

Education, population, poverty, tax...getting views on topics like those in Jersey isn't the difficult part – but have you ever noticed how many people sound eminently credible when talking about them, even though they may actually be basing their views on conjecture, false facts and blind guesswork?

There is a real danger in making the 'facts' fit the opinion, rather than the other way around – which is exactly the point at which someone with an eye on the latest buzzwords will smugly insert the phrase 'post-truth' into the conversation, imagining its actually helpful.

So, we've asked the Jersey Policy Forum to add some robust material to those crucial local debates – the point is not to provoke agreement or acquiescence; it is to provide reliable material on which others can build their views.



Gailina Liew, Director, Jersey Policy Forum

Factfulness

A couple of months ago, I wrote a piece called 'Drinking from a firehose' (<http://online.fliphtml5.com/ktlu/ogvv/#p=70>) and suggested that information literacy is a critical skill for everyone to master. I've since come across a book by Dr. Hans Rosling that emphasizes the importance of understanding the context and provides tools to help. 'Factfulness' is the title of the book and many people have noted its usefulness, including Bill Gates, who gifted all US graduates this year with a free electronic copy of the book. So, what is Hans talking about?

The subtitle for the book, Ten Reasons We're Wrong About The World – And Why Things Are Better Than You Think, provides a clue. It turns out that Hans is a Swedish doctor and global health expert and has been travelling around the world, giving TED talks and lectures to the leading thinkers and international development experts. He's discovered that

very few people have a clear fact-based understanding of the state of our world. How does he know this? He's been asking people to answer 13 multiple-choice questions. Each question posed has 3 choices where 1 answer is correct. There are no trick questions. All of the answers are based on well-documented facts that are publicly available and reported by the UN and various other well-known organizations. The questions relate to the global state of issues such as living in poverty, access to education and health, population growth and the environment.

For example, question three is asking about the trend in poverty:

In the last 20 years, the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has: (a) almost doubled, (b) remained more or less the same, or (c) almost halved?

What would your answer be? The correct answer is (c). It's a pretty incredible achievement to realize; also incredible to see Hans report that an average of only 7%

of people he asked got the right answer!

How about his question nine:

How many of the world's 1-year old children today have been vaccinated against some disease? (a) 20%, (b) 50%, or (c) 80%

Asking about vaccinations is really an indicator about having access to basic modern health care. The correct answer is (c). Another incredible achievement but, on average, Hans reports that only 13% of people he asked got it right. So, why does this matter?

Hans believes that we, as humans, have evolved over time to rely on certain basic instincts that helped us to survive in small groups of hunters and gatherers. These instincts provide our brains with short-cuts when confronted with a threat so that we can just react instead of engaging in critical thinking. In the modern world, most of us do not have to worry about being hunted by another creature for dinner but our brains are still driven by our instincts and

that's why we often react to sensational headlines and alarming numbers presented in isolation by frantic activity instead of calmly assessing the facts that might be right in front of our eyes. In this book, Hans suggests that 'factfulness' is about "using data as therapy" to calm our innate human tendencies to be overly dramatic so that we can dispel misconceptions and engage in more constructive activity to address the actual problems that we have.

The first example that Hans uses to illustrate the power of what he calls the 'Gap Instinct' is to look at labelling countries as being 'developing' or 'developed' which focuses on the two extremes. In fact, today, 75% of people live in middle-income countries, right where the 'gap' is supposed to be! That's because the number of people living in extreme poverty has been almost halved over the last 20 years (remember question three above) so much progress has been made. The 'two-bucket' way of looking at countries may have been based on facts in 1965 but today, Hans believes that using 4 categories is more helpful. Bill

Gates agrees and has publicly declared that he will move to the framework that Hans has developed.

Hans goes through each of the 10 human instincts that can lead us astray in similar fashion and suggests that these dramatic instincts can be brought under control by making a habit of asking key questions and taking action on the data to end up with a more 'factful' view:



Based on free teaching material from www.gapminder.org

Besides being an interesting and eye-opening read, why has this book made such an impression?

Information literacy and factfulness; these two concepts should help us to understand where we are right now so that we can better chart a path to get to where we want to be as a society. Before the days of GPS, a sailor would be in danger when the fog descended as there would be no reliable reference points by which to navigate.

Would it be useful to look at Jersey through Hans' eyes? Can we look at Jersey in a factful way? What issues would you like to explore using this approach? How might we go about it? Perhaps a factful conversation with you and others that care about an important issue would be a good start?

What do you think? The Jersey Policy Forum is interested in your views. Please share your thoughts by email to contact@jerseypolicyforum.org