Data and Numbers
By
Daniel E. White February 16, 2026

I have had a complicated relationship with numbers for a long time. I don't think I am alone.

I was standing outside a data center (it is a community center, too) waiting for colleagues. I watched as a steady stream of cars entered the parking lot which was already mostly full. Out of the cars came men and women, mostly my age or thereabouts, carrying things in their hands into the building.

A smaller flow of people left with things in their hands to find their cars and create spaces for a new round of cars and people with things in their hands.

I felt joy. Until into my brain came the image of warehouse-size buildings springing up like weeds in our region, sucking up water more greedily than biological weeds, housing machines that collected, massaged, combined and spit out information that would become key components of numerical expressions of this conclusion or that.

How did a moment of joy become sullied by that scary image? And why did I conclude that the vision was scary?

I was, in fact, standing outside a community center that was a repository of information: a library.

No doubt, in *The Wizard of Id* days of human existence, someone discovered that writing some insight or fact on something permanent for the benefit of sharing thoughts with others was a good idea.

Others followed suit. Over time, these written recordings of stories and thoughts accumulated. The organizer in this prehistoric group proposed creating a secure place for this accumulation, and the first library was founded.

Or maybe the earliest ancestors of libraries are the petroglyphs and pictographs scratched on rocks around the world. Generations of archaeologists, anthropologists and curious travelers have worked to understand whether the drawings are just ancient graffiti or collections of images with symbolic meanings to be discovered by the descendants of those "writers."

Or maybe, before scratching on rocks or writing things down, our longest-ago ancestors sustained verbal libraries that we now call oral traditions. We continue a variation by recording oral histories about people, places, and things.

What unites these early examples of collecting information and preserving it is that each form illustrates a living, breathing human being trying to make sense of the world or instruct others or merely entertain themselves and their friends. What exists in a library is not exclusively the result of crunching numbers or data points that exist independent of a real person.

Several years ago, I worked with a group of fourth graders to show them how to calculate batting averages for baseball players. That's how I learned about averages when I was their age. I still enjoy baseball statistics—hence my avid participation in a fantasy baseball league (baseball being a champion preserver of numbers called statistics).

It was fun to point out that a player who hits safely three out of ten times in a career would probably be recognized as a top player of the game to illustrate to the kids that, while perfection might be a goal, few achieve it in any endeavor. So, ease up on yourself if you are not perfect.

I still remember being fascinated in the eighth grade when my teacher showed me that the numerals in the number produced by multiplying any number by nine will always add up to nine. It's as amazing as magic. Try it!

So, I have some positive experiences playing with numbers. I see their value as tools. They are a great way to keep track of things or to compare.

But numbers were part of the reason I walked away from a graduate program for which I had a fully paid fellowship. The Political Science faculty was divided over whether or not words or numbers should be the preferred way to assess the acceptability of research conclusions. The numbers people were louder in a field of study that aspired to be a "science." Several of us on fellowship who valued words more than numbers left.

I have written before about how my beloved game of baseball has embraced data analytics as a foundation for deciding what move a manager should make in a game or which player to keep on the team or not. A few old-school guys still around understand such intangibles as grit, perseverance, determination and will.

If something happens 85% of the time, is it ever worthwhile to consider backing the 15%? Choosing the 85% is the safe bet. But 15% of the time, that is the wrong bet. It is a human being, subjective, beset by swirling emotions and memories from experience, that must choose.

I wonder if some of the underlying angst abroad in the world is a factor of a feeling shared by folks that their human-ness, with all of its imperfections, is threatened by the rise in the importance of data and numbers as measures of their value. There are books in that data center of long-standing called a library that warn about numbers replacing names. Of that I am 100% certain.

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