

# Facts v Feelings: How to Stop Our Emotions Misleading Us

September 18, 2020

By the spring of 2020, the high stakes involved in rigorous, timely and honest statistics had suddenly become all too clear. A new coronavirus was sweeping the world. Politicians had to make their most consequential decisions in decades, and fast. Many of those decisions depended on data detective work that epidemiologists, medical statisticians and economists were scrambling to conduct. Tens of millions of lives were potentially at risk. So were billions of people's livelihoods.

In early April, countries around the world were a couple of weeks into lockdown, global deaths passed 60,000, and it was far from clear how the story would unfold. Perhaps the deepest economic depression since the 1930s was on its way, on the back of a mushrooming death toll. Perhaps, thanks to human ingenuity or good fortune, such apocalyptic fears would fade from memory. Many scenarios seemed plausible. And that's the problem.

An epidemiologist, John Ioannidis, [wrote in mid-March](#) that Covid-19 "might be a once-in-a-century evidence fiasco". The data detectives are doing their best – but they're having to work with data that's patchy, inconsistent and woefully inadequate for making life-and-death decisions with the confidence we would like.

Details of this fiasco will, no doubt, be studied for years to come. But some things already seem clear. At the beginning of the crisis, politics seem to have impeded the free flow of honest statistics. Although the claim is [contested](#), Taiwan complained that in late December 2019 it had given important clues about human-to-human transmission to the [World Health Organization](#) – but as late as mid-January, the WHO was reassuringly [tweeting](#) that China had found no evidence of human-to-human transmission. (Taiwan is not a member of the WHO, because China claims sovereignty over the territory and demands that it should not be treated as an independent state. It's possible that this geopolitical obstacle led to the alleged delay.)

Did this matter? Almost certainly; with cases doubling every two or three days, we will never know what might have been different with an extra couple of weeks of warning. It's clear that many leaders took a while to appreciate the potential gravity of the threat. President Trump, for instance, announced in late February: "It's going to disappear. One day it's like a miracle, it will disappear." Four weeks later, with 1,300 Americans dead and more confirmed cases in the US than any other country, Trump was still talking hopefully about getting everybody to church at Easter.

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In 1997, the economists Linda Babcock and George Loewenstein ran an experiment in which participants were given evidence from a real court case about a motorbike accident. They were then randomly assigned to play the role of plaintiff's attorney (arguing that the injured motorcyclist should receive \$100,000 in damages) or defence attorney (arguing that the case should be dismissed or the

damages should be low).

The experimental subjects were given a financial incentive to argue their side of the case persuasively, and to reach an advantageous settlement with the other side. They were also given a separate financial incentive to accurately guess what the damages the judge in the real case had actually awarded. Their predictions should have been unrelated to their role-playing, but their judgment was strongly influenced by what they hoped would be true.

Psychologists call this “motivated reasoning”. Motivated reasoning is thinking through a topic with the aim, conscious or unconscious, of reaching a particular kind of conclusion. In a football game, we see the fouls committed by the other team but overlook the sins of our own side. We are more likely to notice what we want to notice. Experts are not immune to motivated reasoning. Under some circumstances their expertise can even become a disadvantage. The French satirist Molière once wrote: “A learned fool is more foolish than an ignorant one.” Benjamin Franklin commented: “So convenient a thing is it to be a reasonable creature, since it enables us to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to.”

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