

Doubly-Damned Lies

Nobody asked but ...

Here is what Wikipedia has to say about lies, damned lies , and statistics:

Mark Twain popularized the saying in Chapters from My Autobiography, published in the North American Review in 1907. “Figures often beguile me,” he wrote, “particularly when I have the arranging of them myself; in which case the remark attributed to Disraeli would often apply with justice and force: ‘There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.’”^[2]

Alternative attributions include, among many others (for example Walter Bagehot and Arthur James Balfour) the radical English journalist and politician Henry Du Pré

Labouchère (1831–1912), Jervoise Athelstane Baines,^[3] and British politician and man of letters Leonard H. Courtney, who used the phrase in 1895 and two years later became president of the Royal Statistical Society. Courtney is quoted by Baines (1896) as attributing the phrase to a “wise statesman”,^[4] but he may have been referring to a future statesman rather than a past one.^[5] The phrase has also been attributed to Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington.^{[6][7]}

Edward Tufte, a master statistician, said, “It is straightforward for me to be ethical, responsible, and kind-hearted because I have the resources to support that.” But it takes more, because too often, too many people with resources choose exploitation, irresponsibility, and mean-spiritedness to gain more resources, pointedly those of power.

I have begun to get the impression that the actual cost of living is not accurately reflected in government-produced statistical indices. I have spent hours perusing the federal presentation of statistics. The amount of data is stupendous, but I can’t tell you where it begins and ends. The amount of information that you get from that data is unknowable.

Part of the problem is that there is no verifiable central repository, and even if there were, the configuration would evolve from moment to moment. There is no reliable standard for answering the questions about who, what, when, where, why, and how (process, how much, how many, etc.) There are no conceptual handles for grasping the associations and relationships among the data. It is a miasma. It is a sargasso sea of loose ends. I now understand how the Pentagon could lose trillions, or why we will never know how much particular programs cost, or why boondoggles are endless. If the government does accounting like it does everything else, why are we keeping score?

— Kilgore Forelle