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THE HUMAN NARRATIVE BEHIND THE NUMBERS

Stories of a Smart Nation

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On March 19, astronaut Tim Kopra tweeted a photo showing the nighttime view of Singapore. The image was taken with Mr Kopra's digital camera from the International Space Station, 420km above the surface of the Earth.

From that distance, the whole of Singapore can be seen in a single shot. The highways are clearly identifiable, lit by lamp posts and car headlights. Singapore's busy airport and sea port twinkle at night. Other parts, such as the Central Catchment area, also stand out, conspicuous by their darkness. To me, the photo was a fascinating form of data visualisation, giving a stunning overview of many tiny, individual data points. I wondered about the lights. Where are they? Who had their lights on at that time, and why? What were they doing? And why was there no light in other places?

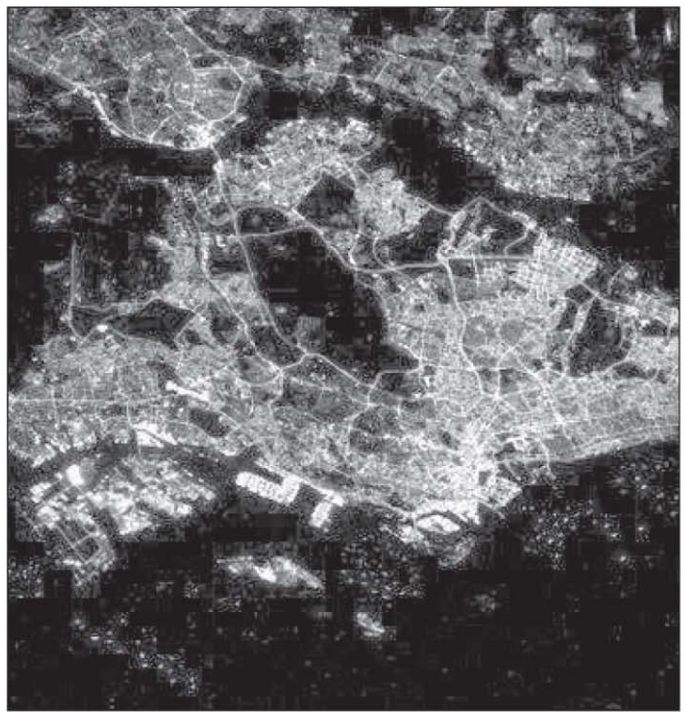
In this era of the Smart Nation, data are sometimes referred to as "the new oil". Like oil in the 18th century, data are the 21st century's new resource — vast and mostly untapped.

Framing data in this way gives one the feeling of being on the cusp of a new age of exploration, value-creation and development. Those who see the value of data and learn to exploit them will reap huge rewards.

This frame drives much of Singapore's discussion on being a Smart Nation. It also makes data sound like a commodity, homogenous and fungible. It is too easy to think that data visualised in this way is abstraction. But behind every light and every data point, there is a unique, individual experience.

Data are not abstractions: We need to be more sensitive to this. The current conversation about data and the Smart Nation is usually either about government involvement or company profits. We seldom talk about the human narrative behind the numbers.

Yet, data exploration invites us into a messy, uncharted space, full of questions that need further investigation. We need to be curious about the data and look at them in different ways. What can we say (and not say) about the narratives behind the numbers?



Astronaut Tim Kopra's snapshot of Singapore from space. As Singapore marches into its Smart Nation ambitions, its next big thing will be to tell the world its stories. PHOTO: TIM KOPRA'S TWITTER

How can we tell better stories about a Smart Nation?

First, we have to make data and the storytelling about data part of our culture. Data are not just a natural resource like oil. They are also a cultural resource that needs to be generated, protected and interpreted. Data, as culture, also means that we must expect them to drive our decision-making and, in some cases, change our behaviour. Of course, as Plato pointed out, human behaviour stems not just from knowledge but also from desire and emotion — the latter two conveniently and squarely in the domain of stories. Can we bring the storytelling element back into data to help us make better decisions?

Second, we must recognise that the term raw data is an oxymoron. Before Mr Kopra even took the photo, a number of decisions were made: Where and when to take the photo. What camera to use and where to point the camera. As data collection tools get more sophisticated and ubiquitous, decisions around where, when and how data are collected affect what we see and the stories we can tell. A deeper understanding about choices made when data are collected will help us tell better stories. What data have we chosen to collect (or not)? Whose stories are not being told?

Third, we should embrace the multiplicity and complexity of the data. One of the beautiful things about stories is that they include multiple points of view and do not necessarily seek to resolve the tensions between, and perhaps even within, them.

There is a line in Victor Hugo's Les Miserables that asks: "Where the telescope ends, the microscope begins. Which of the two has the grander view?" Both the telescope and microscope unveil a view that is not seen with the naked eye. Telescopes enable us to see things far away, beyond the immediately obvious. Microscopes enable us to see things in front of us in fascinating detail.

In the same way, data can enable us to see beyond the immediately obvious and make observations about issues that appear remote, and also to focus on a single issue and dig deeply to uncover new insights. Things are seldom what they seem. Which has the grander view? How can we use stories to draw out the complexity of the data?

Fourth, we must see the patterns in the data. In 1969, author Piers Anthony wrote a novel titled Macroscope. The novel's central plot device was a macroscope, a large crystal that could focus on any location in space-time with exceptional clarity.

In the novel, scientists booked time to use the macroscope and were able to explore space in an unprecedented way, discovering patterns across space-time that were not obvious before. This was a powerful tool. Advances in technology help us do the same with data today; perhaps looking at the data in this way will show us that there are patterns and archetypes in the stories. I hope to see the story archetype of a bold, entrepreneurial and experimental nation through Singapore's many manifestations as a British sea port, young country and now Smart Nation.

As we march purposefully into our Smart Nation ambitions, our next big thing will be to tell the stories of Singapore to one another and to the world. But sometimes, I worry. Father Zosima, the wise elderly character in Dostoevsky's novel The Brothers Karamazov, observed that the more he loved humanity in general, the less he loved man in particular. I think the same observation can be made about a Smart Nation.

The more we love the data visualisation, big picture, 420km view of Singapore, the more we run the risk of loving each data point, each little light, less. I hope we guard against this and learn again how to fall in love with the narrative behind the numbers: The multiple, personal and particular stories that make up a Smart Nation.

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This piece first appeared in The Birthday Book 2016, a book of essays by 51 different authors on Singapore's Next Big Thing. TODAY will be publishing other essays from the book in the coming weeks.