

Transcript – Ted talk - Hans & Ola Rosling « How not to be ignorant about the world ».

0:11 Hans Rosling: I'm going to ask you three multiple choice questions. Use this device. Use this device to answer. The first question is, how did the number of deaths per year from natural disaster, how did that change during the last century? Did it more than double, did it remain about the same in the world as a whole, or did it decrease to less than half? Please answer A, B or C. I see lots of answers. This is much faster than I do it at universities. They are so slow. They keep thinking, thinking, thinking. Oh, very, very good.

And we go to the next question. So how long did women 30 years old in the world go to school: seven years, five years or three years? A, B or C? Please answer.

1:01 And we go to the next question. In the last 20 years, how did the percentage of people in the world who live in extreme poverty change? Extreme poverty — not having enough food for the day. Did it almost double, did it remain more or less the same, or did it halve? A, B or C?

1:22 Now, answers. You see, deaths from natural disasters in the world, you can see it from this graph here, from 1900 to 2000. In 1900, there was about half a million people who died every year from natural disasters: floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruption, whatever, droughts. And then, how did that change?

1:46 Gopminder asked the public in Sweden. This is how they answered. The Swedish public answered like this: Fifty percent thought it had doubled, 38 percent said it's more or less the same, 12 said it had halved. This is the best data from the disaster researchers, and it goes up and down, and it goes to the Second World War, and after that it starts to fall and it keeps falling and it's down to much less than half. The world has been much, much more capable as the decades go by to protect people from this, you know. So only 12 percent of the Swedes know this.

2:22 So I went to the zoo and I asked the chimps. (Laughter) (Applause) The chimps don't watch the evening news, so the chimps, they choose by random, so the Swedes answer worse than random. Now how did you do? That's you. You were beaten by the chimps. (Laughter) But it was close. You were three times better than the Swedes, but that's not enough. You shouldn't compare yourself to Swedes. You must have higher ambitions in the world.

3:11 Let's look at the next answer here: women in school. Here, you can see men went eight years. How long did women go to school? Well, we asked the Swedes like this, and that gives you a hint, doesn't it? The right answer is probably the one the fewest Swedes picked, isn't it? (Laughter) Let's see, let's see. Here we come. Yes, yes, yes, women have almost caught up. This is the U.S. public. And this is you. Here you come. Ooh. Well, congratulations, you're twice as good as the Swedes, but you don't need me —

3:52 So how come? I think it's like this, that everyone is aware that there are countries and there are areas where girls have great difficulties. They are stopped when they go to school, and it's disgusting. But in the majority of the world, where most people in the world live, most countries, girls today go to school as long as boys, more or less. That doesn't mean that gender equity is achieved, not at all. They still are confined to terrible, terrible limitations, but schooling is there in the world today. Now, we miss the majority. When you answer, you answer according to the worst places, and there you are right, but you miss the majority.

4:37 What about poverty? Well, it's very clear that poverty here was almost halved, and in U.S., when we asked the public, only five percent got it right. And you? Ah, you almost made it to the chimps. (Laughter) (Applause) That little, just a few of you! There must be preconceived ideas, you know. And many in the rich countries, they think that oh, we can never end extreme poverty. Of course they think so, because they don't even know what has happened. The first thing to think about the future is to know about the present.

5:22 These questions were a few of the first ones in the pilot phase of the Ignorance Project in Gopminder Foundation that we run, and it was started, this project, last year by my boss, and also my son, Ola Rosling. (Laughter) He's cofounder and director, and he wanted, Ola told me we have to be more systematic when we fight devastating ignorance. So already the pilots reveal this, that so many in the public score worse than random, so we have to think about preconceived ideas, and one of the main preconceived ideas is about world income distribution.

5:57 Look here. This is how it was in 1975. It's the number of people on each income, from one dollar a day — (Applause) See, there was one hump here, around one dollar a day, and then there was one hump here somewhere between 10 and 100 dollars. The world was two groups. It was a camel world, like a camel with two humps, the poor ones and the rich ones, and there were fewer in between.

6:26 But look how this has changed: As I go forward, what has changed, the world population has grown, and the humps start to merge. The lower humps merged with the upper hump, and the camel dies and we have a dromedary world with one hump only. The percent in poverty has decreased. Still it's appalling that so many remain in extreme poverty. We still have this group, almost a billion, over there, but that can be ended now.

6:56 The challenge we have now is to get away from that, understand where the majority is, and that is very clearly shown in this question. We asked, what is the percentage of the world's one-year-old children who have got those basic vaccines against measles and other things that we have had for many years: 20, 50 or 80 percent? Now, this is what the U.S. public and the Swedish answered. Look at the Swedish result: you know what the right answer is. (Laughter) Who the heck is a professor of global health in that country? Well, it's me. It's me. (Laughter) It's very difficult, this. It's very difficult. (Applause)

7:37 However, Ola's approach to really measure what we know made headlines, and CNN published these results on their web and they had the questions there, millions answered, and I think there were about 2,000 comments, and this was one of the comments. "I bet no member of the media passed the test," he said.

7:59 So Ola told me, "Take these devices. You are invited to media conferences. Give it to them and measure what the media know." And ladies and gentlemen, for the first time, the informal results from a conference with U.S. media. And then, lately, from the European Union media. (Laughter) You see, the problem is not that people don't read and listen to the media. The problem is that the media doesn't know themselves.

8:28 What shall we do about this, Ola? Do we have any ideas? (Applause)

8:43 Ola Rosling: Yes, I have an idea, but first, I'm so sorry that you were beaten by the chimps. Fortunately, I will be able to comfort you by showing why it was not your fault, actually. Then, I will equip you with some tricks for beating the chimps in the future. That's basically what I will do.

9:04 But first, let's look at why are we so ignorant, and it all starts in this place. It's Hudiksvall. It's a city in northern Sweden. It's a neighborhood where I grew up, and it's a neighborhood with a large problem. Actually, it has exactly the same problem which existed in all the neighborhoods where you grew up as well. It was not representative. Okay? It gave me a very biased view of how life is on this planet. So this is the first piece of the ignorance puzzle. We have a personal bias.

9:37 We have all different experiences from communities and people we meet, and on top of this, we start school, and we add the next problem. Well, I like schools, but teachers tend to teach outdated worldviews, because they learned something when they went to school, and now they describe this world to the students without any bad intentions, and those books, of course, that are printed are outdated in a world that changes. And there is really no practice to keep the teaching material up to date. So that's what we are focusing on. So we have these outdated facts added on top of our personal bias.

10:16 What happens next is news, okay? An excellent journalist knows how to pick the story that will make headlines, and people will read it because it's sensational. Unusual events are more interesting, no? And they are exaggerated, and especially things we're afraid of. A shark attack on a Swedish person will get headlines for weeks in Sweden.

10:41 So these three skewed sources of information were really hard to get away from. They kind of bombard us and equip our mind with a lot of strange ideas, and on top of it we put the very thing that makes us humans, our human intuition.

We need to turn our intuition into strength again. We need to be able to generalize. So now I'm going to show you some tricks where the misconceptions are turned around into rules of thumb.

14:09 Let's start with the first misconception. This is very widespread. Everything is getting worse. You heard it. You thought it yourself. The other way to think is, most things improve. So you're sitting with a question in front of you and you're unsure. You should guess "improve." Okay? Don't go for the worse. That will help you score better on our tests. (Applause) That was the first one.

14:37 There are rich and poor and the gap is increasing. It's a terrible inequality. Yeah, it's an unequal world, but when you look at the data, it's one hump. Okay? If you feel unsure, go for "the most people are in the middle." That's going to help you get the answer right.

14:53 Now, the next preconceived idea is first countries and people need to be very, very rich to get the social development like girls in school and be ready for natural disasters. No, no, no. That's wrong. Look: that huge hump in the middle already have girls in school. So if you are unsure, go for the "the majority already have this," like electricity and girls in school, these kinds of things. They're only rules of thumb, so of course they don't apply to everything, but this is how you can generalize.

15:25 Let's look at the last one. If something, yes, this is a good one, sharks are dangerous. No — well, yes, but they are not so important in the global statistics, that is what I'm saying. I actually, I'm very afraid of sharks. So as soon as I see a question about things I'm afraid of, which might be earthquakes, other religions, maybe I'm afraid of terrorists or sharks, anything that makes me feel, assume you're going to exaggerate the problem. That's a rule of thumb. Of course there are dangerous things that are also great. Sharks kill very, very few. That's how you should think.

16:03 With these four rules of thumb, you could probably answer better than the chimps, because the chimps cannot do this. They cannot generalize these kinds of rules. And hopefully we can turn your world around and we're going to beat the chimps. Okay? (Applause)