

I had long discussions with Christoph von Braun about the subject of the contribution to ISR which he had promised, and somewhat hesitantly he asked if he could expand a short article he had written for *Die Zeit*, published on 26 October 1990 which he had called “*Das Mass aller Dinge*”. I was glad to accept his suggestion, as it was highly interdisciplinary and very imaginative.

In his abstract for the article, published in March 1993, which he called “Numbers—Magic and Mania” he wrote: “Quantitative information has become the prime tool for the description of the world at large. Irrespective of a country’s ideological disposition or level of development, statistics and numbers serve as ultimate sources of proof and disproof in all areas of science, technology, industry, society and everyday life. They are the dominant foundation of credibility and act as the prime channel of communication at the expense of verbal expression. The increasing use of numbers can be traced to classical Greece and has evolved ever since.”

“In today’s world this is threatening to lead to a quantitative overload. Although the human brain is not adept at performing complex calculations, or even the understanding of the significance of very large, very small or very many values simultaneously, society has become obsessed with numbers. At the same time growing technological sophistication in electronics, as well as analytical and measurement instrumentation allows—and therefore demands—levels of detail that far exceed the degree of precision actually required in many instances. This has led to counter-productive forms of number usage, which serve more to confuse, than to clarify, or which hide more than they reveal.”

“At the same time, forefront indicators in mathematics and natural science are pointing away from numerical thinking. Finally, the way in which the unbridled attempt to quantify ourselves and our world can lead to serious misinterpretations of reality, is illustrated. Ultimately, numbers are instruments of explanation, not of understanding. They should, therefore, be servants, not masters.” What Editor would refuse such an article?

There were three illustrations to this article: The letter π as a symbol of a transcendental, timeless and endless number, portrayed in 25 concentric circles of ever increasing decimal places. The next illustration was a page of the *Wall Street Journal*, giving future prices. I could contribute a historical item from my own collection, a page from the inventor of logarithms, John Napier’s (1550-1617). His first Continental Edition of *Mirifici logarithmorum canonis descriptio*, was published in Lyons, France, in 1619. Such logarithmic tables were of course indispensable for all scientific calculations, until the recent invention of the electronic calculators.