

Five important lessons we can learn from statistician Hans Rosling

February 13 2017, by Zuzana Hucki



Hans Rosling: presenter of the facts. Credit: Neil Fantom/flickr, CC BY

I first came across Hans Rosling's work while I was trying to make mathematics students fall in love with statistics. His TED talks are inspirational since they present data in new and dynamic ways, but not

just that, they're also educational and eye-opening.

Rosling decided early on that a better way to change the world, than being out on the [research field](#), was to educate the public. So he began his career in data visualisation and presenting. But he taught us more than just facts from the data – here are five important things that we can learn from his work:

Visualise your data

Rosling was not only a statistician but also an exciting storyteller. He would not only express his opinion, he made numbers and figures tell the stories. He used the the very latest technology to visualise trends in large data sets – 120,000 numbers to be exact, were presented in his "200 Countries, 200 Years, 4 Minutes – The Joy of Stats" video with BBC Four.

But he didn't present long boring lists. Instead he showed bubbles of data which represented different countries of different sizes, and different colours were different continents. As he popped those bubbles he also popped the audience's preconceived ideas about the world.

Sometimes he would even become part of the graph presented on the stage. He pointed out how rich the world's population is from a different point on the graph. He added colour and shape to years of collected data and argued that presenting data in a visually appealing way was very important – after all, we are unlikely to care unless it is made interesting. He even [climbed a ladder](#) to help explain a point.

Sometimes old is good

Although Rosling often used technology, he did not shy away from old well-functioned methods of communication. He used [simple boxes](#) to

help represent population growth and debunk the prediction that the population will soar much above 11 billion. He proved that although visualisation was important, it didn't need to break the bank or be fancy. You can achieve a lot, with very little – he even once used rolls of toilet paper.

No more 'them' and 'us'

[He famously argued](#) that the boundaries between the "developed" and "developing" countries are diminishing. While there still too many poor people on the planet who need help, most of the world's population is somewhere in the middle on the wealth scale.

But in order to save the planet, we need to look at our bad habits, reduce our wastefulness and allow the rest of the world to reach our living standards. In other words, the wealthiest people in the [population](#) should make sacrifices to help the poorest and reduce the gaps.

Be positive

Despite the fact that he was tackling world problems, Rosling was always positive – as hard as that may be. He was [tweeting](#) truth and positivity even to the end of his days – the "good news" as he called it, which was all importantly backed up by facts.

Things that make us scared get the highest number of clicks and views, but getting the average small positive news that child mortality is reducing can be non-event. And in our current world of "alternative facts", the truth has never been more important. This is exactly what Rosling brought: the truth, hope for the future and the belief that we can all make a difference.

Be aware of your biased views

He said he never called himself an optimist, but he was a "[possibilist](#)" – he believed in the possibility of making the world better. He influenced many educators and in the last few talks, he and his son Ola Rosling, tried to find solutions to the prejudiced views and preconceived ideas that we all have.

In his "[ignorance survey](#)" the UK public did worse than chimpanzees, who would randomly choose the answers. But his fellow Swedes did no better and he argued that the reason for this was not a lack of knowledge, but our outdated, biased views of the world. So he always tried to challenge ignorance and make us aware of our biases – he even told us [how to change](#).

Hans' son [@OlaRosling](#) writing: Hans sadly died today! But his dream of a fact-based worldview, we will never let die! Follow [@Gapminder](#)

— Hans Rosling (@HansRosling) [February 7, 2017](#)

Rosling's positivity has clearly been adopted by his son. And, thanks to him, I'm sure this infectious love of knowledge will spread to generations of students, even those who – like some of mine – are still struggling to get excited about [data analysis](#). I believe that incorporating a bit of clever visualisation can change people's views about [data](#) analysis – and help the world move a step closer to making some of the changes it so badly needs.

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