



Why is there such a prevailing knowledge gap present in the society, and how can we combat it?

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Introduction

There has never before existed more information in the world. The internet makes sure that an unfathomable amount of data is stored at any time, and a large part of it is freely available to anyone. With a constant surge in people getting access to computers and the internet, information that was earlier inaccessible is now just a quick Google-search away. With that in mind, it would only be natural to assume that people should be able to make more informed decisions and be more difficult to be tricked by misinformation and bias. Yet this assumption has been proven wrong again and again.

An absurd utopian ideal would be that everyone knew everything. This is not possible. The world is simply too complex and filled with nuisances. To counterweight this, we rely on different medias to keep us informed about the situation in the world, the most important part, of course, being the so-called mainstream media. The problem arises when the mainstream media fail this task, and we are presented with a simplified and often skewed representation of reality. However, blaming everything on the media has become something of a cliché in the past year, with the President of the US being an excellent example of this. But how can we combat the prevailing knowledge gap that is present in the society when all else seem to fail?

Going with the gut feeling

One of our most important tools for understanding the world is through intuition. Intuition can simply be defined as our immediate understanding of any given situation, our so-called “gut feeling”. At earlier evolutionary stages it was an excellent tool for survival as we were able to quickly identify what to do in dangerous situations. In prehistoric times the world was much less complex, and a black and white distinction was quite viable. The modern person on the other hand rarely has to make decisions on the spot, and an intuitive approach to problems might prove to be a drawback instead. This is especially true when one considers big decisions such as how we decide to vote, and how we view people from other demographics. The problem with intuition is that it is



an elusive tool for understanding the world. While we like to think that we are informed and have well-considered opinions on the world, this easily might not be the case. We are so confident in ourselves, that we fail to see our own ignorance. Ignorance is inherent in all of us, and precisely because we place so much trust in our own intuition, our ignorance is a blindside which is hard to correct.

The British market research organization Ipsos MORI did a study in 2016 involving 40 different countries across the globe. It looked at the gap between people's perception and the reality of their own countries to make an "Index of Ignorance". This was done to measure how prevailing ignorance and misconceptions are in the society, and it brought some highly interesting facts to light. It showed that we tend to overestimate how many Muslims are living in our country as well as the percentage of GDP our government spends on health expenditure. We also greatly underestimate the happiness of the population, and we are generally very wrong on guessing the opinions people have regarding homosexuality, sex before marriage and abortion.

It is worrisome how extremely bad we are at estimating crucial facts concerning our own countries. A reason for why this is happening is that we are affected by how these topics are portrayed in the media. A good example is how the immigration crisis have been perceived. In France, there has been a large skepticism towards immigration that has led to the rise of far-right parties. The fear has been that immigration will lead to a large change in the demographics of the country. When asked, the French estimated that 31 percent of the population were Muslims, when in reality there are 7.5. It proves to show that there is a large misconception around the topic. This is only an example of how absurd the debates can become when our perception of the world is so inherently different from what is the truth. After all, it is with such a bias we decide who to vote for. This exposes a large weakness in the democracy when the people who are voting votes for what they feel is true rather than for researched and well-thought reasoning. It remains to see whether this clear misconception will have an impact on the upcoming election in France, but no matter what it is evident that a knowledge gap is prevailing in the society.

Closing the gap

And this leads us back to the media; how come that we have not been corrected of these obvious misconceptions? One challenge is that we get more and more information via our Facebook feed and other social media. Social medias can be very efficient platforms for exchanging ideas since it is possible to connect and share information with whoever you want. However, because anyone can share information there is no filter on what is being shared. This makes it so that those who read an article is not necessarily aware of who the source is and whether the information is correct or not. The most sensationalistic stories are those who are often shared because they are appealing to us. As mentioned earlier, we are wired the same way as in prehistoric times and we



still tend to separate the world in black and white. And how fun would it be if the click-baits lead to a dry academic article? Strangely enough, we do tend to spend more time on social media than on reading newspapers, and we are constantly being bombarded with the most polarized types of unfiltered news. This makes it so that our reference points on the world are only the most interesting cases, and our intuition tries to guess how the world works accordingly. This has shown to be a highly inaccurate way of looking at the world, and it only makes us aware of certain problems that the world is facing.

On the other hand, this is difficult to change since there should not be restrictions on either what is allowed to share on social media, or what the media is allowed to share - as both would result in the impeachment of free speech. An answer to such a problem would be easier said than done, but the goal is to steadily close the knowledge gap. A good step in the right direction is done by Hans and Ola Rosling of the Gapminder Foundation. Through their project, they are exposing misconceptions people have about the world and connecting databases to make statistical data easily accessible. Facebook is also trying out a “fact-checker” tool and has partnered up with independent fact checking sites that notify users if they try to post a story where facts in the article are disputed, and asks them if they are sure if they want to post it. This is only in its early stages, but if it were to become international it would help filter out a lot of strange cases being shared on the site. This might seem like small steps, but it is small changes like this that can lead to a more enlightened society. And as the young entrepreneurs of the future, it is our job to come up with similar solutions that will aid the process of closing the knowledge gap.

Conclusion

It is problematic that when people are asked whether the world is getting better or worse, 71% of us answer worse (Etchells, 2015) The majority of the dramatic stories chosen by the media are of course those who are concerning war and famine, and it distorts our picture of the world as we are mostly exposed to these stories. But in many ways the world is certainly moving in a positive direction; the average years of living is rising and child deaths are falling due to better and more efficient health care, technology is improving and making our lives easier which make us happier and fewer people are dying of natural disasters due to better infrastructure (Rosling, 2007). The thing is that our brain is better at remembering what is negative, thus leading us to believe that the world is getting worse when it is not necessarily the case. It is important to be able to factor out the problems the world is facing, and base our world view on facts rather than what seems intuitively correct to us.



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