

# How to master data-driven storytelling



# Intro

There's a greater need than ever to communicate complicated data in an effective way. Whether you're building a Go-to-market strategy packed with vital data points, or attempting to increase understanding around your sustainability and development work, all organizations must at some point successfully convey results in the form of data. When done poorly however, the interest of the target audience will quickly be lost, be they stakeholders, consumers or any other parties you are tasked with reaching.

The bad news at a time where data is more prevalent than ever before is that it is inherently difficult to make data easily comprehensible. The good news is human beings have been telling complicated stories for thousands of years – by tapping into tried and tested traditional storytelling methods designed to make an emotional connection with an audience and adapting them to include data, it's possible to get difficult points across while maintaining the attention and understanding of the groups we are attempting to speak to.

In this guide, Whispr Group outlines essential cornerstones of effective data-driven storytelling, flags up common pitfalls in the area, and highlight best practice examples to follow in order to make your organisation experts at communicating data.



## Cold Hard Facts: Difficult to Communicate

Just because a data point is noteworthy doesn't mean it will do its own legwork when it comes to communicating it.

Just because the person or organisation attempting to communicate understands the importance of their key piece of data doesn't mean their communication target will also automatically do so.

Your organization may be hugely excited about how it managed to reduce the use of harmful chemicals in production by 10% for example...

...but unless an audience can connect this development to their everyday life, they're unlikely to be equally thrilled or retain that information.

Worse still: they may even misinterpret it.

Sustainability communication in particular has struggled to connect audiences with important data points in a meaningful way, often causing a misunderstanding of key issues. Of which a pertinent example reared its head in 2020...

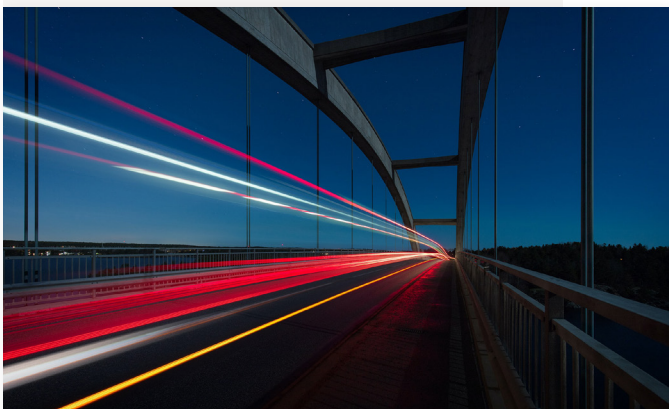
Remember when air traffic ground to a halt as the Covid-19 pandemic picked up pace in April 2020? Jubilation followed about the dramatic drop in CO2 emissions that occurred, and headlines in major international media outlets ensured data demonstrating a drop achieved widespread reach.

But the impact of lockdowns on emissions was overplayed, and data lacked vital context: just a month later, the concentration of CO2 in the atmosphere was up to 418 parts per million. That's the highest ever recorded; should we really have been celebrating?

In reality had lockdowns not happened and emissions continued as normal, the CO2 concentration in the atmosphere would only be 0.4 parts per million higher. Halting air travel was but a drop in an ocean-sized issue.

“Climate change is a cumulative problem,” Glen Peters, climate scientist at Norway’s Center for International Climate Research explained to National Geographic. “It’s not like other pollution where someone puts something in a river, then stops putting it in and the problem is solved. It’s all our emissions in the past that matter”.

We’ve reached the limit on how changing individual actions impact emissions: systematic change to our carbon fuel reliance is far more urgent. We may try to fly less and believe we’re making a big impact as a result, but aviation only accounts for about 3% of overall CO2 emissions, while general heat and power production accounts for around 45%. That’s a hugely important piece of data that scientists are well aware of, but has not been effectively communicated.



## Best Practice Examples to Learn From

Another case of data-driven storytelling caught attention in 2020 for the right reasons. A 2015 clip of Bill Gates speaking with data-focused media outlet Vox went viral because the Microsoft co-founder and philanthropist predicted the coming of a global pandemic in eerily specific terms, five years before it happened. The video now has over 11 million views on Youtube alone.

The video's big achievement is communicating a complicated concept (how a disease could spread from one country to the entire globe in days) founded in challenging data (the variables disease modelling programs use to predict epidemics) in an effective and engaging way (a simple format with occasional animations, short in duration and hooked on the easily relatable example of Spanish flu).

Gates admits the modelling he used "had to make some assumptions" but doesn't get bogged down in listing those, avoiding distracting from his core message. And while he does list specific data points, he limits those to only a couple of essential figures in order to maintain the viewer's attention. By keeping things as simple as is feasible, he manages to convey a challenging data-driven story in a way the broadest possible audience will be able to understand. As proven by the huge viewing numbers.




What Bill Gates is afraid of

11,093,728 views · May 27, 2015

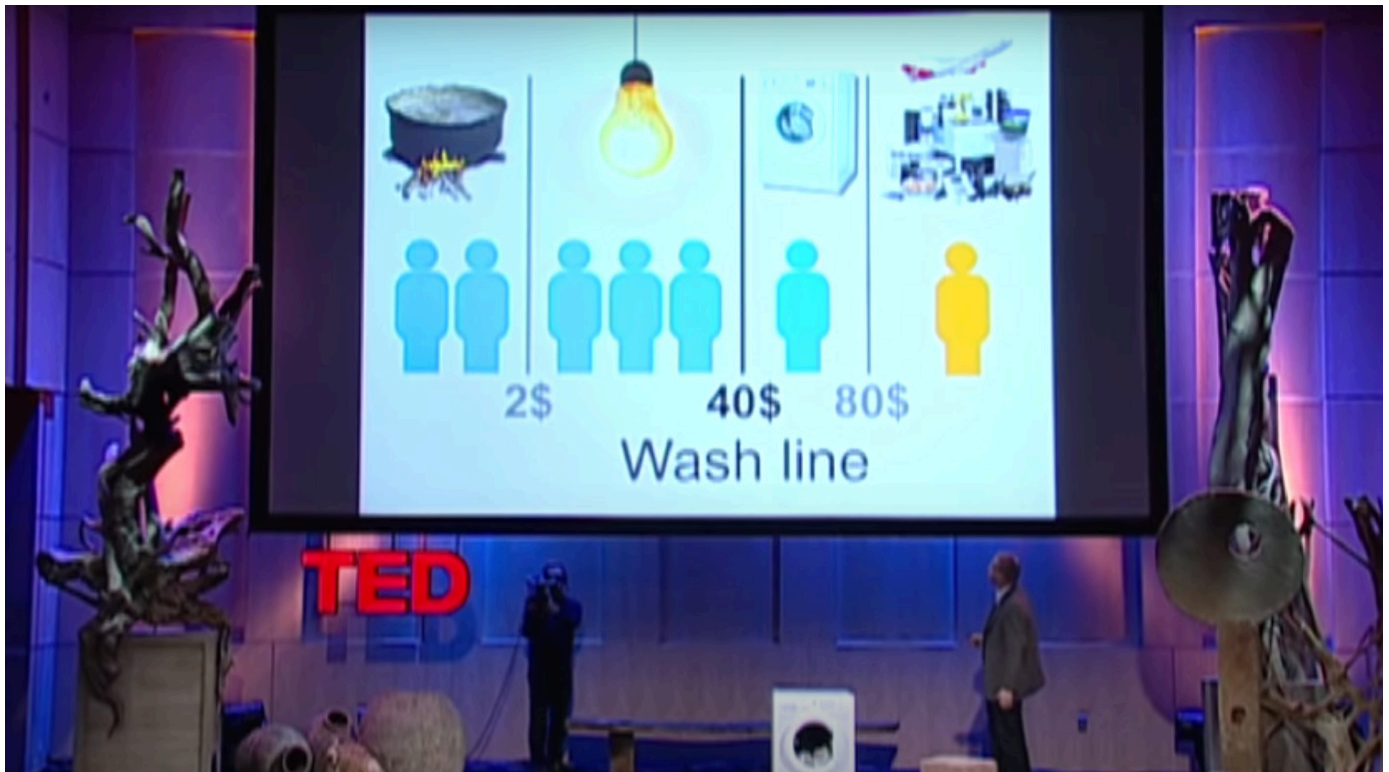
 192K  10K  SHARE  SAVE ...



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Gates surely learned a thing or two from his friend, the late Dr Hans Rosling, whose “magic washing machine” is a now iconic example of impeccable data-driven storytelling.

The story, one of Rosling’s many TED talks, tackles almost a century of income inequality in a mere nine minutes, all hinged upon the relatable and emotionally engaging anecdote of seeing his mother load a washing machine for the first time.

Peppered with a few carefully selected data points and delivered through a traditional narrative structure involving a set-up and pay-off, despite the heavy subject matter, Rosling’s presentation achieved widespread engagement and understanding thanks to the skill with which it is crafted. Not to mention the care it takes to avoid assuming preexisting knowledge among the audience.

## Checklist for Better Data Communication

- Start with a clear idea of the story you want to communicate. It's easy to get carried away in excitement about fresh data, but simply talking about those numbers without a specified goal is a recipe for failure. The same piece of data can be interpreted a multitude of ways, depending on how the story is presented and who it's being told to, so it's essential to know your narrative.
- Know exactly what you want your story to achieve. Do you want people to be concerned? Take action? To think you're on the right track, or grasp the severity of a situation? Desired outcome dictates the path you use to get there.
- Follow the hallmarks of a traditional, non data-driven story: they're even more essential to making a tricky subject engaging. Structure your narrative around a set-up and pay-off that makes the story (and its data) memorable, and find a human emotional connection where possible. Hans Rosling's Magic Washing Machine is a clear example.
- Identify whether the people you're speaking to are likely to understand the story you want to tell, and the factors that will make that as probable as possible. While it can't be guaranteed that the story will be understood the way you want, an **insights partner like Whispr Group not only provide detailed demographic information on the people you're trying to direct, but also the details of what engages them, how sophisticated their knowledge of a subject is, and which data they're likely to find relevant.** That makes the process far smoother.



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