

Seeing the whole picture

ATLE HETLAND

EN ROUTE

“Don’t bring me the ocean if I feel thirsty”, says the Norwegian poet Olav H. Hauge (1908-1994). And he goes on: “Not the heaven if I ask for light or, the entire truth if there is something I want to know – but just a hint, some enlightenment, a bit of dew – as birds carry drops of water away from the lake, and the wind a grain of salt from the ocean.”

We live in a time when we can Google and find ‘everything’ on Internet, and we can still look up facts in encyclopedias and other books. We can get information in fields we never studied, and we can become ‘instant specialists’, well, based on a culture of ‘cut and paste’. We could lure anybody, maybe even ourselves, to believe that we know something about topics we don’t really know much about at all.

Yet, we also know that it takes quite a bit more to see more of the picture, if not the whole picture; the latter would take a life-time, or more, to begin to understand a subject’s many facts and fiction, the pros and cons, the why’s and the why not’s.

It is dangerous if we think ‘we know it all’ when we know close to nothing about most topics. And even specialists may believe that they know the breadth and depth of issues, including all the new things in every field. Laymen expect experts to know more than their specialization really taught them – and amateurs challenge experts because they have ‘been on Internet’ and know how to Google before they ask professionals any questions.

In our time, what we really know and what we don’t know becomes blurred. One of the reasons is that we have too much shallow information about too many things. All those ‘facts’ must be put in a context and understood in real life situations. Even education does sometimes become a collection of facts without much reflection, discussion and understanding.

Last week, two famous American journalists got into difficulties because it came to light that they had exaggerated some of their war reports. They are Brian Williams of NBC News and Bill O’Reilly, who was earlier with CBS and is now with FOX News. Williams had repeated his stories from Iraq many times, maybe so long that he began to believe his stories himself. And O’Reilly is more a commentator and analyst than a reporter, allowing for more aspects than just facts to shed light on a topic.

I have sympathy for the two journalists. Naturally, they shouldn’t tell ‘fairytale’. But doesn’t it go with the territory to find glossy packing for important stories? Yes, I think it does, especially in America where the hard competition doesn’t allow a modest reporter to rise to prominence and fame. Politicians exaggerate all the time, don’t they? They colour their stories to fit their political agenda. Even researchers, experts and advocates must know how to sell their findings and messages nowadays. Sometimes, their data and evidence aren’t quite as clear as they claim. Sometimes, it is the professors with a streak of charlatany who are best liked by their students, and they become the pets of TV anchors on talk shows and readers of best-selling books.

It can be a problem if only facts are presented without comments. They, too, may distort reality because the facts may give a feeling of giving insight. But they are just pieces of the whole picture. And, important, the facts we present are not neutral either. They have been chosen for certain reasons, knowingly or unknowingly.

True, there is difference between facts and fiction. And we should always try to stick to the facts, but not facts alone. Fiction may be needed so that we can understand the facts. That is why novelists are so important; they have the artistic freedom to choose and interpret facts and put them in the relevant context. A professor in history must put more emphasis on facts than a historical novelist. Yet, often the latter will be the real teacher, telling stories that appeal to hear, not only mind, placing issues in a context and in real life situations, never mind that it is not, and cannot be accurate reports as required in science and journalism – even in TV journalism.

Some years ago, I helped a Norwegian woman to find her African father in Kenya where I worked that time. Adelheid E. Gulbrandsen had never seen her father, and her mother had not wanted to tell her daughter much about him since he had only stayed in Norway for a few youthful years. I had lived for long in Kenya and managed to locate her father quite fast. But in Adelheid's award winning book about her 'expedition', she changed many few facts, including that it was the Red Cross that had helped her find her father. She had the full right to do that, as a write, and I think it only enhanced the content of the book, which was not meant to be a memoire anyway.

I also wonder why we in our time are so keen on gossip and details that should better remain private. We want to 'know everything', as I drew attention to in the introduction of my article today, quoting a thoughtful poet. We want to be seen as someone having all the facts, yet, we may not have not digested and considered the issues deeply. And, then, if someone makes a mistake with facts, like the TV journalists I mentioned above, we are very fast in criticizing them. We should remember that most of the facts will be forgotten tomorrow. Strange as it may sound, too many facts and details may distract from understanding and reflecting on reality. What we at best will be able to remember are trends, atmospheres, mindset and Zeitgeist, yes, and of course some individual events, especially if they effected us more directly, someone we know, or issues and places we were particularly concerned about.

In conclusion, I want us to take more of a bird's eye on the world around us. I want us to be more analytical and summarize issues. I do not want us to bring the whole ocean when we just need a zip of water to quench our thirst, again referring to the poet above. A lot of the facts we have in our 'hard disk', in our mind, are going to be outdated soon. What we need is the ability to analyze and understand, to see connections and get overview, find new information, and thus make a bit more sense of the world we live in. At the same time, we should enjoy what we do. But be sober, too; there is no need to misrepresent facts and distort reality even when Pakistan loses to the West Indies in a cricket match in the World Cup!

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid
