One thing to change: Anecdotes aren’t data

Steven Pinker wants clearer delineation between facts and feelings

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This is the first part of a series called Focal Point, in which we ask a range of Harvard faculty members to answer the same question.
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Too many leaders and influencers, including politicians, journalists, intellectuals, and academics, surrender to the cognitive bias of assessing the world through anecdotes and images rather than data and facts.

Our president assumed office with a dystopian vision of American “carnage” in an era in which violent crime rates were close to historical lows. His Republican predecessor created a massive new federal department and launched two destructive wars to protect Americans against a hazard, terrorism, that most years kills fewer people than bee stings and lightning strikes. In the year after the 9/11 attacks, 1,500 Americans who were scared away from flying perished in car crashes, unaware that a Boston-LA air trip has the same risk as driving 12 miles.

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One death from a self-driving Tesla makes worldwide headlines, but the 1.25 million deaths each year from human-driven vehicles don’t. Small children are traumatized by school drills that teach them how to hide from rampage shooters, who have an infinitesimal chance of killing them compared with car crashes, drownings, or, for that matter, non-rampage killers, who slay the equivalent of a Sandy Hook and a half every day. Several heavily publicized police shootings have persuaded activists that minorities are in mortal danger from racist cops, whereas three analyses (two by Harvard faculty, Sendhil Mullainathan and Roland Fryer) have shown no racial bias in police shootings.

Many people are convinced that the country is irredeemably racist, sexist, homophobic, and sexually assaul tive, whereas all of these scourges are in steady decline (albeit not quickly enough). People on both the right and left have become cynical about global institutions because they think that the world is becoming poorer and more war-torn, whereas in recent decades global measures of extreme poverty and battle deaths have plummeted.

People are terrified of nuclear power (the most scalable form of carbon-free energy) because of images of Three Mile Island (which killed no one), Fukushima (which killed no one; the deaths were caused by the tsunami and a panicked, unnecessary evacuation), and Chernobyl (which killed fewer people than are killed by coal every day). They imagine that fossil fuels can be replaced by solar energy, without doing the math on how many square miles would have to be tiled with solar panels to satisfy the world’s vastly growing thirst for electricity. And they think that voluntary sacrifices, like unplugging laptop chargers, are a sensible way to deal with climate change.

How do we change this destructive statistical illiteracy and disdain for data? We need to make “factfulness” (as Hans, Ola, and Anna Rosling call it) an inherent part of the culture of education, journalism, commentary, and politics. An awareness of the infirmity of unaided human intuition should be part of the conventional wisdom of every educated person. Guiding policy or activism by conspicuous events, without reference to data, should come to be seen as risible as guiding them by omens, dreams, or whether Jupiter is rising in Sagittarius.