

### This Week's Top Articles

- **'Factfulness' test: how well do you know the world around you?** *Graham Hand*
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### 'Factfulness' test: how well do you know the world around you?

Graham Hand

It's not often that I read a book which makes me think differently about the world. Hans Rosling's *Factfulness* has a subtitle, "*Ten reasons we're wrong about the world – and why things are better than you think.*"

Bill Gates said of this book: "*One of the most important books I've ever read – an indispensable guide to thinking clearly about the world.*"

Please take the test before reading the review of the book in the following article. We asked the publisher and [Book Depository](#) for a special discount for our readers without success, but since the latter offers free postage of a hard cover version for only \$20 (or \$14 if you want to wait for the release of the soft cover), there's not much point shopping around.

Many of you will know Rosling from the extraordinary visualisation he created in 2010 on '200 Countries, 200 Years, 4 Minutes – The Joy of Stats'. Viewed some 8.5 million times, in only four minutes he takes us through how life expectancy and income changed around the world over 200 years. The [YouTube link is here](#).

**The Factfulness book starts with a quiz to test yourself about the world and how you understand it. We have recreated the test below so we can compare Cuffelinks readers with both the Australian and worldwide results. Please take a few minutes to do the test.**

### [Gapminder Test 2018 on Global Development](#)

**We will report the results in the next couple of weeks. In the meantime, you can read about some of the answers on [this link](#).**

Footnote: The material provided in *Factfulness* and *Gapminder* uses free global development data. They upload content to their website using animated techniques which make it easier to use. The World Bank initially objected, but Gapminder asked, "Don't you believe in free access to information in order for global forces to work as they should?" In 2010, the World Bank decided to release all its data for free. Gapminder operates a Creative Common Attribution Licence 4.0.

Free fact-questions from [www.gapminder.org](http://www.gapminder.org).

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## Factfulness and a childlike sense of wonder

Graham Hand

[SPOILER ALERT: In the previous article in Cuffelinks, we reproduced the 13-part questionnaire from the start of the *Factfulness* book, designed to test your understanding of world affairs. You will benefit most if you attempt it before reading this review. Consider [buying the book](#), it's only \$20 including postage.]

When Hans Rosling and his family founded the Gapminder Foundation in 2005, their mission was “to fight devastating ignorance with a fact-based review”. ‘Devastating’ is a strong word, but he has done us all a good service. As the book takes the reader systematically through dozens of worldviews where the majority of people hold wrong opinions, the most obvious question is ‘why?’ Why do the best-educated people know so little about global trends in population, health, education or demographics despite watching and reading the news every day? In fact, says Rosling, “*the most appalling results came from a group of Nobel laureates and medical researchers.*”

Rosling concludes we have an overdramatic worldview because of the way our brains work. After millions of years of evolution, the brain is designed to jump to immediate conclusions without much thinking, which once helped us to avoid attacks by sabre-toothed tigers. We are most interested in gossip and drama in the same way we crave sugar and fat, which were once a vital sources of energy. Obesity is a growing problem despite education about healthy food, in the same way our news instincts influence our worldview.

Our daily media consumption feeds this obsession with drama rather than reporting the gradual incremental progress the world is really experiencing. News delivers sensational stories rather than a wider perspective, and much of it is disproportionately emotional and negative and encourages quick conclusions.

### Close parallels with Daniel Kahneman

There are similarities with the arguments of Nobel Prize-winning behavioural economist, Daniel Kahneman, and his System 1 and System 2 thinking. He says there are two ways we make decisions: System 1 is automatic, fast, often subconscious and intuitive, while System 2 is slower, logical and deliberative. But System 2 also takes more effort, so we fall back on System 1 even for important decisions. It has implications for many activities, including investing, where we react in irrational ways to minor events. Similarly with Rosling, the drama of the immediate news cycle forces us into opinions and thoughts and often we do not take a slower, more logical look at the issues.

### What happens when you dive into the facts?

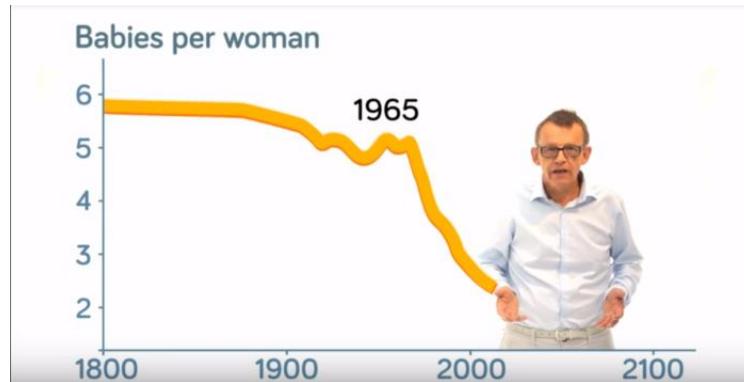
Rosling has no less an aim than to change the way people think and calm irrational fears. When people strip away the drama of the headline, they can be more hopeful about the world. He encourages critical analysis rather than instinctive thinking. It's like a healthy diet with more exercise and better food. You can even stay more alert to real danger than worrying about the wrong things. He wants people to return to a childlike sense of wonder about the world.

He also argues that when people think the world is becoming worse, it's not really thinking, it's feeling. Consider the selective reporting of the news cycle. Natural disasters, crime, wars, politics, corruption and terror. Most people are less interested in stories about gradual improvements in the lives of millions.

The solution is not to sugar-coat the news, but to keep two thoughts in mind at the same time while maintaining a wider context. For example, the dramatic news item might be that 12% of one-year-olds are not vaccinated, but that means nine out of ten children are. The non-vaccination figure has fallen from 66% as recently as 1980 despite there being two billion more people in the world.

### Rosling's most dramatic example

In a book offering many examples to support Rosling's claims, he says his most dramatic chart is the number of babies per woman from 1800 to today, as shown below in this extract from one of [Rosling's videos](#).



For most of history, and as recently as 1948, women on average gave birth to about six children each, and now it is headed for only two. This is a vital statistic as it shows billions of people are coming out of extreme poverty. They no longer need large families to toil on a small farm and as insurance against old age and child mortality. Better-educated women have fewer children, aided by access to contraceptives. This also means the period of fast population growth across the globe will soon be over.

My favourite financial example is Rosling's explanation of why many houses are half-built in Tunisia. It looks as if many Tunisians are lazy or cannot finish a project. Rather, as many Tunisians escape poverty, they have capacity to save but they don't have access to banks. Money can be stolen or lose its value through inflation. So they buy bricks, but as there's no space inside to store them and outside they might get stolen, they add their bricks to their house as they buy them. Over 10 to 15 years, they gradually build a better home.

### **Income defines what everyone in the world buys**

In fact, the vast majority of people in the world do not live in extreme poverty or extreme wealth, but somewhere in the middle. It's not as bad as most people believe and the lives of the majority of the world's population are somewhere in the middle. Rosling's powerful example is the distinction between developing and developed countries. Due to the vast differences in lifestyle found within any country, he argues, to label it either 'developed' or 'developing' can be misleading. He dispels the notion that the standard of living in each country is defined by culture. Rather, he argues, everywhere it is defined by income. Regardless of where a person lives, people of a comparable income tend to buy the same things: not only expensive items like cars and electrical equipment, but even toys and kitchen utensils.

### **Back strong opinions with strong facts**

I admire *Factfulness* for making the case for less cynicism and ignorance while remaining sceptical about the world. It is not a flowery book making out the world is a wonderful place, as of course there is serious inequity and injustice. But not as much as most of us think and opinions should be more nuanced than extreme.

After reading this book, I challenge myself not to react to the headlines or dramatic news items without considering other facts. Rosling has a simple rule that would surely make the world a better place of informed opinion: *only carry strong opinions when you have the supporting facts*. Many politicians and media commentators (especially our shock jocks who are frequently held libellous for badly-researched opinions) need to offer a more balanced view and we might not be so pessimistic about the planet we are all sharing.

Footnote: Hans Rosling wrote the book with his son, Ola Rosling, and Ola's wife, Anna Rosling Ronnlund. They conceived the idea in September 2015 and Hans was diagnosed with incurable pancreatic cancer in February 2016. He died in February 2017, and the book was finished to honor his memory.

The final words in the book are:

*"When we have a fact-based worldview, we can see that the world is not as bad as it seems – and we can see what we have to do to keep making it better."*

The writers have also created [Dollar Street](#), an online database on life in different countries.

How did you score in the test? Did you think the world was a worse place than is really is?

*Graham Hand is Managing Editor of Cuffelinks.*

## When the chimp wins the Factfulness test

Graham Hand

The Factfulness book includes [13 questions](#) at the beginning which you should have completed before reading this, as well as receiving your results. How did you go?

We will provide a full summary of the results from Cuffelinks readers in a couple of weeks, comparing them with Australian and worldwide results.

On the Gapminder website where the work of the Rosling family is shared, they include the results for five of the questions by respondents in Sweden, Norway, the US and South Africa.

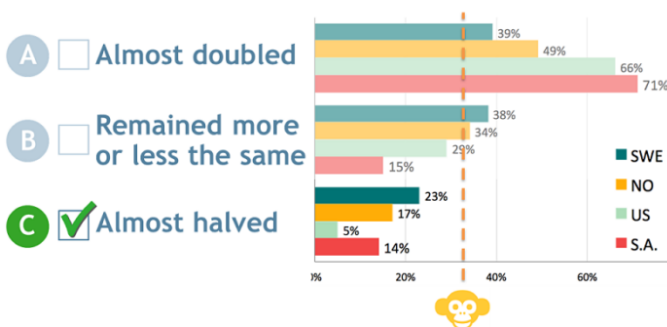
They also highlight with a chimp logo and a yellow line where a random response would occur, such as with three possible responses, a chimp would average a 33% correct response. The amazing finding is that in most questions in most countries, people do far worse than simple random guesses. We are so badly informed about the world, with such bias built into the way events and numbers are reported, that we perform worse than if we had a blind stab at the answer.

To read each of these charts: the four coloured bars show the proportion of people from each country who selected answers A, B or C, and the darker shading shows the correct answer. For example, in question 1 for the US, 66% of responders said the proportion of people living in extreme poverty has 'almost doubled' in the last 20 years, whereas the correct response of 'almost halved' was recorded by only 5%.

### Question 1

#### Extreme Poverty Rate Trend – ANSWERS

In the last 20 years the proportion of the World population living in extreme poverty has...

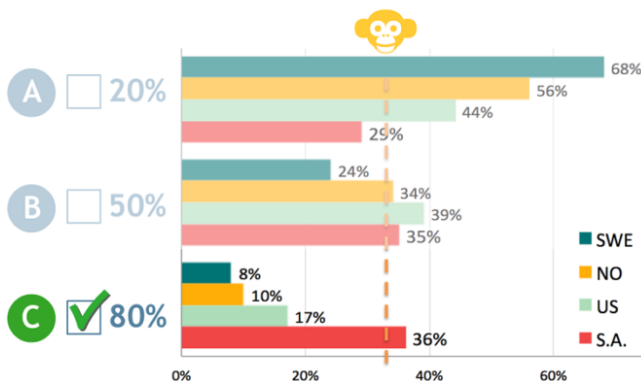


### Question 2

#### Vaccination Coverage – ANSWERS

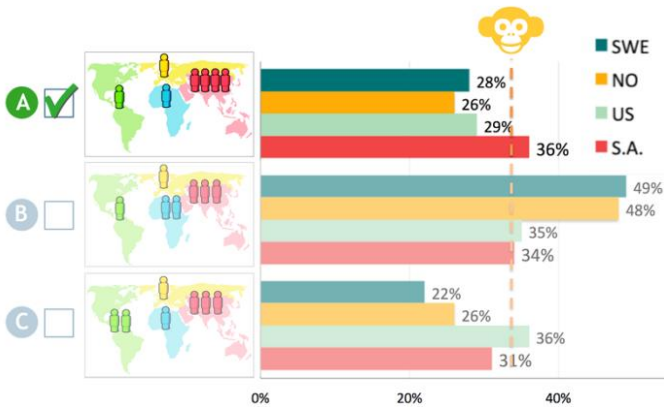
What percentage of the world's one-year old children is vaccinated against measles?

ANSWERS



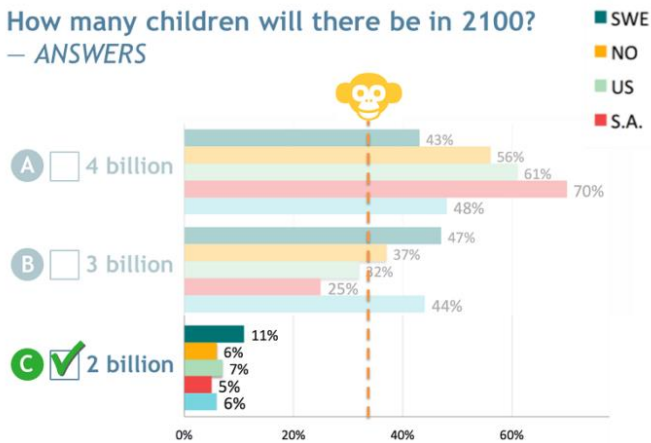
**Question 6**

Where do people live? – ANSWERS



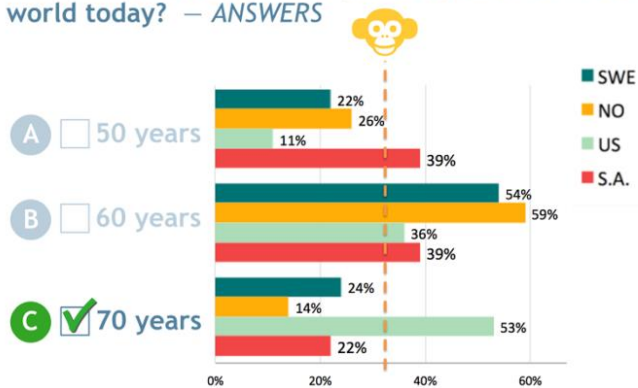
**Question 9**

How many children will there be in 2100? – ANSWERS



**Question 11**

What is the average life expectancy at birth in the world today? – ANSWERS



Source: [http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/unpp/panel\\_indicators.htm](http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/unpp/panel_indicators.htm)

Look out in a couple of weeks for a report on all the questions, and how we compare with Australia-wide results.

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