

Education, population, poverty, tax...getting views on topics like those in Jersey isn't the difficult part – but have you ever noticed how many people sound eminently credible when talking about them, even though they may actually be basing their views on conjecture, false facts and blind guesswork?

There is a real danger in making the 'facts' fit the opinion, rather than the other way around – which is exactly the point at which someone with an eye on the latest buzzwords will smugly insert the phrase 'post-truth' into the conversation, imagining its actually helpful.

So, we've asked the Jersey Policy Forum to add some robust material to those crucial local debates – the point is not to provoke agreement or acquiescence; it is to provide reliable material on which others can build their views.

Gailina Liew, Director, Jersey Policy Forum

## Playing hide and seek with our lives and future

Looking back over 2019 and forward to 2020 and beyond, a few key themes might merit some reflection as we gather and cherish the time we have with family and friends to celebrate Christmas and welcome in a new year. The ones I've chosen to bring to your attention highlight the critical importance of human trust and integrity, values that can't yet be coded into a robot or machine learning algorithm. Can civil society find ways to ensure that the people in authority, particularly those who can significantly impact outcomes with their decision-making power, are provided with the right information, not permitted to hide behind legal or technology constructs, and are held to account for negative consequences and wrongful or poor outcomes?

### Hiding behind algorithms – what happens when they don't get it right?

Just a few weeks ago, New York State's Department of Financial Services in the U.S. launched an investigation into Goldman Sachs' credit practices when the Twittersphere was rocked by a series of tweets from tech entrepreneur and Ruby on Rails founder, David Heinemeier Hansson ("DHH"). DHH tweeted about the experience he and his wife had when

signing up for an Apple Card. DHH was granted a credit limit that was 20 times that offered to his wife and Apple's customer service personnel could not offer any explanation other than citing the algorithm that Apple's credit card service provider, Goldman Sachs, was using. Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak also commented as seen in the screen shot of excerpted tweets below:



People are not well-served by these kinds of technology barriers. Companies will face increasing scrutiny and regulation to ensure that there is transparency and 'explainability' of decision-making by algorithms so that people who are impacted negatively by decisions that don't make sense can pursue appropriate redress. Ensuring that these elements are incorporated into the design of algorithms from the very beginning would be a good starting point. The added

bonus is that using algorithms that can explain themselves might actually reveal biases in the process, thereby allowing an opportunity for correction going forward.

### Hiding behind theoretical models – what happens when the underlying assumptions are wrong?

I am the proud mum of four 'now adult' children. When they were toddlers, they collectively consumed about 6 litres of milk/week. As they grew to teenagers, their milk consumption increased to 20 litres/week and then tapered off, as they became interested in other sources of hydration! If I had continued to stock our fridge through their teenaged years with milk based on their toddler level consumption, I would have had very unhappy (and undernourished) children. So, understanding the dynamics around the changing rate of consumption, the limits of my fridge capacity and timing of new milk purchases to replenish the fridge supply were important factors for my family.

The authors of Limits to Growth, a study published in 1972 by the Club of Rome, presented different scenarios for the world's economy by looking at the interaction between five

variables (population, food production, industrialization, pollution and consumption of non-renewable natural resources) based on essentially the same principles we just explored with my children and their milk consumption. The study was pilloried at the time as most economists based their theoretical models on a static rate of consumption over time with access to an unlimited pool of resources, assumptions that do not usually reflect the reality of changing dynamics. The usual political arguments of left/socialist versus right/conservative policies were also made. It took more than 30 years for this work to be recognized as pioneering and important after various follow-up analyses and studies showed that the 'business as usual' forecasts made by the original study have largely been validated by what has actually happened. Matthew Simmons, a respected energy economist summed it up in 2000 by stating, "In hindsight, The Club of Rome turned out to be right. We simply wasted 30 important years ignoring this work." (see <http://limits2growth.org.uk/the-debate/> for ongoing work that a UK All Party Parliamentary Group set up in 2016 is doing).

Challenging assumptions dispassionately and reflecting the reality of changing dynamics in the use of and reliance upon models for future planning is critical. Having the courage and agility to respond to rapid changes is also critical to ensure that key resources are not suddenly exhausted or out of balance within a holistic system.

### Hiding behind the corporate veil – companies (and governments) are run by people who make decisions and do things.

The words of 16-year-old Greta Thunberg at Davos 2019 ripped through the corporate veil to remind everyone that human beings are responsible for corporate actions:

"We are facing [an] existential crisis, the biggest crisis humanity has ever faced...If everyone is guilty, then no one is to blame, and someone is to blame... Some people, some companies, some decision makers in particular know exactly what priceless values they have been sacrificing to continue making unimaginable amounts of money, and I think many of you here today belong to that group of people."

Rank	CEO	Company	CO2 emissions (metric tons)
1	Curtis A. Morgan	Vistra Energy	139,477,048
2	Thomas A. Fanning	Southern Company	98,547,185
3	Lynn Good	Duke Energy	98,003,594
4	Warren Buffett	Berkshire Hathaway	76,462,070
5	Nick Akins	American Electric Power	68,135,192
6	Mauricio Gutierrez	NRG Energy	60,414,623
7	Donald J. Trump	U.S. Government	55,243,323
8	Ben Fowke	Xcel Energy	50,470,381
9	Charles E. Jones Jr.	FirstEnergy	40,900,043
10	Thad Hill	Calpine	38,140,422
11	Darren Woods	Exxon Mobil	36,754,879
12	James I. Robo	NextEra Energy	35,029,723
13	Terry D. Bassham	Evergy Inc.	34,446,006
14	Thomas F. Farrell II	Dominion Energy	33,860,181
15	Leo P. Denault	Entergy	33,657,207
16	Gary R. Heminger	Marathon Petroleum	32,082,163
17	Jerry Norcia	DTE Energy	31,642,519
18	William H. Spence	PPL Corp.	30,278,432
19	Warner L. Baxter	Ameren	30,114,577
20	Kevin Fletcher	WEC Energy Group	29,299,248

Source: From The Planet's Most Destructive: Climate Culprit 100, published online by Medium

The Political Economy Research Institute ('PERI') at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, has published various indices to draw attention to the top corporate contributors to pollution (air, water and greenhouse gas emissions) as part of their Corporate Toxics Information Project (see <https://www.peri.umass.edu/corporate-toxics-information-project>).

The information is based on data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The table below shows the CEOs (and one U.S. President) of the top 20 companies (including the U.S. Government) of the Greenhouse 100 Index.

Expand this list to the top corporate polluters in every region around the world and one can easily understand that there are just a few hundred CEOs/heads of government who collectively hold the overall health of our world (and, by logical extension, the future of every living person and thing on this planet) within their decision-making authority.

As Professor Randers, one of the original authors of Limits to Growth, states in his book, 2052: A Global Forecast for the Next

Forty Years, it's not too late to address the climate challenge and other global issues but:

*"...human activity is dominated by short-term considerations. Neither the capitalist system nor democratic society appears to be willing to sacrifice short-term advantage in order to create a better life for our grandchildren. So my sad future will be imposed on us by our own decisions...If we just decided to do something, it could easily be done. The problem is not a lack of technology, nor the economic cost, but the way we have chosen to organise our societal decision-making."*

Maybe it's time to stop hiding and start seeking people who understand the importance of trust and integrity to be accountable for their decisions and actions? Use our power and authority as shareholders, voters and members of civil society to select the custodians of our future based on their ability to take a long-term view in their decision-making that will positively impact our collective good? Something to ponder over eggnog and mulled wine? What kind of world do you want to leave for your children and grandchildren?