

Why tell a story?

DATA STORYTELLING CONCEPTS



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Humans are storytelling creatures

- Story telling is a proven method of communication
- Stories provoke emotion
- Emotion leads to change



¹ Brent Dykes, "Effective Data Storytelling" (Wiley 2020)

Stories are better than "just the facts"

A screenshot of an Oxfam donation page. The top half features a blue background with a green and yellow decorative bar at the top. The Oxfam logo (a white circle with a stylized 'globe' icon) is positioned in the upper left. To its right, the word "OXFAM" is written in a bold, sans-serif font. Below this, a large, semi-transparent rectangular overlay contains the text "DONATE NOW." and "SAVE LIVES." in large, bold, dark gray capital letters. At the bottom of this overlay, a smaller paragraph reads: "Now, more than ever, your support means everything. Millions of families around the world are struggling to overcome hunger, poverty, and injustice. You can help." To the right of the text overlay, there is a close-up photograph of a smiling man with dark skin and short hair, wearing a light-colored shirt. The overall composition emphasizes the emotional impact of the message through the personal image of the man.

Changing behaviors

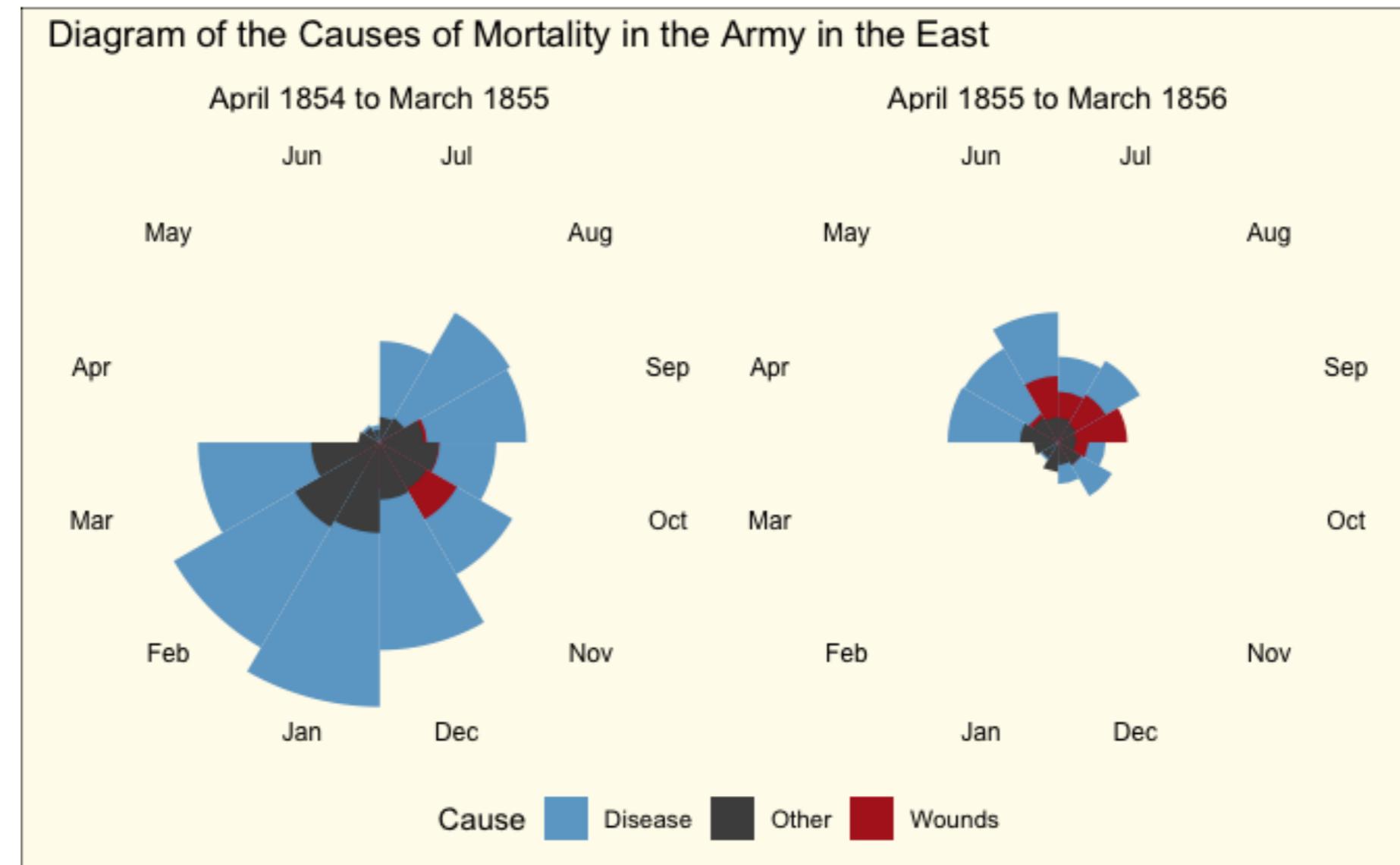
- Story telling isn't just slides
- An actionable insight is a conclusion drawn from data
- Data stories relate insights with a message
- Complex information is easier to understand



TED talks are popular, short format lectures by subject matter experts about something they find to be important

Nightingale's graph

Florence Nightingale made the calendar year into a circle, charting casualty causes by month



The very human basis for data stories

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Deep cultural reasons that stories work

- Narratives are derived from psychological needs
- People seek patterns and stories explain those patterns
- There are many types of stories, such as fables, parables and even public service announcements



Know what they know and feel what they feel

- We can vicariously experience something through a story
- Facts are perceived and emotion felt as the parts of the brain work together
- You can feel good based on a pleasant podcast or TV show



Mental simulation

- Narratives are important because they blend facts and emotion
- Neural coupling makes us feel as though we are all connected in a good way
- Our brains readily accept facts as presented in a story



Building a blockbuster story

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The exposition or problem



- The exposition or problem is the first stage
- A princess being kidnapped by a dragon is a great opening scene



¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav_Freytag

Rising action

- Many events take place here
- Tension and suspense are built
- A knight on a quest to save the princess is rising action



The climax of a story

- The third stage is the climax
- The main characters overcome obstacles
- A climatic battle by the knight against a dragon is a good example



Falling action

- The falling action occurs after the climax in the story
- Most of the events foreshadow the last section of the story
- The knight and princess may journey home as part of falling action



The resolution or conclusion



TV Advertisements as stories

- The Super Bowl is a championship football game played in the United States.
- These ads often tell stories



¹ Rosen (2014)

Research shows this structure is effective

- Advertisements that followed a Freytag structure were more memorable.
- All the model parts can be lengthened or shortened depending on the format or media platform
- A data story knits together a narrative, the data and visuals.

