

Freakonomics' Stephen Dubner Takes On This Week's Headlines

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We spoke with *Freakonomics* co-author Stephen Dubner about three issues that have been dominating headlines lately. In case you've missed them and need to catch up quickly, we've compiled the highlights so you can be a champion of serious water-cooler discussions.

The major take-away? Dubner urges you to [think like a freak](#), and to listen to more public radio.

The World Cup

The 2014 World Cup [kicks off this Thursday](#), June 12, with a match between Brazil and Croatia. Teams from all over the world will play a total of 64 matches and, according to Dubner, it is not a question of *if* but *when* a critical penalty kick will determine the outcome of one of these matches. So, when the fate of a team hinges on the split-second decisions of two players, the kicker and goalkeeper, where should the kicker aim?

Not surprisingly, it's all data driven. Elite penalty kickers will typically go for the corners, where it is harder for the goalkeeper to reach. In reaction, goalkeepers will almost always jump to either the left or right corner - *before the kicker has even hit the ball*.

It turns out, if you really want to give yourself the best chance for success, you want to kick it dead center, which is extremely nerve-wracking and counterintuitive because that's where the keeper is standing at the moment that you approach. But you know that only 2% of the time the keeper will actually stay in the center, he almost always leaps left or right. So, if you really want to help your team win, you will go center, that's what the data says.

And as far as predicting the winner, Goldman Sachs and Itaú Unibanco (Brazil's largest bank) both [expect a victory for host country Brazil](#). Stephen Dubner, however, cautions against putting all your money on them just quite yet.

One thing you can be sure of is most predictions are terrible. The fact is, we spend a lot of time and effort and money on trying to predict the future, even though the data suggest even the very best people in their fields, whether it's economics or politics or sports, they're about as good as a monkey with a dart board. That's what the data say.



Climate Change

Public opinion on climate change has long been a problem for policy makers. So we challenged Stephen Dubner to approach the issue like a freak. From a purely data-driven standpoint, what should policy makers do if they want people to take a serious interest in cutting carbon emissions?

People say they respond to moral incentives, and generally they don't. Money matters to some degree. The biggest factor that we uncovered, especially when it comes to some energy consumption, is what I'd call the herd mentality incentive. If everybody else is doing it then you tend to do it too, even if morally you don't really care that much, even if financially it might cost you a little bit. So, of course then the idea becomes 'how do you get a lot of people to get the ball rolling'?

Dubner also notes a counter-intuitive trend with regards to views on climate change: the more educated a person becomes on the issue, the more extreme their opinion on climate change is likely to become. In addition, the person's views are likely to become immutable. So, if you want to persuade someone who doesn't want to be persuaded, remember, it's not going to be easy. Dubner reminds us that the best way to be ignored is to insult someone's point of view.

Gun Control

In light of the recent mass shootings on campuses in Isla Vista and Seattle, we asked Stephen Dubner about the statistics behind such incidents and what might come of calls for tighter gun-control laws. According to Dubner, statistics indicate that these laws don't significantly address the issue of the guns that already exist in the U.S., and wouldn't do much for keeping those guns out of the hands of criminals and mentally ill individuals with a history of violence.

In this country we have somewhere like 300 million, maybe more, guns in circulation. They're not perishable. They're not going anywhere...Then you have countries like in Scandinavia where the rate of ownership is higher than here and you don't have many of these crimes. You know, a lot of things that people are in favor of, gun buy backs, turn out to be, according to the data, entirely ineffective. What kind of person participates in a gun buy back? Somebody who is not going to use that gun anyhow, for anything. And so, you see a lot of posturing and a lot of heartbreak but we don't see that the current type of gun laws that have been introduced or proposed would do what we want them to do.

In this case, thinking like a freak may give some people pause, but Stephen Dubner claims the first step in problem-solving is putting away one's moral compass. In addition, if one want to think like a freak, Dubner says the best path to a good solution is to look at all the possibilities, even the unpopular ones. But that's just part of thinking like a freak.

For the full interview with Stephen Dubner, click [here](#).

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