

## **By Numbers**

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Our relation to information is more and more a relation to numbers. I find it impossible to know how to be of one mind about these numbers, because they slice my existence in two. It seems that it is impossible to be completely of one mind about these numbers, since they divide our existence in two. For living in a world of abundant information means I have to be simultaneously in the world of big numbers, and the world of small numbers, of which I myself am one. The most important kinds of information to which I have access and on which I feel I ought to be able to act rationally, tends nowadays to come in the form of big numbers – the numbers of people succumbing to stroke, owning cats, burning coal, voting for UKIP, or simply existing in the world – and since I used the phrase ‘big numbers’ a few seconds ago, the number of people in the world has gone up by 47 (actually closer to 48, but only odd numbers sound exact). Big numbers can, I know, in the long term, be counted on. On the small scale, by contrast, the world of one thing at a time and one thing or another in which, as a finite creature skewered in space and time, I have to live. Things are sputteringly, spasmodically erratic. For example, on average, global road traffic fatalities, seem to chug along at a rate of about one every 25 seconds, with suicides limping slightly behind this figure, at around 2 a minute. But this gives little help in knowing what my chances are as I am poised to cross the Euston Road. We can assume that, like buses, traffic fatalities come along in clusters rather than on a regular schedule, with peaceful lulls in the global death-count for minutes at a time, followed by spectacular, screeching pile-ups which increase the tally by a dozen or so. Similarly, hovering spoon in hand over my triple decker Death By Chocolate, I may reflect on my personal cardiac odds. I may have a 10% chance of a heart attack in the next 5 years, but I have a 0% chance of having 10% of a heart attack. Nor can I smooth out the risk by putting it on a sort of existential tick, since I also have a 0% chance of having 2% of a heart attack in each of those 5 years. No, I’m either in for a heart attack, a whole and juicily irrefutable infarct, or I’m not. The more information I have, the more I am split between these two forms of accounting, one to the right and the other to the left of the decimal point, in one of which I have a 10% chance, and in the other of which, all along, my chances will only ever have been 0% or 100%. I am scissored between these two worlds, both of which indubitably exist, and exist inseparably from each other, since, after all, the big numbers are just the cumulations of all the little ones, yet I cannot live, or at least cannot possibly turn out to have lived, in both at the same time. There is either safety in numbers, or my number is up.