by Malcolm Gladwell, US home retailer Target successfully harnessed Big Data to track and record consumer purchases. Then, vouchers corresponding to their most frequently purchased items were automatically mailed to these consumers to encourage them to spend further. The success of numbers as a tool for financial gain is evident in how Target continues to be a dominant player in the retail industry. From this example, the virtue of numbers as a business tool demonstrates how numbers are accurate in helping people make future decisions, which can only arise from how numbers are able to present the truth. Thus, numbers do not lie.

Yet, numbers are also viewed as poor conveyors of the truth because they are often used to confuse people. Oftentimes, numbers are manipulated or hidden to present misinformation and half-truths. We need look no further than across the Causeway to see evidence of that. Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Bin Mohamad recently revived the issue of water with Singapore. He complained that Johor supplies raw water to Singapore for only 2 sen for every million gallons per day (mgd), and that Malaysia is making a net loss by being legally bound by the 1962 Agreement to buy treated water at 50 sen per mgd. Here, Dr Mahathir conveniently omitted the fact that the cost of treating water is RM2.40 and that the Singapore administration subsidises RM1.90 instead. Numbers are often used by politicians to obfuscate, distort the truth, and to garner political support. If we view numbers as tools and as a means to an end, we must judge the nature of numbers as tools by the outcomes they produce. In the political arena, numbers are used to confuse people. Thus, numbers can in fact portray erroneous half-truths and “lies”.

Another argument for the view that numbers do lie is predicated on how numbers often fail to paint the full picture, especially in a setting where subjectivity is inherent. Numbers often fail to present

truth in its entirety when applied to areas incongruent with numerical analysis. For instance, how is intelligence judged? Though much progress has been made to change conceptions, there still lingers in the Singaporean societal consciousness the notion that academic grades are the all-encompassing indicator of one's intellect. Were that the case, there would be no call for "multiple peaks of excellence" and a shift away from T-scores in the Primary Six School Leaving Examination as announced by the Education Minister, Ong Ye Kung. Such actions demonstrate how increasingly so, there is a realisation that numbers alone do not enable us to understand situations fully. In the greyer areas, numbers portray only one facet of a person's intelligence: his academic capacity, and leave out areas such as his or her capacity to build rapport with others (emotional intelligence) or their skill with mechanical tools and building (technical intelligence). Numbers do "lie" in describing traits and situations that are difficult to assign numbers to. Though some point out that emotional quotients do exist, numbers provide a false precision in areas where a more holistic approach is better suited for the task. Thus, numbers do lie.

In the final analysis, since numbers are portrayed as tools to be used in this essay, a conclusion as to whether numbers lie or not must be drawn from the outcomes that the use of numbers leads to as previously argued. Numbers can be used to lie, especially for political purposes. Yet in the same vein, it is not the numbers that lie but rather the people who use these numbers as tools of obfuscation. It is deliberate misrepresentation or misuse in inappropriate contexts of numbers on the part of Man, rather than the inherent nature of numbers as poor conveyors of truth, that create falsehoods. Hence, numbers do not lie. People do.

Comments:

Consistent use of apt examples that also helped to broaden the scope of discussion (from the environment, to business, to politics, and education). Overall, a well-balanced discussion with personal insight and mostly original examples.