

Factfulness Summary

By Hans Rosling

When was the last time you argued with someone on the Internet? Did you dazzle them with some well-researched facts and evidence? Did you win the argument, or did they merely respond with, 'Let's agree to disagree, shall we?'

Despite living in a knowledge economy, the fight against anecdotal evidence, unsubstantiated opinions, and general ignorance, is at an all-time high. And, it's easy to get angry and despondent about the world, but *Factfulness* indicates that things are *a lot better* than we think.

Hans Rosling passed away in 2017, and devoted his final years to writing this book. It's a collaborative effort between him, his son, and his daughter-in-law. Between them, they have a myriad of experience. Hans was a global health professor, an advisor to UNICEF and the WHO, and was listed as one of *Time* magazine's most influential people. Ola and Anna have received international awards for their work in UX and data design. This collaborative effort combines one man's experience in research, academia, and global health, with the youthful inventiveness of his children in order to "measure ignorance systematically."

After years of exhaustive research, Hans Rosling discovered something very worrying. Did you know that chimpanzees answering tests at random, know more about the world than humans do? And, the more tests the authors conducted, the direr the levels of ignorance became. Moreover, it's not just the incidence of ignorance that's alarming, but that there's such a dogmatic persistence towards such ignorance. At first, Rosling believed that it was all down to outdated teaching methods and

archaic knowledge. However, after recruiting his children to develop sexy teaching tools brimming with infographics and graphs, he realized the medium wasn't the problem. Upgrading teaching wasn't solving the problem; there was a much larger obstacle at hand.

We'll briefly look at the problems that have arisen from a warped worldview and an intense leaning towards the dramatic. But what or who is to blame for this, and how do you solve it? And more importantly, how do you change opinions and worldviews, not just for a few hours after a lecture, but more permanently? These are the challenges posed in this insightful book on facts, and how to use them.

It's Quiz Time

By way of introduction, let's engage with a handful of the 13 questions posed by our authors.

Do you think that the majority of the world's population live in, low, middle, or high-income countries?

Has the proportion of those living in extreme poverty worldwide, almost doubled, remained more or less the same, or almost halved?

Is the average life expectancy 50, 60, or 70 years of age?

Have 20%, 50%, or 80% of the world's one-year-old children been vaccinated against some form of disease?

Do 20%, 50%, or 80% of the world's population have some access to

electricity?

And finally, according to global climate experts, will the average temperature get warmer, remain the same, or get colder over the next 100 years?

Some of the answers from this quiz might shock you. The fact is that most of us live in middle-income countries and have a life expectancy of 70. There's an 80% vaccination rate, and 80% of the world's population has access to electricity. But yes, the world is obviously getting warmer, there are no surprises there. The aim of the 13 question quiz isn't to trick or to humiliate, but rather to illustrate the facts. The facts are well-documented and undisputed, yet most people end up with abysmal scores. This tells us that we have a doom and gloom mentality, and we also have an aversion to facts.

You may have noticed you haven't been given an answer to the question about those living in extreme poverty? Hans Rosling uses this example of a severe disconnect between what we think we know, and what's real. Over the past two decades, extreme poverty has halved. It might take a moment for that to sink in, because that's a fact that challenges most of our perceptions about life on earth as we know it. Astonishingly, only 7% answer this question correctly.

The Overdramatic Worldview

So we know that chimpanzees know more about the world than your average Joe, but here's something to blow your mind. At the World Economic Forum in Davos back in 2015, Hans Rosling found himself presenting a lecture to the world's most powerful minds. Audience

members included people at the top of their fields, researchers, world leaders, activists, UN officials, and so on. Rosling was armed with three questions, and was worried about the knowledge of his audience members. This is because the success of his lecture hinged on the audience doing badly at his quiz.

This risky experiment revealed that the group of experts knew more about poverty than the general public. However, when it came to population growth, and basic health care, it was two-nil to the chimps. Astoundingly chimps and their ability to randomly choose between, A, B, or C, did better at a test than some of the world's finest brains. It appeared that top-level decision and policymakers were woefully ill-equipped with the basic facts. For this reason, the authors have committed their careers to teaching what they call a "fact-based worldview." It's not only about providing facts, but also about teaching people how to interpret them.

Close your eyes and think about the world. How do you feel about the current situation? Think about things like war, poverty, corruption, violence, natural disasters, and so on. It's likely that you feel things are bad, and that they're going to get worse. It's a leaning towards a worst-case scenario or overdramatic worldview, and it's often misleading. The facts indicate that bad things are happening around us, but each year the world is improving. So while there are challenges, progress is actually winning the race.

Stop for a moment and reflect on this. Has your mind altered at all, or are you still dubious about all of this, 'things actually aren't so bad after all'? The trouble with the overdramatic worldview is it's not just about a gap in knowledge, outdated information, the media, propaganda, or fake news. An overdramatic worldview is hardwired in each of us. It's difficult to shift

this mindset because our brains are responsible for perceiving the world around us.

Our brains have evolved in many ways, and our instincts have helped us survive in various situations. To avoid immediate danger, we've had to make decisions very quickly, and with not a lot of time to mull over facts. Furthermore, humans tend toward drama in terms of our narratives and how we tell stories about the world. Think about how often you embellish a story for dramatic effect? And there's nothing wrong with this, but we have to be aware of how dramatic instincts can compound a dramatic worldview.

The Factfulness Worldview

Hans Rosling asserts: 'This book is my very last battle in my lifelong mission to fight devastating global ignorance. It is my last attempt to make an impact on the world: to change people's ways of thinking, calm their irrational fears, and redirect their energies into constructive activities.'

It's not enough just to put together interesting presentations, theatrical lectures, and insightful content. The idea is that we need to shift our perceptions of data. In short, data is therapy. When we engage with data and statistics, it should give us peace and enlightenment, and make us realize that our overdramatic worldview is probably unfounded. The message here is that we need to treat facts and factfulness as we do mindfulness. It should become a daily practice that will lead to better decision-making, perspective based on rational fears, and a more stress-free and positive mindset.

Factfulness introduces us to 10 fundamental instincts that help us better understand the world and interpret situations. We'll look at a few of these instincts to get us on the path to factfulness.

The Gap Instinct

We love to formulate binaries. We often see the world in black and white, which causes us to tune out nuance. What do you think is one of the most significant issues with the economy? Is it the vast gap between the rich and the poor?

What's between the rich and the poor though? Thinking about economics in this manner leads us to think about injustice, unfairness, anger, and so on. When you split the world into two groups, you end up with an either-or situation, which creates very specific mindsets and ideologies.

Think back to the earlier question where we learned that most of the world lives in middle-income countries. What does this tell us about the rich and the poor? It tells us that it's a lot more complicated, than the them versus us narrative we've been holding onto for so long.

Using comprehensive data and facts, we're shown that the world isn't simply divided into two. And whether we use developed vs. developing, third world vs. first world, the west vs. the rest, or us vs. them, these binaries are no longer useful or factual.

So let's look at some facts to help us understand this. Did you know that the average life expectancy in low-income countries is 62? Most people have enough to eat in these countries, access to water, basic healthcare

like vaccinations, and most children finish primary school. The misconception is that life in low-income countries is impossibly hard and that there's extraordinary suffering. And, while no one is saying that there isn't tremendous suffering, the misconception is that things are worse than they are. Globally only 9% of people live in low-income countries. Many low-income countries are more developed than a lot of people think. Hence, the common belief that there's a world of us and them, where all of the so-called "them," live in abject poverty, is a complete myth.

To avoid a binary view of the world, the proposal is to divide the world into four clear income levels. If we divide 7 billion people into four income levels, it's a lot easier to see that the world isn't as clearly divided between rich vs. poor, and that the majority of humans fall into levels 2 and 3.

So how do we keep our gap instinct in check, when the world is presented to us in binaries, and we're constantly being threatened with notions like, "the widening gap"? The first piece of advice is that averages can be misleading, and that we need to look at numbers in a more critical way. As with many things, we tend to look at averages as the gap between two numbers, and as a result, we often see gaps that aren't there. It's better to look at numbers in terms of ranges or view them on a continuum. By doing this, we'll often see overlaps as opposed to gaps, which is a much more realistic representation.

The second thing we can do is to be aware of how we compare extreme situations. When asked to compare the government of two countries you may look at North Korea and Sweden as two extreme examples. It's seldom that people don't choose extreme opposites because it's human nature to compare things. So next time you're asked to analyze

something, try to avoid leaping straight into binary mode.

The final thing is to realize that there are different levels of rich, middle-income, and poor. Most of us need to adopt the idea of "relative poverty," because poverty is country-specific. Poverty is often viewed as a blanket term, and poor has lost a specific meaning. We need to be a lot more aware of the distinction between the different income levels, because there's a vast difference between Level 1 and Level 2, even though this may be hard for most of us living on Level 4 to understand.

So, the first rule of factfulness is considering gaps, and reframing our mindsets to think about the world in a way that avoids binaries. In short, look for the majority, because the majority is somewhere between the rich and the poor, the developed and the developing, and the them vs. us.

The Negativity Instinct

Do you tend towards the glass half full, or the glass half empty? At the moment, how do you feel about the world, your life, your job, and your relationships?

The truth is that most of us notice the negatives more than the positives. Data reveals that the majority of people think that the world is getting worse. This doesn't mean that the world is in a bad state. It means worse. When one considers this propensity towards the overdramatic worldview, it's easy to identify why so many people are stressed, depressed, and anxious.

Early on, we were introduced to the idea that statistics are therapeutic. We don't tend to look at positive achievements and all of the

improvements that have happened in the world. Life expectancy is up, extreme poverty levels have fallen, and the book provides an additional 32 reasons to look on the bright side. On the decrease are things like slavery, HIV infections, child labor, nuclear arms, and hunger. While on the rise, we have protected nature, women's right to vote, literacy, child cancer survival, girls in school, access to water, mobile phones, and the Internet. There's a lot to be immensely grateful for.

So how do we account for the negativity instinct? The first thing is to remember that we tend to look back on the past with rose-tinted glasses. You'll often hear people talk about the "good old days." Hence, when we reflect on the past, we need to consider the facts, and look at how much has improved.

Regarding the news that we engage with, there's a saying in the world of journalism, "if it bleeds, it leads." In a nutshell, this means that bad news sells. Access to news and information is at an all-time high, but this also means access to bad news has never been higher. We're truly living in a time where we know all of the world's problems, and very few of its improvements. Then, there's also a big difference between thinking and feeling. How we feel isn't the same as what we think. Feeling like the world is getting worse isn't the same as thinking it's worse. Feeling is based on opinion, and thinking is based on facts. The facts dictate that despite all the bad things that are happening, we're still in better shape than we were.

Embracing Factfulness

There are some other things about the world and ourselves that we should know.

No matter how much we want it to, a line will never continue on an upward trajectory. At some point, a line will begin to curve, and curves come in many different shapes. This is important when considering trends and expectations.

We also need to change our relationship with fear, and how we manage it. We respond to frightening things because that's how our brains are wired. However, not everything that's frightening is necessarily risky. We often associate risk with fear, so we need to learn how to calculate risk by weighing up fear and reality. A useful way of looking at this is by viewing risk as a combination of danger and exposure. Weighing up danger and exposure allows us to react in an informed and logical way. Fear makes us perceive the world differently, and clarity is only achieved through calmness, so when we're feeling frightened, we need to try to relax and breathe.

Often we observe the world as a set of comparisons and different scales and sizes. When dealing with data, we should compare all of the numbers in a data set. Dividing is another way of making better sense of numbers because it helps us analyze big and small groups. Aside from comparisons, we also tend to generalize a lot more than we should. Be aware of your tendencies to generalize and interrogate categories as much as possible.

To live more factfully, we also need to embrace a range of broad and varied perspectives. Once you have these, it's a lot easier to find workable solutions. Don't be afraid to test ideas, to collaborate with

others, and remember that numbers tell a good story. Avoid blaming others at all costs because no human progress was made through blaming others. Rather than looking at who's to blame, find out what causes something to happen in the first place. And when something good happens, focus on the system that allowed it to happen. Finally, distinguish between importance and urgency. This is where relevant data is crucial because it's needed as a measure before big decisions are made. No one can predict the future, but you're a step closer to predicting outcomes if you test an idea.

One of the core messages of *Factfulness*, is that change often happens gradually, and gradual changes can have a considerable impact. Furthermore, update your knowledge regularly, think about how cultural and social values change over time, and remember all of the examples of big and small changes you've encountered in your own life.

In Conclusion

Factfulness is about embracing humility and curiosity. We all need to admit when we're wrong, when we're leaning towards feeling, over thinking, and when we don't know the answer to something. We also need to develop a heightened sense of curiosity and a thirst for knowledge. We need to update our knowledge regularly, and also to embrace the fact that data is therapeutic. Finally, and crucially we need to adapt to changing our opinions if they don't match the facts.

We're often stressed and anxious because we're not approaching the world with a factfulness worldview. The fact is the world is a lot better than we think it is. 'When we have a fact-based worldview, we can see the world is not as bad as it seems – and we can see what we have to do to keep making it better.'