

Book Review

Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World and Why Things are Better Than You Think

Reviewed by Cecilia Emanuela Băsu, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania

Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World – And Why Things Are Better Than You Think
Hans Rosling with Ola Rosling and Anna Rosling Rönnlund

©2018 by Sceptre

352 pp.

\$14.99

ISBN 978 1 473 63748 1

Hans Rosling was a Swedish medical doctor, professor in international health, statistician and world-renowned public speaker. He had the role of advisor for World Health Organization and UNICEF, and co-founder of *Médecin Sans Frontières* in Sweden. He held several TED talks (viewed more than 35-million times) and a multitude of speeches at various global conferences, including at 2015 Davos World Economic Forum. He was included in *Time's* magazine's one hundred most influential people in the world. This book was his last mission, his legacy to the world, as he died making final notes on the draft manuscript.

His mission was to promote the use of data to understand the development trends of the world.

He co-founded The Gapminder Foundation together with his son Ola Rosling and his daughter-in-law Annal Rosling Rönnlund. They developed Trendalyzer, a software that presents UN and World Bank data trends as animated bubble charts for ease of presentation and understanding of world trends.

The book title and subtitle are self-explanatory: "Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World – and Why Things are better than you think". It seems that there is no entry for the word "factfulness" in the most reputable English dictionaries (Oxford, Cambridge and Merriam-Webster), suggesting that this is a word invented by Hans Rosling. Considering his legacy and life mission, we can interpret this new concept similarly to the one of "mindfulness," but with more facts and figures.

Speaking about the contribution made by this book, there is no better description than the one of Bill Gates: "an indispensable guide to thinking clearly about the world."

For the ones that know Hans Rosling's work, and even for the ones that do not, you will be pleased to know that this book is the quintessence of Hans' mission to change the people's skewed view of the world. The contents of this book are the result of 18 years of work of the three co-founders of The Gapminder Foundation. Thus, while many ideas are not necessarily new, this is a reference

book – a practical guide - with clearly marked tools to help us improve our view of the world, to be used now and in the future.

Why the need for this book and where did Hans' mission come from?

As a professor of international health, he was teaching his students global trends and he was puzzled by how, even when students were provided with data trends, they still maintained a skewed view of the world. To gain more insights, Hans moved from students to other audiences (including highly-educated ones, Nobel laureates and medical researchers) and started to systematically measure the ignorance about the world, typically with a live audience being tested on their global knowledge. Little to no differences amongst the audiences. It appears that it is not about being intelligent, but about how we perceive the world, i.e. systematically wrong as Hans demonstrates by gathering empirical evidence.

But how do we know if we are ignorant about the world? We measure this with the 13-fact question test included in the book at the very onset, so that the reader is tested about his or her knowledge of the world. Readers that are already familiar with Hans Rosling's work might score well in this test on this occasion. But even these readers will benefit from reading the book, as it is full of interesting insights and practical steps on how to equip us with a better understanding of the world.

This global-knowledge scale measures our knowledge about important world issues such as population (geographic distribution, growth expectancy, deaths by natural disasters, life expectancy, children vaccination), wealth (global distribution of population based on income, extreme poverty), education (of female population), energy (access to electricity) and environment (climate change, endangered species).

All items, except climate change, seem to be perceived worse than the sheer reality of facts and figures.

Our skewed view of the world is caused mainly by our personal biases (recency effect bias, consistency bias, egocentric bias amongst many other), by our outdated information knowledge and by biased media information framed to dramatize the news. Strong dramatic headlines catch the attention of the audiences and will always be preferred by media, in the detriment of neutral news about normal positive facts or small incremental developments of the world, which would not get published nor would get attention from audiences.

From a knowledge-based perspective, Hans Rosling sets up the book with a didactic approach. He commences by assessing the global knowledge score of the reader – setting the baseline - and follows up by presenting 10 reasons why we are wrong about the world, reasons referred by Hans as instincts. Manifestly, the lesson is completed with the practical applications of factfulness.

The "Factfulness Rules of Thumb" summary at the end of the book can be used as a cheat-sheet only by those that understood each instinct described in chapters 1 to 10 and how to control for it: the gap instinct (control: look for the majority), the negativity instinct (control: expect bad news), the straight line instinct (control: lines might bend), the fear instinct (control: calculate the risks), the size instinct (control: get things in proportion), the generalization instinct (control: question your categories), the destiny instinct (control: slow change is still change), the single perspective instinct (control: get a toolbox), the blame instinct (control: resist pointing your finger) and the urgency instincts (control: take small steps).

Hans has a very didactic approach in presenting each instinct. From the very onset in the book, he states that the human mind is more receptive to stories, rather than numbers. Hans applies this knowledge and tells insightful stories (very often personal stories) in order to familiarize the readers with the concepts. He thus gets the audience prepared for the theory behind each instinct, always providing enough supporting evidence of the instinct through real world trend data (main sources: World Bank and United Nations). And because this is a reference book, Hans equips us with practical

thinking tools on how to control these instincts that interfere in our correct perception of the world (this is his factfulness knowledge that he passes onto the reader).

The main ideas in the book are derived from the concept of overdramatic worldview that most of the population has. Such view originates from a binary thinking: people tend to have the tendency to split the world in two categories (minimum and maximum wealth), without middle class. It is easier for us to conceptualize the world this way, through oversimplification. But as Hans proves with figures, the majority of the population actually lives in the middle of the scale.

The fact is that the world made significant progress on most important aspects over the last 20-100 years (wealth, education, medicine, etc.). Extreme poverty is rare, as the majority of the population lives in middle-income countries. Most families have two children on average and have access to preemptive medicine (their children get vaccinated). Education is no longer a male attribute for most families and daughters get educated. Most families consider travelling abroad for holidays, not as refugees. Most of us perceive the typical family differently, mainly because this common family depicted by Hans' data is rarely, if ever, broadcasted in the news. One could reiterate that the media is promoting a skewed view of the world. The fact is that dramatic news reaches an increasing audience. Consequently, the news is frequently covering dramas of refugees and extreme poverty. These stories represent in fact only a small percentage of the population and thus we perceive these extreme situations as being more frequent than they really are (a classic case of availability bias).

The most valuable idea that one can learn from the book, in my view, is that the global major institutions should not categorize the countries in 'developed' and 'developing'. A better categorization would be a 4-tier-income level countries, a structure that supports a better view of the positive trends in the world globally but also at the individual level. Some individuals or families can be at the highest income level 4, but live in 2nd or 3rd income-level countries.

This is an important shift in viewing the world, but easier to conceptualize than to operationalize. It took Hans Rosling 17 years and 14 conferences to convince the World Bank to make this shift in countries categories. Binary thinking might once more be the culprit.

One of the strengths of the book is the narrative style. The fact that it is written in plain English, as if it was narrated by Hans himself, makes it very enjoyable (plenty of humor, too), in addition to being easy to understand and convincing, as it is, quite naturally at this point, backed up by data.

The didactic approach in constructing and deconstructing the instincts that make us see the world worse than it really is, gives the valid premise of this book becoming an effective tool in combating ignorance in the future.

The target audience might include every person with concerns about the world and especially those who want to make a change in the world, be those students, educators, business leaders, journalists, activists, politicians.

Factfulness is using data and statistics as therapy, it is "understanding [the world we live in] as a source of mental peace." This 'therapeutic method' has practical benefits for the population, helping us to make better decisions at personal and business level, to be better consumers of news, to better use our energy in response to real dangers and to be less stressed about the misconceptions of the world.

Concisely, factfulness equips the reader with tools to replace instinctive reactions with critical thinking.

I believe that factfulness may be the next driver of change and progress in the world. No better words to conclude than Hans' own: "I have found fighting ignorance and spreading a fact-based worldview to be a sometimes frustrating but ultimately inspiring and joyful way to spend my life."